

CHAPTER 1

*236th Stretch of Gain
Alpha Cycle of the 947th Stretch
Millau Estate - Isyldill*

The promise contract landed on the mahogany table with a thump, but Ladyling Ynnea Kaianne made no move to touch it. It was sickeningly thick and something Ynnea wanted no part in, but she was only twelve and that meant she was still under her noble father's thumb. If Papa had listened to her, it never would have been written, but that was far too much to hope for.

A servant uncorked a bottle of ink and placed a quill in her hand. She bit her lip and rolled the stress off her shoulders just a touch, nothing unseemly. She wouldn't want to be called improper and berated for the fragility of her gender's constitution now, would she? Certainly not with Papa, or Lord Pascual of House Bryant, or her future intended, or Princeling Andreiyes in attendance. They all stared as though she were an animal to cage. She dipped the quill and skimmed over the calligraphed words. The ink's bitter scent on the ten crisp pages pricked her nose.

A child half her age could accomplish this task. Initial each page and sign the last to ensure her compliance and bind her and her family's fate on her eighteenth name-day to the Lordling Willik, heir of House Bryant. It gave her five stretches and five moon cycles of freedom to do as she pleased before they forced her to run a household and pop out children like Mama. Oh, so much to look forward to – vomiting, bloating, something growing inside bumping up the skin at odd angles, and the pain. As if to mock her, her mother wailed and

whimpered, courtesy of a contraction from her latest pregnancy. The cry echoed from the other side of the manor, and Kaianne winced.

Why couldn't boys be the ones to carry children and help the wetnurses with their chores? Sword training looked like more fun. Other than wearing pretty gowns, being a girl was dull. Sit straight and sew, or read or play an instrument, or dance or fan yourself. The only fun to be had nearby was walking through the markets in Millian – the town attached to their estate – or climbing trees in the Weldolf woods at the estate's edge.

No one reacted to Mama's cries as they echoed through the conference hall. Lord Pascual of House Bryant, northern commander of Isyldill's kingsmen, cleared his throat. His Highness Prince Andreiyes, court witness to the signing, leaned sideways in his chair and stifled a yawn, chin resting on his fist. Even Papa's stern facade only cracked for a grainfall before reverting to marble.

Sweat clammed Kaianne's palm, the quill slipping between her fingers. Normally, the floor to ceiling tapestries that lined the walls brought warmth and comfort, but at that moment they were threatening to wrap and smother her. Her chest tightened in the stuffy stillness.

She pleaded silently across the room for Papa to reconsider, but Lord Thibault of House Lyssandre remained impassive. One blink was all he gave, a silent order to sign. Her two older brothers beside him offered her no further comfort, permanently the faithful sons, and she didn't even try to enlist Prince Andreiyes' help. He tended to be in sync with her brother, Grayson – the two of them thick as thieves. Always with the insults and horseplay, too often at her expense.

Beside her, Willik shifted in his chair. At nearly sixteen, three stretches her senior, perhaps he was just as uncomfortable as she was. Gods knew they could not stand each other. That little hope had her glancing up. He forced a smile below the odd orange fuzz growing beneath his nose and on his chin. Oh little lords, would she really be forced to kiss that one day?

She cringed with a shiver and stared down at the contract outlining her life sentence. A forever with Willik, the pompous dunce who complained of the slightest bit of dirt on his boots. The one who could never be bothered to be seen with her because she was a girl and younger than he. Whose red hair made her wish she could strike flint to it. She gulped. She needed to get out of there, immediately.

Kaianne set down her quill and stood, her chair screeching along the tile. "Pardon me my Lords, your Highness. I need but a moment." Just to escape to the privy for a short while to form a real plan of escape.

"Sit. Down," Papa ordered, his baritone voice promising discipline. His dark eyes were fiery with challenge. "Everyone out. My daughter and I need a moment."

For a moment's hesitation, the air was so still not even a butterfly could have flown on it. Then, her eldest brother Deacon cleared his throat, inclined his head to Papa, and left, trailing her brother Grayson behind him and escorting out House Bryant's members. Kaianne gave Deacon one last pleading look before he slipped into the hallway. The princeling remained, a grin tugging at the corner of his dark face. He waved to Papa to proceed once the doors to the room shut.

"Your Highness." Papa's tone was measured behind gritted teeth. "I require a few sandfalls with my child."

Andreiyes' eyes snapped to meet Papa's, and for a moment the playfulness in his amber eyes that Kaianne hated vanished.

"If you consider her a child, Lord Thibault, then she has no place signing that contract today."

Kaianne gaped at him. She was unpleasantly well acquainted with his jesting nature. The pranks he and her brother played on her were a plague on her life. Being an arrogant arse did not help his cause, either. This serious, supportive side of him was shocking and suspicious. She narrowed her eyes at the boy who was fourth-in-line to the throne of Isyldill.

In all Isyldill, Royal House Lenierz were the closest descendants of the gods – Aethel and Gaia – who had

terraformed the land to provide for their people and led them to a prosperous future. Following in their footsteps should be more than enough motivation for a prince, but not Andreiyes. Just past celebrating his fifteenth stretch, the princeling still preferred to frolic and jeer. This was the most dutiful she had ever seen him.

“I may be young, Lord Lyssandre, but I am far from foolish. King Triunn has demanded I bear witness to the signing of this contract and all of its dealings. That includes these conversations.” Andreiyes sat upright and entwined his fingers on the table. “Hard be it for me to disappoint my grandfather, and I am certain you do not wish to offend or counter his requests. So, as much as I would rather be anywhere but here...as you were. Proceed.”

Kaianne shuddered. He oozed haughtiness like pus from a boil ever since his voice had stopped fluctuating from broken high pitches to a deeper timber than his spindly frame suggested. No one would ever doubt him to be royal born, even if they were blind to his tanned skin tone that was at least five shades darker than hers. Supposedly the god couple had skin black as night, the color carried down in their descendants yet diluted after hundreds of stretches of couplings with light skinned nobles and commonfolk. Not that her own family skin shade was pearl white. Her family’s nobility and prestige was tied not only to their wealth and loyalty to the crown but also to their caramel skin. In some distant past, one or more of her ancestors had likely been royal. Unlike the Bryants who were so white they competed with snow.

Papa inclined his head. “As you wish.”

Kaianne bit her cheek, eyes bouncing between the princeling’s focused gaze and Lord Lyssandre, before choosing to ignore the princeling. It wasn’t him she had to convince. She took a deep breath. “Papa, I’m begging you. Willik and I – ”

“Are to be married. That is the end of it.”

“But Papa, you cannot...I don’t want a husband.”

“Enough, Ynnea.” His tone was clipped. She hated the use of her first name. Its pronunciation was stern, detached, and

lacked warmth. “We discussed this. There is nothing further for you to negotiate.”

The prince bent forward. She squirmed with unease, staring into her father’s brown eyes, begging him to reconsider. Eyes narrowed, Lord Lyssandre slapped his palm against the table.

“Remember your place, girl. My affection for you will only go so far. If you go against your word again, I’ll have you locked in your chambers and married in a fortnight. Is that clear?”

Kaianne’s breath skipped. She nodded.

“Good.” Lord Lyssandre circled the table and patted her shoulder before placing a chaste kiss on her temple. “Make me proud and sign. You need this. We need this.”

She stared at his empty seat as he left the chamber, the door clicking shut whilst her mother wailed once more. Her chest tightened. The idea of being pregnant and pushing out a babe, it made her shiver. Never, never would it happen to her. That was a vow. With a shaky hand, she picked up the quill.

“Well,” the prince broke her unease. “I certainly did not expect such excitement. Especially not from you.”

She shot him a glare. His jesting smile was not in the least bit comforting. “Just because you know Grayson does not mean you know me, *your Highness*.”

“Careful, Ynnea. I am not your equal.”

“As if you and my brother would ever let me forget it.” If only he was the sole cause of her ire. She would certainly love to sear holes through that smug face of his and chip away at the straight edges of his jawline and brows that were becoming more prominent every stretch.

“Little else puts you in your place.” The contempt in his voice was as clear as her father’s. “This bargain with the Lord, what do you gain?”

“What do you care?”

“What can I say? My curiosity is never sated.” He reclined in his chair, the wood creaking from the shift.

Kaianne exhaled and scanned the papers once more. “Five and half stretches. To do as I wish if I accept willingly.”

“And if you did not?”

Burning tears fogged up the words on the parchment. She willed them away. “Papa would see me set on the streets without a penny to my name until I accept a quick wedding.”

“Well, every woman needs a man. And you are just a girl.”

And he was just a boy. She scoffed. That kind of response was exactly why she had nicknamed him Yierd like turd, because that was what his attitude reminded her of: an enormous steaming pile of manure that required a good shoveling.

“That’s something only boys like you think to fluff your own feathers. I’d be thrilled to never marry.”

His chortle grated her ears. “I almost pity House Bryant. Almost.”

The nincompoop winked at her. Kaianne grinded her teeth. Let him mock her. She planned to show all of them her worth. She had the following five stretches and five cycles. That made exactly sixty-five Maiesta moon cycles to disgust Willik and Lord Bryant into abandoning this dumb contract. In total one thousand nine-hundred fifty days to change her fate. There was time – an infinite number of sand grains in timekeepers left to fall. She tapped the quill on the ink bottle’s bottom. The quill scratched the parchment as she signed her name on each page. Ladyling Ynnea Kaianne Lyssandre.

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While her mother suffered from child pains, Kaianne was the lady of the house. Duty required her to accompany their guests to the estate’s courtyard to see them off. As if signing her life away were not enough.

The men ambled from the conference hall to the foyer surrounding the grand marble staircase. Papa, Deacon – her eldest brother –, and Lord Bryant’s voices rumbled through tiresome political conversations while Yierd and her brother Grayson regressed to their crude assessments regarding the ladies of court. Her younger brothers Eryk and Adelmo followed behind them like eager hounds. Willik, unfortunately,

found it appropriate to wait for her, elbow out for her to hold, lips curled up in a sneer.

She glared into his bland brown eyes and their golden rim around the iris – the same color everyone in Isyldill was born with except for the royals – expecting a deprecating or vain remark now that his father was out of hearing. Nothing about him made her giggle like some of her acquaintances at court might.

His too pale skin flushed with freckles was a reminder that the Bryants were of a newer line of nobles, dubbed only a century before because their coffers were overfilled with gold migs. The royals adored their excessive sycophantic behavior enough to name Lord Pascual and his father before him the Northern Commander. Her family was selling her to the Bryants to further their own wealth and military prowess, nothing else. That twisted her insides. She was no better than kindling for the fire on a cold night.

“Do me a favor, Ynnea, try growing some tits.”

She scoffed at the insult. Did he forget she was only twelve? “You dare address your future wife in such a way?”

“My wife should know her place.”

“Wow. How much more of a cur can you be?”

“At least I have the decency to feign interest.”

“Is that what you’re doing? Such a hardship.” She waved him forward, desperate to send him and his distasteful slurs on their way and escape the glaring eyes from the portraits hanging along the hall. “Willik, let’s be honest. I don’t like you. You don’t like me, and I will never be your wife. Pretending otherwise is foolish.”

His lips twitched into a snarl. “You are a lamb, Ynnea. Always have been, always will be. And I look forward to your slaughter.”

Kaianne pulled away and hurried ahead of him, unwilling to deal with him any further. The butler opened the double doors that led to the front courtyard and its greenery. Only then did her tension slacken.

Whiffs of thyme, rosemary and tarragon permeated the air from the vegetable gardens on the edge of the manor’s east

wing. The heat from the last twelve cycle stretch was only starting to abate, but the breeze caressed her skin beneath the lace of her half-sleeves. It forced a few strands of Kaianne's ash brown hair out of her braided bun. They blew backwards, begging to be as carefree and unrestrained as the wind. She rolled her shoulders and drew back her head. The sky was clearing, clouds bustling by, an ivory waxing gibbous and one sandy sphere hanging on opposite sides of the sea of sunny blue – Taelgir's two moons.

Twenty paces away, along the pebbled passage through the manicured garden hedges, lawn and ponds, their guests' horses awaited with a groom attending to each. Soon, this charade would be over.

"Until we meet again." Willik grabbed her palm. Had she not felt Papa's and Lord Pascual's gazes on them, she'd have torn her hand out of his grasp before he slobbered it with a long kiss.

With a shiver, she ripped her hand away and wiped his saliva on the back of her dress. "You forget, lordling," she hissed through her teeth. "I have no plans to see you for as long as the gods permit."

He chortled with a shake of his head before descending the marble steps and approaching his horse. Good riddance.

"Lord Pascual," she curtsied before the blond noble – Willik's red hair came from his mother's side. "Your company, as always, is a pleasure. We do hope to see you again soon."

"As is yours. I expect to return shortly to celebrate the birth of your sibling. It will be a joyous occasion." His smile reached from ear to ear. Despite her dislike of Willik, Pascual of House Bryant had a genuine charm to his tone and demeanor that always put her at ease. How he got along so well with her brooding father was beyond her. "The day you become a Bryant and we join our two houses permanently will be all the more."

"You're too kind." Kaianne forced a smile.

"You are, as always, welcome at the Zesco Manor. Her Ladyship and I would be thrilled to see more of our future daughter." Instead of a kiss to her wrist, Lord Bryant pecked her cheek and offered a warm smile.

“Please send her Ladyship my best.”

As Lord Pascual took his leave from Papa, Kaianne hugged her arms with unease. Pascual held the warmth her father lacked. That attention from a father figure was delightful, almost worth envying Willik for.

The two men locked right forearms, their marks facing in and touching, before pulling each other close for a back-patting embrace before parading down the path to the horses. Absentmindedly, Kaianne traced her own mark – the black outline of a griffin’s eagle head in profile, black feathers brushed back, a steely golden eye the exact same color of Isyldill’s royal family’s, and a menacing pointed beak.

Everyone in Isyldill was born with the same one except for the Flawed. They had none whatsoever, and those few were always exterminated as quickly as possible. Dangerous abominations, they were. They threatened the realm and the Order of Stewards’ stability with treachery. Something about them causing dissonance and disarray, all predicted by the gods. Both Papa and Mama had explained it, though Kaianne’s attention had wavered within the first few boring sentences of political reasoning and the mention of the traitorous Carved.

Boys’ laughter a few paces to her right cut through her thoughts.

“Eh, Kay.” Grayson elbowed her. “I bet four gold migs Willik was imagining wetting something other than your hand.”

She frowned. “What in Nogo’s pits does that mean?”

“Excellent phrasing,” Yierd said with a waggle of his eyebrows. Grayson shoved him. Her two other youngster siblings melted into chuckles.

“Your marriage bed, sis,” Grayson said. Kaianne blushed at his words. Willik imagined wetting what? “He’s most certainly impatient to –”

Deacon smacked the back of Grayson’s head. Nearing seventeen and Papa’s heir, he was the only levelheaded lad out of her four lookalike brothers.

“Eh, what was that for?”

“Kay’s virtue is no laughing matter. Be happy it was me who heard and not Pa, or you’d be yelping from the lashes.” Deacon

then pulled on Adelmo and Eryk's earlobes. "Was the laugh at her expense worth it? Do you little squirts even know what they're going on about?"

The two whimpered and shook their heads.

"Dea, you don't -," Kaianne said.

"I'm not done, Kay."

She rolled her eyes. For Gaia's sake, why did boys always think that their words were worth more than hers?

Deacon brandished his index finger like a weapon before her brothers. "If you don't know the innings of what is being said, then keep your gobs shut."

"It was only a little humor, Dea." Yierd always acted like it was his right to cut into family talks.

"With all the respect this family has for your position, your Highness, a daughter of House Lyssandre is not sport for wordplay."

"Dea, enough. I can handle myself."

Deacon clutched her by the elbow and ungraciously forced her back inside the manor.

"Let me go." She shook her arm, but he only squeezed tighter. "You're not Pa."

His fingertips dug into her muscle as he dragged her up the grand staircase toward the west wing's upper apartments. With each step closer to Mama's chambers, Kaianne tugged harder against Deacon's hold. He had no right to tug her along like this.

"You're hurting me. Let go."

They stopped in the middle of the hallway, so close to Mama's quarters that Kaianne could hear her panting between wails. The smoky scent of sandalwood and lavender incense wafting throughout the wing didn't seem to be helping to calm Mama. Deacon's grip unlocked from Kaianne's arm, and she massaged the prickling area as a pained shriek peeled down the corridor and left her skin feeling raw. Poor Mama. She'd heard the servants whispering that a day and a half of child pains was already past the norm.

"Look at me, Kay."

She glared up at her brother's straight edged features and into his brown eyes. There was no anger there, but his telltale signs of frustration showed through his pinched lips and shake of the head.

"You think that because you've reached womanhood or because you convinced Pa to push back the wedding, you know best. You don't."

"So, you think I'm useless. Just another girl who doesn't know which way is up without a man's hand."

He shook her. "That's not what I'm saying. I don't know what's best either. Pa always tells me: respect can be given, but most is earned and you have to fight to keep it. If your own brother is permitted to discuss you so crudely, others will too. Then you'll be fighting twice as hard to retrieve all the respect the Lyssandre name has given you. You're worth much more than that, Sis."

Kaianne crossed her elbows, head bowed. "I'm not a fragile little thing. I don't need you to protect me."

"I do because I want to, Kay. My loyalty is to the family, and gods know I love you." He grappled her in a hug and kissed her head. "Not just anyone could have stood up to Pa and changed his mind like you did. Just don't let anyone demean you and your worth."

Kaianne's cheeks prickled, and she dug her face harder against Deacon's tunic. Like water dousing Nogo's flames, she could never stay mad at him for long.

"Thank you."

Another guttural cry from Mama's room pierced the air. The far door clicked open and a woman in her servant grays, hair pulled tight into a cloth wrapped bun, raced through, carrying bunched sheets in her arms. The servant bowed her head and curtsied as she passed, but Kaianne only paid heed to the large, red stains on the flowered fabric.

"Any news?" Deacon asked the servant, who turned to face him midstride.

"No, m'Lordling. The midwife says she not be progressing near as much as she should."

"And the blood?" Kaianne felt a twinge in her stomach.

“I’m sorry, m’Ladyling. I’m no healer.” The servant hurried away, somber thuds following her footfalls on the rug.

CHAPTER 2

Poor Mama's face was pastier than the palest commoner, despite the sunlight gleaming through the window veils. She had now been in labor for three days.

Purple bags dragged down her almond eyes, lines of tears tracing their edges. Her breathing was erratic, and her cries were filled with more sobs than any other sound. No amount of cold washcloths on Mama's brow calmed the sweating spells. No matter how often the maids aired out the room or the amount of incense that burned, the cloying odor of blood, sweat, and tears overwhelmed the room. Kaianne shook her head, disgusted. Nothing was worth this much pain, not a babe nor even five stretches of freedom.

Mistress Tilde, the midwife, pried up Mama's third nightgown in half a day. This latest one was already crusted in layers of fresh and dried blood. She prodded Mama's belly – top, bottom, and sides. Mama winced, and the old woman rasped an apology.

Mistress Tilde puckered her lips. “The babe's breech, m'Lady.”

Mama grunted and whimpered. Kaianne placed her washcloth back into the water basin at the bed's edge and squeezed the excess water out. She pressed it on Mama's forehead once more and dragged it down her cheeks.

“You're almost there, Mama. I'll be meeting my little sister real soon.”

“You would like that, wouldn't you? A sister,” Mama hissed, face pinched.

Kaianne smiled. “Any more lads in this family and they'll run us into the ground.”

“Time to push, m’Lady.” Mistress Tilde rolled down the bedsheets past Mama’s ankles. “Hard pushes.”

Mama grunted and squealed. She squeezed Kaianne’s hand without relent. Her knuckles turned white, and she bit back a yelp.

“Almost there, m’Lady. Again, three more.”

Once more Mama grunted, then her grip on Kaianne’s hand relaxed, and a frozen silence took over. For five long grainfalls – not a word, not a breath, nor even a movement. Until the baby wailed and broke the stupor.

“Well?” Mother asked panting. “Boy or girl?” Kaianne peered around the Mistress’ shoulder, just as curious.

“A...a little lad, my Lady.” Mistress Tilde forced the barely wrapped babe into Kaianne’s arms, all covered in gooey, red muck.

“What?” Kaianne gathered the bundle awkwardly. His arms flailed, wiping himself all over her green gown, as she worked to keep a solid hold on him. The screams coming out of his toothless mouth were deafening. “But I...Where are you going?”

The midwife backed away from them, eyes wide, head shaking, lower lip quivering.

“I must call on his Lordship.”

“Wait,” Kaianne said. “What am I supposed to do with him?”

To Kaianne’s surprise, Mistress Tilde scuttled backward and rushed out the door – bloodied apron, goo-mucked hands and all. Usually, the woman was so methodical that she thanked the blessed moons and stars when she could avoid her. Now, she wanted to beg the woman to come back. If she did, Kaianne promised never to mutter again about how ancient she was.

“He’s beautiful,” Mama whispered before her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

“Mama? Ma?” Arms busy with the babe that had finally calmed in her bouncing arms, Kaianne nudged Mama’s shoulder with her elbow. No response. Bleddyn, Mama’s personal chambermaid, lifted Mama’s head and fluffed her pillow while her daughter set a clean set of sheets beneath Mama’s legs. “What’s wrong with her? Why won’t she wake up?”

“Sleeping, m’Ladyling. She’s tired is all. Long three days, and she’s bled her share.”

Kaianne wiped a runaway tear against her shoulder. “And now?”

“Less, much less.”

“Then why did Mistress Tilde leave? Why is she not here?”

“I’m sorry, m’Ladyling. I don’t know.”

“Is something wrong with him? Is my brother ill?”

“He sounded just fine. No need to worry now. Just needs a cleaning is all. But go on and hold him a bit longer if ye’d like. Seems he’s taken a liking to ye.”

Kaianne peered down at the now silent, wrinkly thing cocooned in her arms. Eyes sealed shut, cheeks bunched to make pouty lips. She sighed. Another brother. One more bouncing egotistical, supremacist to the lot. If she had any say in the matter, he would remain forever far from their brothers’ irritating influence to become the sweetest, most caring, most loving of them all. If only.

“Baby brother. You need a name.” Kaianne gently tapped a finger on his tiny nose and smirked. “I dub thee...Thad.” She rubbed the goo off his chubby face and arms. Strange though, his skin was all bare, caramel flesh. She twisted his right arm to the side. “Bleddyn, how long after birth does the mark appear?”

The servants glanced at each other. “It does no’ appear, Ladyling. It just is.”

But that meant...Thad was a Flawed? How? The servants’ unease spread waves of tension that had Kaianne’s skin prickling. No wonder Mistress Tilde ran out like the Order’s Masters were on her heels. The Order and their trained drynn wielders were a scary few; not even the royals messed with them as the gods’ chosen few with the talents to carry out their will.

Gods below, someone was going to come for Thad. Flawed weren’t allowed to live. Kaianne shook her head with a trembling breath. Thad’s little face looked so peaceful and harmless tucked in the crook of her arm. No snoring, no fidgeting. He was as harmless as a coney’s kittens. It just wasn’t possible, not him, not this little babe snuggled against her.

“No one will touch you, little brother,” she whispered.

She needed to hide him. With Mimsee, her governess, out on holiday, there was a spare chamber in the servant’s quarters where he could stay for a little while. Kaianne lay her baby brother over her chest and crossed to the trunk at the end of her mother’s bed, the hardwood floor creaking with each step. The two servants backed away to Mama’s side on her approach, heads bowed with the occasional furtive glance her way. Neither seemed keen on aiding.

With a tug, the trunk screeched open to reveal stacks of clean cloths and sheets. She grabbed a bolster’s case. The servants’ hushed whispers grated her ears, worry lines etched in their brows.

“He’s only a babe. He cannot hurt you.” Kaianne rolled her eyes. She swaddled Thad in the extra layer.

Muffled yells boomed from the other side of the west wing. That meant one thing: Tilde had found Papa. Not good. Usually, Papa waited in his audience chambers to officially be presented with his newborn.

Bleddyn clamped her mouth shut and both maids scooted further into a corner. Kaianne pressed Thad tight against her, his innocent whimper making her lip quiver. A stampede of footfalls drummed through the hallway. Their quake echoed through the stone floor, its hardwood coverings, and rug, all the way up her slippers.

Papa barked commands. *‘Double the watch at the gate.’ ‘No one enters.’*

Still Mama slept, her color unimproved. On the other side of the door, Grayson muttered something, probably a poor joke, and Papa snapped, cursing his idiocy to the pits. A whack followed. Deacon’s even tone interfered, yet his calm words had no effect this time.

When the handle clicked and the door opened, Papa was still roaring. Brows furrowed, lips curled, he barged into the room and slammed the door behind him. Kaianne had seen Papa mad, – he often was – but this seemed different. His facial lines were drawn out further than the day before and liquor wafted off his breath and skin.

“Is it true?” he asked, boots clicking against the hardwood flooring.

Kaienne backed away toward the room’s center. Her gaze jumped from the room’s entrance, to Papa, to Thad, and finally to Mama’s dayroom door near the vast windows on the opposite side of the room.

“What will you do to him?”

“Give *it* to me, Kaienne.”

“He’s not an it, Papa. He’s your son. My brother.”

“He means the death of your mother and this family’s good name.”

“Mama just needs some rest. She’ll be well shortly.”

Kaienne inched closer to the dayroom door, heart thumping in her chest. Less than ten more steps to reach it. From Mama’s dayroom, the patio doors led to her private gardens with a winding passageway off the main grounds through which she could reach the servants’ quarters. She just had to keep Thad hidden from Papa long enough for Mama to get better and reason with him.

Kaienne darted to the side, but Papa clutched her arm and reeled her back. The jolt forced her down on her rear. A bolt of pain shot up her spine as Thad woke, shrieking.

“Hush now.” She bounced him against her chest with a hiss. His wailing would only rile Papa up further.

“Foolish girl.”

She didn’t see the blow coming. It shot her head to the left. Her cheek prickled with heat. Half the room blurred while one ear rang. Papa had never struck her face that hard before. Tears flowed unbidden, cooling her cheek as he ripped Thad from her grip.

“Why?” she muttered between sobs. “He’s just a babe.”

“Do not push me further.” Papa’s sunken eyes warned her.

He was known for his temper, but this wasn’t his usual cold fury. There was something unhinged in his gaze that made Kaienne want to cringe and hide. When his stare jumped to Mama’s bed and softened slightly, a shaky breath left Kaienne trembling.

“Ready her. She’ll be leaving within the next sandturn.”

“But m’Lord.” Bleddyn’s voice was as shaky as Kaianne felt. “Her Ladyship lost too much blood. We move her, she may not survive.”

Papa fell to his knees as Thad tumbled from his laid-out arms to the ground. He pounded the floating floorboards with clenched fists until they cracked. Kaianne curled into herself, Thad’s wails and screams drowning the thuds that vibrated through the parquet. Strands of Papa’s ash hair fell from the band at his nape. Fire raged through his eyes like that of feral criminals escorted to their deaths.

She wanted to grab Thad and hide in a void, but her body refused to respond. All she could do was watch in horror as Papa reached into the bedding that enveloped Thad and grabbed his neck. A tiny snap, and then Thad went quiet. She shuddered and sobbed. That little sound was all it took.

The change in Papa was drastic. One moment, he radiated rage. The next, he clenched Thad’s quiet body against his chest. Tears – the first Kaianne had ever witnessed from Papa – drained down his scrunched face. When he rose and made his way to Mama. Kaianne found the courage to unfurl her body.

“Don’t hurt her,” she begged.

To her surprise, Papa gingerly sat beside Mama and lay a kiss on her temple, soft and gentle. He caressed back her hair, then fluffed her pillow. He proceeded to cover her body with blankets. Kaianne stared wide-eyed at the display of tenderness after the violence from moments before.

“Are you certain she cannot travel?” he asked Bleddyn, voice low, an arm around Mama’s head and shoulder.

“Only the healer can give confirmation, m’Lord. We can send for him.”

“No, too much time would be lost. It would no longer matter.” He caressed Mama’s cheek and murmured soft words in her ear.

Kaianne trembled in place, but bit back the stinging tears for the brother she’d never know. Papa still held Thad’s bundled body.

“Have her dressed in her finest. Kaianne, order the gardener to pick a mix of her favorite flowers. All violet and yellow. It’s what she would want. Have them brought here quickly.”

“Why?” The question slipped out, and she bit her lip. She knew better than to question Papa.

Papa sighed, head bowed. He’d never looked so weak and resigned before. “She shall soon have guests, ones even I cannot stop. We must only hope that they shall be lenient with the problem resolved.”

Problem. The word for Thad’s lifeless body was so cold, it sent a shiver down her spine. He kissed Mama once more.

“I would not change these past two decades with you for a hundred others lived,” he whispered against her forehead.

Kaianne tilted her head, breath catching in her throat. “Who is coming, Papa?”

“No questions. Do as I ask, now. Your brothers need to call our guard to assemble. But Kaianne, no mention of the Flawed child to the staff. Not a word.”