

# Revenge of the Estatic

A *CHARM WARS* FANTASY NOVEL  
BOOK 3

Dan Lutts

**ALSO BY DAN LUTTS:**  
***CHARM WARS***  
***A LIGHT IN THE WINDOW***

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Penobscot, Maine 04476

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Book Layout ©2017 [BookDesignTemplates.com](http://BookDesignTemplates.com)

Revenge of the Estatis / Dan Lutts —1st ed.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Charm and Staff

RILL RESISTED THE URGE to let his shoulders sag in relief as they passed through the Public Gate into Caldon. He uttered a silent prayer thanking the One Goddess that the uncomfortable part of the journey was almost finished. A dog's sudden bark interrupted his thoughts, and a hound dashed toward him. Alyse tightened her grip around Rill's waist as the mare shied away from the dog.

"Are you alright?" Rill asked after the dog ran past them.

Alyse didn't respond.

Rill shrugged off her silence. After all those days in the saddle with her, he was used to it.

He bypassed the Public Square and started up the gray cobblestone road leading to the top of The Citadel. Reaching the crest, Rill turned the mare's head left instead of right.

Alyse yanked in on Rill's belly, making him expel a lungful of air. "Hey, wait! Where are you going? That's not the way to my home."

Rill ground his teeth in annoyance. Alyse had been a pain in the butt all the way home, day after day reminding him that she was *allowing* him bring her back to Caldon only because she was concerned about her cousin, Kate DeJune. Knowing Alyse's family, Rill figured her matriarch had already expelled Kate because she had helped Alyse in her aborted attempt to avoid marrying Troy Estati. He figured Alyse knew that, too, but refused to admit it to herself. "We ain't goin' there."

Rill felt her body stiffen. "You're taking me to the Estatis?"

Rill performed a mental eye roll. *What does she expect—that everyone will welcome her back with open arms?* "They're the ones who sent me after you. So they're the ones I'm deliverin' you to."

Pride swelled Rill's chest. All during the trip back, he'd imagined the brouhaha everyone would make when he showed up at the Estati compound. He had accomplished what no one else, not even Troy, could do.

As soon as he drew rein in the courtyard, off-duty protectors and backwatchers, chattering with excitement, surrounded him. Their babbling stopped abruptly when the front door burst open and Death, Troy, and the Estati women stepped into the bright afternoon sunshine. They stopped short when they spotted him sitting tall in the saddle. Rill savored the stunned expression on their faces, as if he were tasting a fine, vintage wine.

Death walked through a space the onlookers silently opened for him. The rest of the Estatis trailed behind him.

"Rill," Death said as he stopped by the mare, "we thought you both were dead." He patted Rill's leg. "Well done, Rill. Well done."

Anger swirled in Alyse's face and her emerald-green eyes turned hard, but she said nothing.

Rill's lungs expanded with pleasure, and he sat even taller, feeling like a conqueror. "Obviously, we ain't dead." He forced his expression to become solemn, then nodded at the Estatis' matriarch who had stopped beside Death. "Lady Ariella, I've fulfilled the charge you gave me. I've brought back Lady Alyse DeJune."

Ariella's blue eyes sparkled with approval. "You've more than fulfilled my expectations, Rill." The sparks turned white-hot, her lips tightened into a parchment-thin line, and her brows plunged into a deep frown as she turned her gaze to Alyse. "Get off that horse, you little piece of baggage."

Alyse slipped down in an easy, fluid motion. Then, spine straight and shoulders erect, she steadily shoved back the stony gaze Ariella pressed against her. Neither spoke.

The onlookers glanced from one to the other as the tension rose like a lute string being tightened until it snapped.

"Alyse DeJune," Ariella finally said, "you've insulted my son, my family, my ancestors, and our future generations by your actions. I have a good mind to cancel our alliance with your family."

Alyse pulled herself erect, somehow managing to look dignified despite her travel-worn clothes, dirty face, and disheveled chestnut hair. "I did what I thought was best. Now you must do the same."

Ariella took a quick step toward her and slapped her face. The sharp impact sounded like a crack of thunder.

“You just overstepped yourself, Lady Ariella,” Alyse said, her green eyes hard as uncut emeralds, as she put a hand to the red bruise forming on her cheek.

Anger burned brightly in Ariella’s dark blue eyes while she glared at Alyse. “And so have you.”

“You’re not my matriarch. You have no authority over me.” [At the top of the page, Alyse tells Lady Ariella that she has just overstepped herself. Then, in this paragraph, she repeats herself by saying again to Lady Ariella “And so have you.”]

“Soon you’ll be Troy’s wife, and I’ll be your mother-in-law.” Ariella yanked Alyse’s arm. “Between your matriarch and me, we’ll teach you to obey.”

Alyse jerked free. “That remains to be seen.”

Ariella nodded at Troy. “Take her home. And *this* time, try not to lose her.”

Troy started toward Alyse.

“No! I’ll not go home with a coward. Someone who abandoned Rill to the brigands so he could save his own skin. I refuse to marry a coward.”

Troy froze mid-step, as if she’d cast a Paralyze spell on him.

Bewilderment formed on Ariella’s face. Death appeared just as puzzled. Confusion rippled through the retainers, but Troy remained unnaturally still while a blush bloomed on his face.

Ariella turned to Troy. “That’s not what you told us. You said the brigands killed Alyse and Rill in the attack at the crossroads.”

Troy opened his mouth a couple of times, as if he were trying to force words out but couldn’t. “Well . . . umm . . .” Then the words zipped out, each chasing the heels of the other. “I

*thought* they'd been killed. Brigands had surrounded them and mages were casting Fire Bolt spells at them."

"Lies!" Alyse bent toward Troy, her eyes scrunched into angry slits. "I guess you didn't tell anyone that I was sitting behind you on your horse. When I told you we had to go back to help Rill, you refused. I guess saving your own skin was more important than helping your uncle's loyal apprentice who was facing the brigands alone."

Death stepped toward Troy, brows narrowed. "Is that true?"

Troy turned a panicky face to Death, then focused on Ariella. "She's lying! Don't listen to her."

"Let her have her say," Ariella commanded.

Alyse shot Troy a look of utter disgust, then turned to Ariella. "There were only four brigands. All mages, including Palquo, the brigands' leader. They cast two Fire Bolt spells on Rill." She stroked the mare. "And a third on this poor horse." She strode up to Troy and faced him, nose-to-nose. "You left Rill to die while you galloped off to safety. And you left me there as well. You're a coward with a yellow streak down your back wider than this entire compound."

Alyse turned to Rill. "Tell them that's so."

Dread suddenly overwhelmed Rill and he took a series of quick, shallow breaths. Alyse had backed him into a corner. By supporting her against Troy, he might lose the Estatic's support. He swallowed a mouthful of saliva that, like a slimy snake, had crept up his throat into his mouth. "Well, I . . ." He cleared his throat. "I remember bein' struck by Palquo's fire bolts. Then everything went blank. When I woke up, I was being dragged on a litter by this here horse, and you was walkin' beside me."



The look, brimming with contempt, that Alyse leveled at him made Rill want to pull his head deep down inside his shirt.

Alyse turned to Ariella. “I don’t need an escort. I’ll go by myself.”

“You’ll not go without an escort,” Ariella said. “The Estatus brought you back and the Estatus will deliver you to your matriarch.”

“I’ll escort her,” Livia said.

Before Ariella could reply, Livia rushed over to Alyse and together they strode through the gate, Alyse leading her horse by its reins. Rill’s gaze lingered on Alyse as she mounted the mare and started off along the cobbles with Livia walking beside her. She held her shoulders back and her head high, a portrait of pride. Two conflicting emotions wrestled for domination in Rill—shame for not supporting her and relief that she was gone. A thought settled uneasily on his shoulders. Was he a coward for not supporting her in her accusations against Troy? He gave an imperceptible shake of his head. Naw. He fought the brigands at their camp and at the crossroads. So he wasn’t no coward. He just wanted to make something of himself, come Shelar or high water.

Ariella’s voice pierced his thoughts. “What are you standing around for?” she said to the crowd of protectors and backwatchers. “You all have things to do. So do them.”

Then she strode into the house.

The rest of the family followed her, except for Death. He draped an arm around Rill’s shoulder. “I’m afraid you’ve made an enemy of my nephew.”

“He’s been an enemy for quite some time,” Rill wanted to say, but he shrugged instead.

“Let’s go into my study,” Death said.

After closing the door, Death waved Rill into a chair and then sat down at his desk.

As Rill settled into the chair, his nerves tied themselves into painful knots. Was Lord Deuth going to stop mentoring him because he'd humiliated Troy not just in front of the Estati family but in front of their retainers too?

Deuth picked up a white quill pen, leaned back in the chair, and fiddled with the quill, a frown on his face, as if he were gathering his thoughts. Finally, he sat straight and said, "Don't expect any thanks from Lady Ariella for bringing Alyse back. Alyse's running away humiliated her and the rest of our family. Even worse, having you bring her back instead of Troy has shamed her even more." He waved the feathered end at Rill and grinned. "But, speaking for myself, I'm proud of you."

Deuth's praise made Rill's skin tingle all over, and he strove to keep a grin from conquering his face. "Thank you, Lord."

Deuth ran a finger along the quill's shaft. "I'd like to reward you, but I can't do that openly. Perhaps sometime in the future, when tempers simmer down, I can."

Rill wavered, wondering if he should bring up the matter. But now, because he was in Deuth's good graces, was probably the best time. "Maybe there is something you can do now, Lord."

Deuth tossed the quill onto the desktop. "What's that?"

His heart tapping a tattoo against his ribs, Rill took a deep breath and leaned forward in the chair. "I think I've been an able apprentice."

"That you have."

"I've shown you I can use a Warrior charm. I've collected debts for you faithfully. And now I brought Lady Alyse back when Lord Troy couldn't—"

Death held up a hand. “Let’s not go there. But, yes. That’s all true. So what’s your point?”

Rill hesitated while he gathered his courage before answering while the tattoo against his chest increased. He ran a nervous tongue across his lips. “Give me my own charm and staff. I believe I’ve earned them.”

A pained expression scuttled across Death’s face. “I’m afraid that’s not possible.”

Death’s response created a sudden coldness in Rill’s chest. “Why not?”

“Because things aren’t that simple.”

“What do ya mean?”

“Where’s your staff?”

“I ain’t got it.”

Death raised strict eyebrows.

A flush of embarrassment heated Rill’s cheeks. “I lost it in the fight at the crossroads.”

“That’s most unfortunate because staffs are in short supply.” Death drummed his fingers on the desktop for a long moment, a frown on his face, as if he were thinking. “And your charm? You still have that, I assume, although I don’t see a chain around your neck. Or did something happen to the charm?”

An invisible hand grabbed Rill’s heart and the tattoo ceased in mid-beat. “I lost it too. In the fight at the crossroads.”

Death half rose from the chair. “How in the name of the One Goddess could you lose your charm? It was around your neck.”

“I don’t know, Lord,” Rill said, rushing his words together. “One of the brigands must of taken it when I was unconscious.”

Death's eyes opened so wide the whites showed. "Do you know the value of a staff and a charm?"

Rill looked down, his heart slowing to sluggish thumps. "Priceless."

"They're more than priceless," Death said, his voice so cold it made Rill shiver.

"Irreplaceable. Both of them."

"I'm sorry, Lord."

Death made a derisive snort. "'Sorry.'" He snorted again. "How will being *sorry* bring back my family's charm and staff?"

Rill couldn't think of a suitable reply, so he said nothing.

"Well?" Death asked, his tone harsh, after a long, uncomfortable silence.

"It won't," Rill said in a tiny voice, his gaze still focused on the mosaic floor while the extra-slow thumping of his heart pounded in his ears.

"Exactly. Which brings us back to why it's impossible for me to *lend* you another charm and staff." He paused for what seemed to Rill and excruciatingly long moment. "Because that charm and staff were going to be yours after you proved yourself by bringing back Lady Alyse."

"Mine?" Astonishment made Rill's heartbeats quicken. Then he frowned, puzzled. "But you told me I'd hafta steal a charm and staff to prove myself."

"True," Death said, giving a quick nod. "But I changed my mind. After all, you were almost family. So Lady Ariella had decided to let you keep the charm and staff you already had." His eyes narrowed. "The ones you lost."

"But you've got extra charms and staffs in your charm vault. I saw them when you took me there to show me the *Book of Charms*."

“By losing the ones we lent you, you showed us you can’t be trusted with another set. At least, not another set of ours.”

A sense of hopelessness settled on Rill’s shoulders, feeling so heavy he slumped in his chair. “What am I gonna do?”

“You can ask your mother that,” Death said. “She’s the one who’s responsible for the mess you’re in.”

Anger bubbled inside Rill like molten lava in a volcano ready to erupt sky high. His mom! “I could of been an Estati if it wasn’t for her. If she hadn’t renounced your family—*her* family—and married my dad.”

Death nodded, his face a mask of righteous anger. “We would’ve accepted you as an Estati faster than an eye blink. You would’ve been entitled to your own charm and staff as a birthright. Just like Troy and Livia were given theirs.”

Death got up from behind the desk and put a hand on Rill’s shoulder. “Your own mother denied you your birthright.” He whispered the next words in Rill’s ear. “She hates you.”

The words made Rill flinch. “She don’t hate me.” But even as he spoke, his stomach quivered ever so slightly, and doubt snuck into his mind, like an enemy legionary creeping up on a sentry.

“She does,” Death said. “That’s why she denied you your birthright to be an Estati. To have your own charm and staff—not on loan, but as your own Goddess-given right.”

The volcano brewing inside Rill finally erupted. “I hate her!”

“As she does you,” Death said. “But we don’t hate you. Just the opposite. We see you as *almost* a member of the family. *Almost* an Estati.” Death put his other hand on Rill’s other shoulder and gazed at him with eyes bursting with compassion. “I want you to become one of us,

Rill. An Estati. So I'll tell you what I'm going to do." Death paused, as if he had trouble believing what he was about to say next. "I'll defy my matriarch."

Rill lurched in the chair, stunned by Death's words.

"I know where you can get a charm and staff. And I'll even help you get them so you can claim them as your birthright."

A lump of gratitude for this wonderful man formed in Rill's throat that was so massive he could hardly choke his words out. "How can I ever repay you?"

Death smiled down at him, his features bursting with magnanimity. "Oh, I'm sure we'll find a way."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Homecoming

APPREHENSION CURLED IN ALYSE'S belly like a deadly, poisonous snake, fed by the rhythmic clopping of her mare's hooves on the cobblestones leading to the family compound. She and Livia paused at the front gate.

Amazement showed on the faces of the protectors who stood guard outside. One of them slid back the wooden covering of a small window in the gate and whispered, "It's Lady Alyse! She's not dead. She's here. Inform Lady Maude."

Moments later, Alyse heard startled voices crying her name and then the sound of boots slapping against cobbles as someone raced off to inform the family of her return. The *slap slap* of her own heart against her chest matched the slaps of the boots. She braced herself, straightening her body in the saddle, and had the mare walk through the now-open gate. Livia strode alongside her, and Alyse found the warmth of Livia's presence comforting.

Off-duty protectors and backwatchers crowded around Alyse, Livia, and the horse, their voices babbling joyful welcomes. The expressions on their faces showed a collage of shock, surprise, incredulousness, and delight.

Jade elbowed her way through the press of bodies dressed in tan, red-striped livery and stopped by the mare as Alyse was dismounting. She grabbed Alyse's arm. "You're coming with me."

Alyse wrenched her arm free. "You don't give me orders. I give *you* orders."

"I was sent to bring you back—"

"And you failed. Now I've returned on my own accord."

Jade glowered at her, nostrils flaring.

"That's right," Livia said. "Lady Alyse—"

Jade spun to face her. "Butt out! This is Dejune business, not Estati."

Livia bared her teeth and was about to spit out a retort when the front door banged open and Lady Maude strode out, followed by Pilar, Mora, Jukka Berne, and Degas Spicer. The retainers broke ranks to let them through.

Pilar wrapped her arms around Alyse and drew her in close. "My child, we thought you were dead," she said in a shaky voice. "That brigands killed you. Thank the One Goddess you're not."

Alyse smiled warmly, delighted by Pilar's motherly affection. "As you can see, I'm very much alive."

Maude hugged Alyse, too, then drew back and scanned her up and down with her flint-gray eyes. Warmth infused her voice. "I'm happy to see that you're alive." She smiled and patted Alyse cheek. "Now Mora doesn't have to marry Troy."



Alyse stepped back, colliding against the stirrup iron hanging down the mare's flanks. A sharp streak of pain shot up and down her back. "I didn't come home to marry Troy. I came home to find Kate."

Maude's jaws tightened so hard her cheeks bulged. "You won't find her here."

The words struck Alyse in the chest like dagger thrusts. She had thought this might happen and had prepared herself for it, but not enough because her guts were lurching in her belly, like a ship being pounded in a stormy sea. "Where is she?"

"I couldn't care less."

"I'll find her."

"You'll do no such thing." Maude turned to Jade. "Lock Lady Alyse in her bedroom and give the key to me."

Jade grabbed hold of Alyse's arm and hauled her off like a common criminal. When they reached Alyse's bedroom, Jade shoved her past the threshold, then closed and locked the door.

Alyse opened the shutters on the window, then paced back and forth across the multi-colored tiles on the mosaic floor, unable to focus on her own predicament because of her worry about Kate's. What had Maude done to her? The question ate at her, making her picture the worst scenarios. Kate had spent most of her life living here. She had no close friends besides the ones she had made here, and now everyone had been forced to turn against her. Had Kate fled to The Slums? There wasn't much use for an honest woman there. It seemed to Alyse that Kate's only options were to become a dagger woman or a prostitute, but Alyse couldn't picture her as either. Or perhaps she'd left Caldon entirely. But where would she go and how could she earn a living. Joining a band of brigands was the only likely option, but if she encountered Palquo's band, they would kill her.

Alyse flinched in surprise when the door connecting her bedroom to Kate's opened and Mora walked in.

A nasty smile contorted Mora's face. "Happy to see me?" Mora held up a key. "Grandmother Maude forgot about the lock for this door. I'll be sure to remind her."

"What do you want?"

Mora leaned her back against the door. "You were curious about Kate. So I thought I'd relieve your mind."

Mora had come to taunt her, but Alyse would play the game if Mora would end up giving her the answer. "Where is she?"

"Gone.

"Gone where?"

"Grandmother Maude expelled her. Stripped her of all her clothes except for her nightdress and sent her on her way." Mora's lips twisted into a sneer. "It was quite a sight. The talk of The Citadel." She snickered. "Some of the kids even threw stones at her. I saw one hit her head and another her shoulder."

Mora's vindictiveness snapped Alyse's feigned calmness. She lunged at Mora, but Mora sidestepped and punched her in the stomach. Alyse doubled over as her breath whooshed out of her mouth.

"Don't you *ever* touch me again," Mora said.

Alyse straightened, her hands clutching her belly. "Where is she?"

Mora sniggered. "I'll tell you the honest truth: I don't know."

"Don't lie to me!"

“I’m not. The fact is, no one knows. And no one cares.” She turned and started through the adjoining door to Mora’s room. Then she stopped, turned, and held up the key. “Oh, I’ll lock the door and give the key to Grandmother.”

Sometime later, a handywoman changed the locks on both doors. A short time after that, a pair of handywomen closed and nailed the shutters on Alyse’s windows from the outside, plunging the bedroom into darkness. Fortunately, the twin oil lamps on Alyse’s dressing table and the one on the nightstand still contained oil, and she lit all three. No one had taken the logs by the fireplace, but it wasn’t cold enough to for a fire.

Alyse found a book, laid down on the bed, and began reading. Just as she had lost herself in the book, she heard a key rattling in the door’s lock. Alyse scrambled to her feet just as the door opened.

Jade walked in and shoved a thin sheath of note parchment at her.

“What’s this for?” Alyse asked.

Jade crossed to the dresser and inspected the small ink pot. Apparently satisfied, she set the pot down.

Confusion swirled in Alyse’s mind at Jade’s weird actions. “Jade, what’s—”

Alyse unfolded the parchment and read Grandmother Maude’s words in the shimmering yellow light of the two lamps on the dresser. *You will remain locked in your room, in darkness and silence, until you agree to marry Troy. Until then, you will eat only bread and water.*

Alyse glanced at Jade who mimed writing on her hand with an invisible quill pen, then crossed her arms and waited. Her message was obvious. Alyse’s first instinct was to crumple and fling the parchment at Jade, but she forced herself to take a few deep breaths to calm herself in this new game of competing wills her grandmother had chosen to play with her.

Alyse was tempted to write, “Let the game begin.” Instead, she scribbled, “I will *not* marry Troy!”

The game of will-against-will had now begun.

#

A key scraped in the lock, the door opened, and Jade entered the darkened bedroom carrying Alyse’s . . . what? Breakfast? Lunch? Supper? Being cooped up in the dark with the shutters nailed shut and the only light provided by a single, tiny oil lamp on the dressing table had jumbled Alyse’s sense of time. She had already given up trying to figure out how many days had passed since she’d been locked up. Alyse heaved a weary shrug that was invisible in the gloom. Grandmother Maude had told her she would live in darkness and silence until she agreed to marry Troy. So be it.

Alyse welcomed the torchlight shining in from the family area when Jade opened the door and also seeing a servant walking by. Jade pushed the door closed with the heel of her boot while she held the food tray in both hands. Alyse waited silently, her stomach growling for sustenance. She had stopped trying to engage Jade in conversation—even just a few words—because Jade ignored each attempt. Jade was only following orders, of course, but Alyse assumed Jade relished her control over her.

Jade set the plain earthenware plate and mug on the dressing table, near the lamp, and turned toward Alyse.

Alyse clenched her hands, her fingernails biting into her palms, because she knew what was coming next in this deadly charade.

Jade mimed writing on her hand with an invisible quill pen, then crossed her arms and waited. The invisible message was, as always, the same.

Her mind burning with anger, Alyse grabbed a real quill from the dressing table, dipped it in the ink bottle, and scribbled a reply on the stop sheet of a stack of parchments she'd been given: "I will *not* marry Troy!" Then she sanded and folded the note and thrust it at Jade.

After Jade left, Alyse went to the table and stared at the tray. She wrinkled her nose at what the dancing, yellow flame revealed: another hunk of crusty bread and a mug of wine that had been watered down until it almost tasted like water. Alyse had always enjoyed the clean, slightly sweet, yeasty smell of bread baking in the ovens by the hearth in the kitchen. And her mouth had always watered at the prospect of the head cook's giving her a warm, thick slice of crusty bread to munch on. But not anymore. After having to eat slabs of hard, days-old bread for every meal, she now despised the stuff. She wondered if, once she was released from her perpetually dark prison, she would regain her taste for bread. She hoped so.

She ate a tentative bite of bread. She had learned the hard way, because the bread's interior could be just as hard as its crust, as if it had been left to dry out long enough to cut her mouth. And Alyse believed that sometimes the kitchen staff had been ordered to do just that—to let the bread turn hard—to make her incarceration more painful. Fortunately, this piece wasn't so bad. Probably just a couple of days old. Thankfully, she wouldn't have to soak each fragment she broke off in the precious, so-called watered wine to soften it.

Alyse broke off another chunk. She ate all the bread, no matter how stale, because she had to keep up her strength. Her stomach rumbled from hunger as she sipped some more watered wine. She had to ration the wine until the next time Jade came in with her food because it was the only liquid she was given, one mug per meal.

Alyse swallowed a lump of bread. *Grandmother Maude won't break me.* How many times had she vowed that to herself? At least fifty since . . . when? Yesterday? Two days ago? Four days ago? Yet she had no idea how many meals she had gotten.

“A few times,” Jade told her once, in that scornfully jeering manner Alyse had come to hate, “you’ve gotten just two meals a day. And occasionally just one.”

Alyse wondered if Jade had spoken the truth or was just toying with her. To add to Alyse’s confusion about the passage of time, Jade periodically replaced the oil lamp with different-sized ones. That mean trick, which Grandmother Maude had probably ordered, made it impossible for Alyse to estimate the passage of time by how long it took the lamp to run out of oil.

The bread eaten and the wine mug half emptied, Alyse laid down on her bed, closed her eyes . . .

And was startled to wakefulness by the sound of a key grating in the lock of the door. Alyse squinted, almost blinded by the torchlight flaming in the family area beyond the door, as Jade entered. Alyse pushed herself into a sitting position, her feet on the floor.

Jade handed Alyse another note, which was from Grandmother Maude: “Your next food allotment will be cut in half unless you agree to marry Troy.”

Alyse made a scoffing noise in her throat. “Getting impatient is she?”

Jade held out her hand and twitched her fingers, indicating she expected a response.

Alyse pushed herself onto her feet, went to the dressing table, and scribbled one word on parchment: “No!” She folded the parchment in two, then thrust it at Jade. “Tell my grandmother to chew on this.”

Jade took the paper and left.

Alyse sank back onto the bed. Grandmother Maude wouldn't break her.

Time dawdled. Meals arrived with increasingly smaller portions of bread and watered wine that finally became all water and the cup containing it became smaller too. Gradually, Alyse became indifferent to her stomach's constant grumbling until the rumbling gradually disappeared. She turned lethargic and began spending all her time lying in bed, staring into blankness. Memories of her favorite foods plodded through her mind, but her mouth was too dry to salivate. She vaguely thought that she had missed her sacred time of the month but didn't really care if she had. After a while, it became an effort to get up and go to the bathroom in the bucket they'd given her, which wasn't a big deal because nothing much ever came out anymore. . . .

Alyse didn't hear the key grate in the lock as Jade opened the door and placed a thin sliver of bread and a tiny cup of water on the nightstand. Alyse motioned for her to leave with a listless wave of her hand. And she hardly noticed Jade pick up the oil lamp from the dressing table, hold the lamp over her face while she eyed her, and then silently leave. All Alyse wanted to do was sleep. . . .

A hand on her shoulder stirred Alyse into semi-consciousness. She blinked, blinded by the harsh glare of a lantern held by her head, and saw a blurry face hovering over her. She struggled to put an arm over her eyes to protect them from the lantern's glare.

"Alyse," a familiar voice said softly.

Alyse fished around in her groggy brain to identify it but couldn't.

"Alyse," the voice repeated.

"Huh?"

"Don't you think it's time?"

“Huh?”

A gentle hand touched her shoulder. “It’s time to stop this foolishness.”

“Time?”

“Yes. Time to marry Troy.”

Alyse removed her arm from over her eyes with the slowness of a caterpillar. She blinked rapidly as the glaring light revealed the hazy facial features merged into a sharper image . . . her mother’s face.

“Don’t . . . wanna . . . marry . . .”

“Nonsense,” Pilar said softly. “Troy loves you. That hardly ever happens in a noblesse marriage. You’re a very lucky girl.”

“Don’t . . . wanna . . .”

“Come on, now.” Pilar eased Alyse into a sitting position and adjusted the pillow. “I have some tasty broth for you.” She motioned to a servant Alyse hadn’t noticed standing behind her mother, holding a soup bowl and a spoon. Pilar brushed her fingers lightly along Alyse’s cheek. “We don’t want you to die.”

Alyse barely heard Pilar’s words because she was eyeing the soup bowl.

“You have your whole life ahead of you to live.” Pilar motioned for the servant, who handed her the bowl and spoon. “Now, dear, swallow this.”

Alyse didn’t have the energy to resist, so she went along and swallowed the warm broth that Pilar gently spooned into her mouth.

“Your grandmother was against me doing this,” Pilar said as Alyse swallowed more of the tasty broth. “But I don’t want you to starve to death because of your bullheadedness.” Pilar nodded for the servant to wipe soup dribble from Alyse’s chin. “But she finally relented, for just



this once. She'll give you another chance. So think carefully about it because it's your last chance."

Alyse barely heard her mother's words as she swallowed spoonful after spoonful of the delicious broth until Pilar returned the now-empty bowl to the servant.

Pilar put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Tell me you'll marry Troy."

Alyse lay back onto the bed, her body and mind too weak to resist, and mumbled a response. "All right." Then, through dimly focused eyes, she saw her mother smile.

"That's my girl. I'll send Lenia the healer here to check on you."

As the door clicked shut behind her mother and the servant, Alyse rested her arm on her forehead. The vague notion that she had lost her fight drifted slowly through her mind, like a feather on a gentle current of air.

But she didn't care.