

Charm Wars



Dan Lutts

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CHARACTERS

COMMONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

EULAND FAMILY

Sorah, Jedd's grandmother and family matriarch

Marvis, Sorah's daughter and Kald Larkin's wife

Tor, Sorah's brother

Jedd, Marvis's son

LARKIN FAMILY

Cinna, Rill's grandmother and family matriarch

Kendra, Cinna's daughter and Rill's mother

Marc, Cinna's son and Rill's father

Kald, Cinna's son and and Tarri Euland's husband

Tarri, Cinna's daughter

Rill, Kendra and Marc's son

Faith, Rill's dog

NOBLESSE AND THEIR FAMILIES

BERNE FAMILY

Jukka, Alger's father, co-chief mage, and Maude DeJune's husband

Alger, Alger's son and Shalira Estati's husband

DEJUNE FAMILY

Siema, Alyse's great grandmother, Locien Estati's wife, and family matriarch

Maude, Siema's daughter and Jukka Berne's wife

Pilar, Siema's granddaughter, Alyse and Mora's mother, and Degas Spicer's wife

Leoc, Siema's grandson

Alyse, Siema's great granddaughter and Pilar's twin daughter

Mora, Siema's great granddaughter and Pilar's twin daughter

Kate, Alyse's cousin and backwatcher

ESTATI

Ariella, Livia and Troy's great grandmother and family matriarch

Locien, Ariella's brother, co-chief mage, and Siema DeJune's husband

Yulonna, Ariella's daughter and Tolf Belkon's wife

Death, Yulonna's son, Adele Svagga's husband, and Garth Svagga's father

Shalira, Ariella's grandmother, Livia and Troy's mother, and Alger Berne's wife

Livia, Shalira's daughter and Ariella's great granddaughter

Troy, Shalira's son and Ariella's great grandson

SPICER FAMILY

Degas, Alyse's stepfather and Pilar Estati's husband

Isabet, Degas's sister

SVAGGA FAMILY

Adele, Garth's mother and Deuth Estati's wife

Brico, Adele's brother and Deuth's brother-in-law

Garth, Adele and Deuth's son

OTHER NOBLESSE

Cato Porta, archmage

Tolf Belkon, Yulonna Estati's husband

BACKWATCHERS AND PROTECTORS

Freyou, Dejune protector

Geoff, Dejune protector

Jade Channer, Mora Dejune's backwatcher

Magnus Roeback, Deuth Estati's backwatcher

Milco Barr, the Estati's chief backwatcher

Palquo, Dejune protector

Yall Throwstarr, Troy Estati's backwatcher

PRIESTESSES AT THE ONE GODDESS TEMPLE

Gilda, assistant chief priestess

Glenissa, elderly priestess

Jillina, young novice

Sybil Raine, chief priestess

HEALERS AND SERVANTS

Kalso, Estati head steward

Lenia, Dejune healer

Lothar, Dejune head steward

THE TWINS

Ulbra Thane, a demigod

Ulbridge Thane, a demigod

ARMY DESERTERS

Ebar

Hilbrand Wistlow

Ord

PLACES

Elustra, the afterworld

Shelar, the underworld

GODDESSES AND GODS

The One Goddess (or Divine Lady), the main deity

The Five Sisters (or the Five Weavers), weave the tapestry of life that determines each woman's and man's life

Naela the Spinner, spins the yarn for the loom

Maela the Yarn Chooser, selects the threads that determine a person's personality and health

Kaerla the Allotter, determines the length of a person's life

Traela the Weaver, weaves the incidents in a person's life

Gaela the Thread Cutter, chooses how the person dies and snips the yarn from the loom to end her life

The Three Judges Three gods – two female and one male – who judge the dead and determine whether they go to Elustra or Shelar

CHAPTER 1



Cougar's Lair

THE RAYS OF THE midmorning sun shining through needle-studded pine branches and naked ash and birch limbs created a patchwork of light and dark on the forest floor. Birds fluttered from tree to tree, and somewhere in the distance an owl hooted.

Rill Larkin paused by the edge of a green-and-brown thicket, his broadhead arrow nocked and his longbow half drawn. The chill, early Awakening season wind attacked his bones through the coarse wool of his heavy, dark-brown cloak. He suppressed a shiver, not from the cold but from excitement mingled with apprehension. He eyed the cougar's tracks that disappeared into the thicket of brownish bushes and scrubby, leafless trees that grew on the base of the mountain. A narrow, well-worn trail showed the cougar had come and gone that way many times before.

Jedd Euland lowered his longbow. "We can't use our bows in there." His words, spoken low, held a note of fear. "We should of brought hunting spears."

Rill ignored the tightening in his chest. "You know we couldn't do that," he said in a quiet tone. "My dad would skin us alive if he knew what we're doing. The spears would of been a dead giveaway."

Jedd snorted, then spoke in that slow, deliberate way that made Rill believe he thought out each word before speaking it. "He'll skin

us alive anyways once we get back.”

Rill shot his heavysset cousin a know-it-all grin. “Not if we bring the cougar’s pelt with us.”

“Even *if* we bring it with us,” Jedd said, a troubled look in his brown eyes. “He told you to leave things be, remember?”

“That was two weeks ago.”

“That don’t matter to Uncle Marc. He means what he says. Always has.”

“I don’t care. That cougar killed Blaze. I loved that horse. And that damned cougar ain’t gettin’ away with what it did.”

Jedd turned wary eyes from the undergrowth to Rill. “We can’t use our bows in that thicket.”

“You already said that.” Un-nocking his arrow, Rill leaned the bow against a tree and placed his quiver beside it. He drew his sword, his jaw set and muscles taut. “So we’ll use cold steel instead.”

“Against a *cougar*?”

Rill caught Jedd’s eye. “Scared?”

“No. But I got a bad feeling about this.”

“I didn’t come all this way to turn back now. You can stay here if you want.”

Jedd blew out an exasperated breath as if he were offended by Rill’s remark. “You know I won’t do that. I just think we oughta be cautious.”

“Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

“Where have I heard *that* before?” Rubbing his chin with thumb and forefinger, Jedd made an exaggerated show of pondering, which made Rill want to roll his eyes in exasperation. “Oh yeah. *Now* I remember. Last month when you—”

“Come on,” Rill said, cutting Jedd off before he could bring up *that* embarrassing incident again. “I’ll go first.”

Rill stepped into the dense tangle, his outward nonchalance masking nerves twisting so tight they’d form a coil of rope as he forced one brown boot cautiously in front of the other.

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Jedd pulled out his sword and followed.

Rill grimaced each time a twig snapped and dried leaves crackled under their boots or bare branches rustled against their shoulders. *We're making so much noise the damned cougar can hear us halfway up the mountain. It might even be watching us now.* Rill's heart missed a beat as he pictured the savage beast lurking nearby, ready to pounce and rip them apart with its huge claws and sharp teeth, just like it did Blaze.

The two-week-old memory that haunted Rill's mind stirred restlessly. Five years ago, a neighbor had given Rill's dad a chestnut yearling named Blaze in return for forging a sword, dagger, and other accoutrements for his daughter, who was beginning a career as a backwatcher with a noblesse Lesser Family. With his dad's help, Rill had broken and trained Blaze, who had grown up alongside him more as a family member than an animal. Rill smiled to himself as he recalled the times he and Blaze had ridden into the countryside, sometimes with Faith—the black-and-tan dog he'd rescued from the streets—racing alongside. The smile turned into a scowl as the horrific memory rose into his brain like a demon from Shelar, the Underworld. Two weeks ago, near where they'd tethered their horses today. The cougar's vicious snarls and Blaze's terrified squeals, followed by screams of pain—

The sharp crack of a twig behind him jolted Rill. *The cougar!* Rill whirled around, bringing up his sword—

Jedd leaned back fast, and the sharp blade missed his throat by a hair.

"Sorry," Jedd said, his face pale.

Rill blew out a deep, shaky breath. "I could of killed you." He waited for his galloping heartbeat to slow to a trot before he looked at Jedd, whose face had returned to its normal fleshy hue.

They nodded to each other and continued on.

When they emerged from the thicket, Rill found himself staring at a dark fissure under a gray stone ledge that juttied out above them a short spear throw away, blocking out the sun. A loose, brownish mesh of vines grew all over the rocky mountainside, a few dead, withered leaves still attached and the rest scattered on the grassy

ground beneath them. Rill frowned at the crevice. The edges weren't jagged but smooth, and the opening was almost as high as a tall woman and wide enough for a cougar to slip through.

"Whatever that is," Jedd whispered, "it ain't natural."

"It's woman-made," Rill whispered.

He started forward, but Jedd grabbed his shoulder. "Careful. There's a cougar in there."

Rill pulled free and stole toward the opening, nerves stretched to breaking, and his heart slamming so hard against his chest he could hear the impact of each beat in his ears. He stopped abruptly, just a foot from the opening, his eyes wide with astonishment. "Holy Goddess!" he said.

The vine net obscured the outline of a door whose texture and color matched the gray stone of the mountainside. But a crack from top to bottom split the door into two jagged pieces. Five long lines of deeply etched runes peeped out at Rill through the weblike openings.

Rill trailed his fingertips along the vine-covered door, dipping them in and out of the runes as if the characters were potholes along a well-traveled road. "This ain't no cave. The door's metal. And mage-made!"

"Holy Twins!" Jedd said, stopping beside him. "I ain't gettin' mixed up in the affairs of no mages. Forget the cougar. Let's get outta here."

Rill spun toward Jedd, his eyes burning with excitement as wild possibilities of what might be inside tumbled through his mind, like multiple dice being shaken in a game of chance. Who knew what might turn up? "There's more than a cougar in there."

Jedd's brow crinkled into a frown, the way it always did when he thought Rill was about to do something foolhardy. "Like what?"

"Spell books, maybe. Or charms. Or staves. Or—"

Jedd scoffed. "Dream on."

"Look," Rill said, "a mage sealed this cave and carved these runes on the door. She must of done it for a reason."

"You're obsessed with mages. It ain't healthy."

Rill swallowed an angry retort. *I'm getting tired of hearing that.* "What if someone else finds this place?"

"Then she'll find the cougar too."

The cougar! In the excitement of this incredible, unexpected find, Rill had forgotten about it. He bit his lower lip, his resolve to find the cougar in a pitch-black cave beginning to fray. But the tantalizing prospect of discovering a treasure trove a mage had stashed inside patched his determination together. "I'm going in."

"What if magic wards are guarding whatever's in there?" Jedd said. "Wards that kill."

"The cougar's living inside. And it ain't been killed."

Jedd brushed a hand across the sandy-brown hair on the nape of his neck. "I got a very, very bad feeling about this."

"You don't hafta go in."

"You need someone to watch your back."

Rill smiled to himself. *I knew he'd come along. He always does.* "Let's go make us some light."

After fashioning a pair of torches, Rill and Jedd returned to the cave opening, where they lit the torches with flint and steel.

Ignoring the lump of dread in his stomach, Rill sidled through the gap, thrusting his torch ahead of him into the darkness. Once inside he quickly faced around, his sword at the ready. What the shimmering yellow flame revealed took Rill's breath away.

He hadn't entered a cave, but a chamber whose smooth gray walls and ceiling reflected the torchlight like a gigantic three-sided mirror. The light gradually faded into blackness the farther it penetrated into the chamber. *This place was made by magic.* The space was about twenty feet wide and seven feet high. A line of large rectangular stone boxes on each side marched into the darkness like two files of legionaries. Rill squinted at a gloomy shape between the two files, almost beyond the reflected light. The end of a larger stone box resting on a knee-high base. Rill breathed in the cold air, filling his nostrils with a faint, musky scent that must belong to the cougar.

The whisper of boots sounded behind him, and then Jedd stood beside him. The combined light of their torches rolled the gloom

farther back, revealing more of the double line of boxes and the larger one in the middle.

“Look at these boxes,” Rill said, his tone a mixture of excitement and awe. “I was right. This place is a mage’s storehouse. That’s why the entrance was sealed off.”

Suddenly the torchlight bounced off a pair of large yellow-gold eyes glaring at them from the blackness beyond.

Rill twitched as if a blast of freezing wind shot through him.

The huge cougar hissed a challenge at them.

Rill gripped his sword.

The cougar padded forward into the light, stopped, and hissed again—back arched, ears flat. Ready to fight.

His nerves as tense as a longbow at full draw, Rill took two cautious steps toward it.

The grayish-tan cougar gave a high-pitched snarl that ended with a yowl, and slowly stepped backward.

“It’s afraid of the torches,” Rill whispered.

“Let’s flank it on either side and then go in for the kill,” Jedd said.

A thought swept through Rill quicker than an eye blink. *Why does that critter hafta be in here? What if I’m wounded trying to kill it? Then Jedd will hafta take me to a healer, and I won’t be able to see what’s inside these boxes. And what if someone else finds this place before I can return?* He stared at the cougar, his eyebrows fused together into a determined frown. *I ain’t gonna take that chance.* “No,” Rill said. “We’ll scare the cougar off with the torches.”

Jedd gaped at him as if he were crazy. “I thought you wanted to kill it.”

“Later after we see what’s in these boxes.” Rill spoke quickly, cutting off Jedd’s expressive objection. “You take the left, and I’ll take the right.”

Jedd hesitated and then, heaving a sigh, followed Rill’s order.

Rill crossed to the boxes on his right and carefully made his way deeper into the chamber, his sword clutched in one hand and the torch held out in the other. His heart thumped a staccato beat, and his nerves stretched to snapping as in his mind he saw the cougar

leaping at him, jaws wide open, and sharp-pointed teeth ready to rip into his flesh. Rill booted the image from his mind.

Step by grudging step, the cougar retreated to the far wall as it turned its head back and forth from Rill to Jedd, hissing, growling, and snarling, tail swishing.

The cougar lunged at Rill.

The move caught Rill by surprise, but he instinctively thrust the flaming torch at the cougar's snout.

Uttering a squeal, the cougar scampered backward, stopped at the wall, and hissed.

Jedd's previous words ran through Rill's head like a taunt. A sickening suspicion formed in Rill's belly that maybe this time his cousin might be right. Rill hoped not.

He stopped a few paces from the snarling cougar.

Jedd came up level with him and closed the distance between them.

"Now what?" Jedd whispered.

"We'll stick the torches in its face," Rill whispered back. "The flames will frighten it, and it'll run outside." *I hope.* "I'll move in on him first. You follow."

"All right."

Rill drew a deep breath, then lunged at the cougar with a shout, thrusting the flaming torch in its face.

The cougar screeched in pain.

Yelling, Jedd rushed at the cougar with his blazing torch extended.

The cougar whirled and snarled.

"Together!" Rill cried.

Shouting, the cousins thrust their torches at the cougar.

The cougar leaped between them, raced partway to the entrance, and spun around. It gave a long, throaty snarl.

Rill and Jedd advanced cautiously, torches held forward and swords at the ready.

Slowly, one unwilling step at a time, the cougar retreated from the hissing flames. When the cougar paused by the jagged entrance,

Rill and Jedd yelled and jabbed their torches in unison.

The cougar scrambled outside.

Rill peered through the fissure. The cougar glared from a few feet away. Rill jabbed his torch through the opening. "Go away. Git!"

The cougar hissed one more time, then turned and trotted up the trail into the brambles.

Relief gushed through Rill, and his body sagged like a pig's bladder suddenly emptied of water. He gave a shaky laugh. "We did it!"

The torch in Jedd's hand quivered. "He'll be waiting for us when we leave."

Rill sheathed his sword, missing the scabbard opening in the first attempt. He hoped Jedd hadn't noticed. "We'll deal with the cougar when the time comes. Right now, I wanna see what's inside these boxes."

Because of its prominence, Rill figured the middle box must be the most important one and headed for it. As he drew closer, he noticed something on the box lid that blew away, with hurricane force, all thoughts of everything else.

"By The Sisters!" he said. "This is a sarcophagus."

Carved in relief on the stone lid was the prone figure of a bearded, long-haired man wearing tight-fitting pants and a dress coat that reached halfway to his knees. The partially open coat exposed a buttoned vest that fell a hand's length past the waist. The loose material under the last square button was cut away to form an inverted V. A belt made of square links was buckled around the man's waist, over the vest, which concealed all but a large buckle and several smaller belt links. The edges of a shirt collar poked up from behind the vest. The man clasped a staff to his chest, its orb nestled under his chin and the shaft tapering into a wicked-looking point at his booted toes. Filaments covered the orb like a loosely meshed net, their ends merging into the staff. Deeply etched runes framed the figure.

Rill gaped at Jedd who was nearby. From the incredulous look on his cousin's face, Jedd had reached the same conclusion. "This here's—"

"A tomb! We oughtn't be here." Jedd tugged at Rill's sleeve.

Rill jerked free and ran his fingers over the smooth, chiseled stone of the effigy. "I ain't never seen clothes like these before."

"Rill," Jedd said, his tone laden with fright, "we don't belong in here."

Rill stared at the effigy as if his eyes were welded to it. "Mages don't use runes no more. And no one knows how to read them. They say the Old Mages could cast spells just with runes."

"Rill—"

"We stopped burying our dead over eight hundred years ago. We cremate them now." Realization exploded in Rill's head like a thunder clap, and he spun toward Jedd, grabbing him by the shoulders. "This tomb goes back to The Founding."

Jedd swept his arms out on either side, breaking Rill's hold. "Your fixation on mages and magic is gonna get us in trouble. Let's get outta here. Now!"

"Not yet." Rill turned toward the sarcophagus, his pulse beating fast and his hands reaching for the stone lid. "I wanna see what's inside."

Jedd yanked at Rill's wrist. "There's nothing inside except a body. A charm raider's already been here. Everything's been looted."

"We don't know that."

"For Twins' sake, are you blind? The tomb's been looted."

"Even if it was, the raider might of left some things behind."

"You're the one who knows all about mages and charms," Jedd said. "So you know the Old Mages concealed the entrances of their tombs with magic. Even I know that. But this tomb's entrance wasn't hidden."

Rill shrugged off the comment. His fingers lusted to grab the lid again and shove. "Maybe no charm seeker broke into here. Maybe . . . maybe the Concealment spell failed and a . . . an earthquake broke the entrance. We get them here, you know."

"Not in *our* lifetimes."

"It's been over eight hundred years."

"And maybe a charm seeker used a counterspell to break in here."

"Maybe," Rill said, hoping Jedd was wrong. "But if a charm seeker

did break in, it was a long time ago. Otherwise that cougar wouldn't be using this for a den."

"Rill—"

"You can wait outside if you want."

"With the *cougar* out there?"

Jedd's reminder about the wildcat sent a tremor through Rill. "We'll tackle the cougar together. *After* I see what's inside this coffin."

Jedd expelled a long, resigned sigh. "If you open this and look inside, will you leave?"

"Yeah."

"All right. I'll stay. But just for this one."

After laying their torches on a nearby sarcophagus, Rill and Jedd heaved on the heavy stone lid. It took them a while before they finally eased it all the way off onto the ground and leaned it against the side of the coffin. They fetched their torches and peered inside.

Their gasps of amazement sounded as one.

Inside lay the well-preserved body of an old man with a short white beard and white hair that came down to his shoulders, his face and posture mimicking the effigy's. He wore the same style clothes as the figure on the lid, but in color—dark-blue pants and jacket and a reddish-brown vest over a white shirt whose collar poked out from the top of the vest. A belt of square gold links was buckled around his waist, over the vest. The staff the man clutched resembled the one on the lid. But this staff was the most beautiful one Rill had ever seen. Its color was the same reddish brown as the vest and its tapered point, which was used for close-up fighting, shone with a deadly sheen in the torchlight. The dark-blue orb on the staff's tip was held in place by a network of weblike silver filaments that seemed to melt into both orb and staff.

"An Old Mage," Rill murmured. "He must of been alive during The Founding. Maybe he even came over from The Forbidden Lands with the refugees during The Great Destruction."

Jedd nudged Rill's shoulder. "You've had your look. Let's go."

Rill flashed Jedd an I-told-you-so grin. "Obviously, no charm

seeker's been here." He gazed at the corpse again, goose bumps sliding down his neck and back like rivulets of ice-cold water. "He must of been powerful. I wonder who he was."

"I don't *care* who he was."

Rill gingerly reached inside the sarcophagus, removed the corpse's hands from the staff, and lifted it out.

"Rill, put that back."

Rill caressed the staff with his eyes, then ran his fingers along the silk-smooth metal and fondled the blue crystal orb like a newly smitten lover. The silver filaments had merged with the crystal to form a single glass-smooth surface. "A mage with a staff like this must of worn a powerful charm."

Rill's gaze returned to the corpse.

Jedd slapped Rill's arm. "For Twins' sake, you've gone too far. Put the staff back!"

Rill felt around the corpse's neck for a chain. When he found none, he patted down the chest. Rill examined the man's fingers, but they were bare.

"He ain't wearin' no charm," Rill said, unable to hide the disappointment. "Looks like this tomb *was* opened by a charm seeker."

"I told you so. But you never listen."

Rill scratched his cheek, a quizzical frown on his face. "Why did the charm seeker take the charm but not the staff? I would of taken both."

Jedd's brown eyes held Rill's. "But you ain't takin' the staff, right?"

Rill paused before giving a reluctant nod. "Yeah."

"And you'll put the staff back, right?"

Rill stared at the staff longingly. He pictured himself with it after he was named a mage on Name Day. The feeling of power the staff would give him. The envious looks everyone would throw at him. *I gotta have this—*

"You'll put it back, *right*?" Jedd said, his tone a command, not a request.

Rill answered reluctantly. "Yeah."

“And then we’ll leave, right?”

Rill propped the staff against the sarcophagus. “After I see what’s inside the other coffins.” He strode toward a nearby sarcophagus.

“Rill!” Jedd said, the pitch of his voice rising toward anger.

Rill stopped at the coffin and leaned his shoulder against the lid. “Come help me.”

Jedd seized him by the cloak collar, twisting the material so tight Rill choked. “You promised to look in just one.”

Rill pried Jedd’s fingers open, one by one. “I wanna see what’s in the others.”

“If I know you—and I do—you’ll do more than look. You’ll *take*.”

“I won’t. I’ll be named a mage at the end of the month. Then I can come back here and take any charm and staff I want.”

“You don’t know you’ll be named a mage.”

“I feel it in my bones.”

Jedd eyed Rill warily in the shadowy light and took his time to answer. “All right.”

Rill grinned to himself in triumph. The stone lids of the smaller sarcophagi were lighter than the center one and easier to remove. *There’s gotta be something in here I can swipe.* Beginning with the first, Rill intentionally established a pattern for their work. After they lifted the lid back on a coffin, Rill moved it into place while Jedd went to the next sarcophagus to position that lid so they both could ease it off onto the ground. All the while, Rill waited impatiently for Jedd’s watchfulness to slacken.

But from the beginning, Rill encountered a mind-numbing problem that under different circumstances he’d consider a gift from the One Goddess Herself. Every coffin held the perfectly preserved body of a female or male mage in clothes cut in a similar fashion to the white-bearded mage’s. Unlike the first Old Mage’s corpse, these bodies wore charms and clasped staffs to their chests. The charms were beautiful—pendants and rings made from gold, silver, or bronze. Some were encrusted with emeralds, rubies, and other precious gemstones. Rill’s fingers itched to filch each one. He hesitated, though, because the next charm seemed more beautiful than the

previous one. He felt like a diner who couldn't choose a dish at a scrumptious banquet. *I gotta pick one*, Rill told himself over and over.

His choice finally came when they opened one of the last coffins, and found himself gawking at a large, purple, egg-shaped gemstone surrounded by eight tiny fire-red rubies on an oval pendant made of gold. *It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I gotta have it*. He sneaked a peek at Jedd, whose back was to him. *Now!* Rill snatched the charm, slipped it into his belt pouch, shoved the lid back in place, and hurried to help Jedd.

"This place is a real treasure trove," Rill said as he and Jedd maneuvered the sarcophagus cover onto the ground. "If a charm seeker did open this tomb, why did she take the charm from that one Old Mage but not his staff? And why did she leave all the other charms and staffs behind? I wonder—"

"How fortunate for me she did," a voice said behind them. "And how unfortunate for you."

Rill and Jedd whirled around.

Just inside the entrance stood a skinny middle-aged man of medium height. His gray tunic and tan pants were dirty and patched and his boots old and scuffed. Oily, unkempt hair framed his pockmarked face. In his right hand, he held a staff. The light from Rill and Jedd's torches danced shadows across his face, making his malevolent grin appear even more evil.

A blacksmith's vise clamped Rill's chest, making it hard for him to breathe. A rohan! A backwatcher or protector—either a mage or a bladeswoman or bladesman—who had been expelled by his noblesse patron for breaking his oath to serve and protect her family. An outcast from society no other noblesse First or Lesser Family would touch. A woman or man who was lower even than the criminals, dagger women, and prostitutes living in Caldon's most dangerous neighborhood, The Slums.

Rill's gaze fastened on the rohan's left hand that clutched something beneath his grimy tunic.

A charm.

"Actus," the rohan mage said, his sinister smile showing he'd de-

liberately spoken the word loud enough for Rill and Jedd to hear.

Rill gaped at the staff, his stomach paining him. The rohan had activated his charm. All he had to do now was point the staff at a target and cast a spell. Rill's gaze slid to Jedd, who appeared as frozen as an ice sculpture.

With exaggerated slowness, the rohan aimed the staff at the gap between Rill and Jedd, then deliberately moved it from one to the other. His lips drew up into a cruel smile, making Rill feel like a mouse being toyed with by a cat.

Rill choked on a lump of regret. *Why didn't I listen to Jedd and leave the coffins alone? We could of been partway home by now. I could of been a mage. But now I never will be.*

Slowly and deliberately, the rohan inhaled a mouthful of air and said, "Luco!"

Rill's frightened breath blended with Jedd's when the crystal burst into life, and white mage light flooded the tomb.

The rohan laughed as if he'd just watched a first-rate comedy routine as he stepped several paces forward. "Scared of a little light, boys?"

Rill's gaze jumped to Jedd. His cousin was glowering at the man, his hands balled into fists.

The rohan smirked at Jedd.

Slowly, keeping his eyes on the rohan, Rill moved his hand toward his sword's brown leather grip.

The rohan must have had invisible eyes in the side of his head. With a chuckle, he casually pointed the staff at Rill. "Foolish boy. I can kill you before your sword's half out of its scabbard."

Rill let his hand drop to his side.

"*Tsk-tsk*," the rohan said, drawing closer. "Naughty boys charm seeking. That's a death offense. Unless you're mages, of course. Are you mages, naughty boys?"

"You know we ain't," Rill said through clenched teeth.

The rohan stepped forward a few more paces until only a staff's length separated them. "When I came across your well-fed and groomed horses a while ago, I thought that maybe their owners came

from good families. Families with money. So I went looking for you. My goodness, you weren't hard to find. Not with all that racket you made in here with the cougar. Boys with horses and swords. And purses hanging from their belts." His gaze riveted itself to Rill. "And with such *interesting* things inside."

Rill's heart froze into a lump of ice as he forced himself to return the rohan's stare. *He saw me take the charm.*

The rohan flashed them both an evil smile. "So I said to myself, 'Self, I bet those naughty little boys are carrying some nice shiny gildas in their purses. Or maybe even a goldie.' You got any?"

"Why don't you come closer and find out?" Rill said. He'd tried to sound cocky, but his voice broke halfway through the question.

The rohan grinned, obviously enjoying himself. He pointed the staff at Rill. "Naughty boy. I hope you don't melt."

Terror ripped through Rill like a barbed arrowhead.

He had only moments to live.

CHAPTER 2



Unwelcome News

ALYSE DEJUNE CROUCHED IN a fighter's stance, a razor-sharp dagger gripped in her hand and her heart thumping madly beneath her light-green bodice as if she were a rabbit facing a hungry fox. Weaponless, Kate DeJune mimicked Alyse's posture, waiting for her to attack. The two rear windows were shuttered against the cold morning air. Orange flames in the fireplace crackled like hecklers, and the twin yellow glows cast by the oil lamps on the dressing table created a pool of fidgety golden light around the girls in the gloomy bedroom.

Kate leaned toward Alyse, balancing herself on the balls of her feet. "Come on. Stab me—if you can."

Frustration reared inside Alyse despite her efforts to stomp it down. They'd been knife fighting since after breakfast, and she still couldn't close the gap between them for a death blow. She took a deep, determined breath, then lunged at Kate with the dagger.

Kate sidestepped and jeered. "You can't touch me with that thing. Try again."

Alyse cursed under her breath as she slowly circled Kate. Every time she tried to close in for a thrust, Kate danced away.

"Come on!" Kate motioned Alyse forward with cupped fingers. "Don't think of me as your backwatcher. I'm your enemy. I'm here to

kill you—”

Alyse feigned a knife thrust.

The move must have surprised Kate because she stood in place.

Got you! Alyse stepped in for the kill.

Kate spun away, seizing Alyse’s wrist at the same time, and twisted.

Sharp pain shot through Alyse’s wrist as she stumbled. The knife clunked against the bedroom’s mosaic floor. In the scuffle, Alyse’s foot struck the dagger, sending it skidding across the flat, multicolored mosaic stones to the fireplace. The pommel clunked against the brick hearth extension.

Kate released Alyse’s wrist. “I used this trick on you before. You should’ve stocked it away in your head.”

“I will.”

“You’d better. You’re defying your matriarch by learning self-defense. So if you’re going to learn, then learn.”

“Great-Grandmother Siema’s rule is stupid.”

“It’s not just her rule. It’s every matriarch’s.”

Alyse’s eyes burned with indignation. “Noblesse women shouldn’t have to rely solely on their backwatchers for protection. We should be allowed to defend ourselves. The men can. So why not us?”

“I agree,” Kate said, pushing back long strands of black hair from her forehead. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t be risking my position here by teaching you.”

Alyse watched her wiry, hazel-eyed cousin cross to the fireplace. The flames were burning low, allowing the sharp, cold air of early Awakening season to invade the room again, rising small chill bumps on Alyse’s shoulders. Kate added a couple of logs to the fire, scooped up the dagger, and returned.

She shook her head as if perplexed. “I don’t know why you have so much trouble with knife fighting. You certainly can throw the dagger well.”

Alyse pinched a fold of her silk dress’s dark-green skirt. “I could do better if I didn’t have to wear *this*. It gets in the way of my legs.”

“You have to learn to fight in your everyday clothes.” Kate pointed to the dress and then to her own Dejune lightweight wool livery of tan tunic with red trim and tan pants tucked into dark-brown leather boots. “You have yours and I have mine.”

Alyse pulled a face at Kate even though she knew her cousin spoke the truth.

Kate handed her the dagger hilt first. “I think we’d better work more on the basics. And figure out some techniques to get your fighting legs more used to the skirt.”

Alyse and Kate repositioned themselves.

“All right,” Kate said. “Come at—”

Three quick raps sounded on the bedroom door.

“That’s Lothar’s knock,” Alyse said.

“Give me the dagger.”

Alyse thrust the knife hilt first at Kate, who slipped it into the drawer of the dressing table. After smoothing down her skirt and light-green silk bodice, Alyse opened the door to greet the family’s head steward.

“Lady Siema requests your presence in the matriarch’s chamber,” Lothar told her.

Through years of practice, Alyse kept her face expressionless upon receiving an official summons to a matriarch’s council. “Thank you, Lothar. Tell her I’ll be right there.”

The steward inclined his head. “Very well, Lady.”

“I wonder what my great-grandmother wants,” Alyse said after Lothar left.

Kate shrugged. “Maybe she’s having your mother divorce Degas Spicer. That seems to be the only time she summons you and Mora to a matriarch’s council. When she has your mother divorce your latest stepfather.”

A sudden weariness flooded into Alyse that made her want to sit down, elbows on the dressing table and head in her hands, and weep from frustration. “I hope not. Four stepfathers in nine years is more than I can bear. Besides, I like Degas. He treats me nicely, unlike my previous stepfathers.” Alyse heaved a resigned sigh. “Well, there’s

only one way to find out.”

Alyse threw a yellow cloak of finely spun wool over her shoulders to ward off the chill that the fireplaces never seemed to dispel completely in the larger open spaces of the house during this time of year. The bedroom door opened directly onto the family area. Alyse had taken only a few steps when movement to the left caught her attention. The cloaked backs of two girls, one with chestnut hair just like Alyse’s and the other with brunette, were walking toward the door that opened onto to the courtyard in the rear of the family compound. The bottom of the chestnut-haired girl’s red silk skirt swished in time with her steps. The brunette’s pace matched her companion’s. Her swishing, dark-brown cloak ended at her calves, exposing legs encased in tan pants tucked into dark-brown boots.

Alyse’s twin, Mora, and Mora’s backwatcher, Jade Channer.

Alyse stopped short and watched her sister and Jade disappear into the courtyard. *If Great-Grandmother is going to announce Mother’s divorce, why didn’t she summon Mora too?* The question bubbled in her mind like a hot spring, sending boiling streams of anxiety through her body as she walked across the family area to the matriarch’s chamber, which shared a wall with the formal dining room. *Something serious must be happening that includes me and not Mora. But what?*

Alyse stopped abruptly a staff’s length from the thick, black oak door as realization burst into her mind. *Great-Grandmother knows Kate’s been teaching me self-defense.* That would be just like Siema because she always had it in for Kate. Alyse recalled how Siema had expressed outrage when Kate’s mother, who belonged to a distant, ne’er-do-well family in the DeJune clan, had married a commoner mage. He’d had ambitions of using the marriage to get elected to the Magesterium and founding a commoner-noblesse family. Unfortunately, they’d both died in a tragic accident, leaving Kate an orphan. Siema had been pressured by the DeJune clan matriarch to take her in. Alyse had hit it off with Kate immediately. She’d even foiled Siema’s plan to make Kate a scullery maid by insisting she be her lady’s maid. Later, she’d convinced Siema to make Kate her

backwatcher too. The memory made Alyse's lips lift into a smile. Few people could get Great-Grandmother Siema to change her mind after she'd made a rock-hard decision.

But who could've snitched on us? The answer followed the question instantly. *Mora.* Bitterness turned Alyse's belly sour. *Most twins aren't just sisters but close friends as well. But not us.*

Alyse closed the distance to the door as she fished for excuses that would save Kate from Great-Grandmother Siema's wrath but couldn't find any that Siema would accept. *I'll bear the brunt of it. After all, I'm the one who asked her.* But as Alyse's backwatcher, Kate was responsible for protecting Alyse. And that included preventing her from breaking centuries-old traditions. Noblesse girls do *not* defend themselves. Their backwatchers do. Alyse scraped angry tears from her lower eyelids with her fingertips—anger not at trouble caused by Mora or Siema but by herself.

With nervous fingers, Alyse smoothed her bodice and skirt, straightened her shoulders, and knocked.

Siema's sharp voice pierced the dense wood like a spearhead. "Enter."

Filling her lungs with an extra-deep breath, Alyse opened the door and stepped into the large, windowless room that formed the heart of the Dejune compound. Her gaze snapped to the skinny, wizened, old woman sitting in the ornately carved matriarch's chair on a dais that took up the back part of the room. Ever since she was a child, the Dejune women had hammered into Alyse's head that generations of Dejune matriarchs had sat in that black oak chair. Including the current one, Siema Dejune, who peered at her through gray, frosty eyes while she pushed her straight-handle cane between her knees, against the skirt's folds of her brown embroidered dress.

Involuntarily, Alyse's eyes shifted to the ancient fresco on the wall behind Siema. The scene showed the Five Sisters who determined every aspect of a person's life, creating her or his fate. The large oil lamp suspended from the ceiling over the dais illuminated every detail. The first Sister, Naela the Spinner, spinning the yarn for the loom. The second, Maela the Yarn Chooser, selecting the threads

whose thickness and colors determined the person's personality and health. The third, Kaerla the Allotter, drawing lots to determine the length of the yarn, which fixed the number of years in the person's life. The fourth, Traela the Weaver, weaving into the tapestry the incidents that made up the person's life. And the fifth, Gaela the Thread Cutter, who chose how the person died, waiting with scissors in hand to snip the yarn to free the tapestry from the loom, ending the person's life.

A coiled snake of anxiety formed in Alyse's belly. She can't expel Kate. Kate would become a rohan. Alyse's guts writhed in pain as an image of her cousin, backwatcher, and best friend being ejected from the family compound in disgrace rose up in her mind like a horrid nightmare. Kate would be become a rohan or, if she were lucky, perhaps a dagger woman, one of the loathed assassins for hire living in The Slums—

Siema rapped her cane's silver-covered tip on the black oak floorboards. "Come, child. We're waiting."

Two large oil lamps suspended from the black oak beams in front of the dais cast harsh yellow light on four straight-back chairs set in a row facing the dais. The left two seats were empty. Two women, one with dark-brown hair and the other with gray-streaked auburn hair, sat in the chairs to the right. Pilar and Maude DeJune, Alyse's mother and grandmother. The flames in the fireplace crackled and popped as if chiding Alyse for disobeying a long-standing matriarchal rule by asking Kate to teach her to defend herself.

Siema waved Alyse forward, impatience fused into the motion.

Projecting a self-confidence she didn't feel, Alyse strode to the chairs as if she were the face of innocence and began to settle into the empty seat beside her mother.

Siema crooked a shriveled finger at her. "Come here, child."

The serpent started to uncoil in Alyse's stomach.

Stopping before the first of the three steps leading up to the dais, Alyse faced her great-grandmother. The serpent unwound faster.

Siema folded veined, wrinkled hands over each other on the cane handle and smiled at Alyse. "I have wonderful news."

Huh? The serpent vanished like air from a popped pig's bladder and was replaced by a thick cloud of confusion that swirled through Alyse's mind. Wonderful news? *Then it's not about Kate and me.* Relief dispelled confusion. She beamed at Siema. "What's the news?"

"You're getting married."

Alyse's mind went blank, and she stood as motionless as an ice sculpture. "I . . . I'm *what?*"

"I'm nearing the end of my life," Siema said as if she could care less about Alyse's dumbfounded reaction. "Soon I'll join our ancestors. Your great-grandfather, Locien Estati, will join his ancestors too. Which of us joins them first, only Kaerla the Allotter knows."

Alyse put a trembling hand to her suddenly parched throat. "Who am I marrying?"

Siema ignored the question. "Since before The Great Destruction, for almost two thousand years, the Dejunes and the Estatis have been allies. We keep our alliance intact through the bond of marriage. My death or Locien's will sever that bond. So we must form a new bond before the current one breaks—"

"*Who* am I marrying?"

Siema slowly ran the forefinger of her top hand back and forth along the back of her lower hand gripping the cane's handle. "Troy Estati."

"No!"

Behind her, Pilar and Maude gasped. In front of her, Siema peered through slit, viperlike eyes. "Explain yourself."

Alyse struggled desperately to pull together her scattered thoughts. "I . . . I'm only fifteen."

"I was *fourteen* when I married Locien," Siema said in a hard, even tone. "Next week you'll be *sixteen*."

Alyse gaped at Siema, unsettled by her great-grandmother's unexpected retort.

"It's not as if Troy's a stranger, dear," Pilar said. "You've both known each other all your lives. You used to play together as kids."

"The same goes for Mora," Alyse said. "And I happen to know that she likes Troy. And that she would marry him if—"

Siema banged her cane against the floorboards. “Out of the question. You’re the firstborn, so you marry first.”

“But Mora was born only moments after me.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, child. Does ‘after’ mean ‘before’?”

“No. But not every noblesse family requires its firstborn child to marry first—”

Siema slapped Alyse’s words away. “This family does. And we have since we were made noblesse two thousand years ago in Euloria.”

“Times change, Great-Grandmother. You can set a precedent. Other First Families have.”

Siema opened her mouth to respond but Alyse cut her off.

“Livia Estati is firstborn, but you want to marry me to her brother, Troy. And he’s *second* born.”

Siema wrinkled her nose as if she’d just smelled a dead skunk. “Livia is an exception. A disgrace to her family. And no. There will be no precedent set in this house.”

“But—”

“Even if I wanted to marry Mora to Troy, I can’t because he insists on marrying you. And the Estatis have the bargaining power in our alliance, not us.”

“But—”

“Are you defying me?”

Yes. “No.”

“Good.” Siema fingered the bun of white, stringy hair on the back of her head while her gaze seemed to turn inward in thought. After a long stretch of time, she gave an almost imperceptible nod—as if she were agreeing to something after an internal dialogue with herself. She bent toward Alyse, timeworn hands clutching the cane’s handle. “As firstborn, you’re third in line to become matriarch—after your Grandmother Maude, and your mother, Pilar.”

Alyse wondered if that was why she and Mora didn’t get along. Because Mora wanted to be matriarch but couldn’t because she’d been born just a few moments too late. She looked past Siema to the image of Traela the Weaver on the fresco. *I wish you’d reversed the*

timing of Mora's and my birth. "Yes, I know that."

"You also know our status as a First Family is declining," Siema said.

Alyse knew that too. Year after year, she had watched the number of household staff decrease. Cooks. Scullions. Gardeners. Stable hands. Work women and workmen. Everyone still called Lothar the chief steward. But Alyse recalled when there were three other stewards who had served under him. Over the years they had vanished, one by one, without explanation. But hardly any protectors and backwatchers had disappeared. After all, even a declining First Family had to keep up appearances, which was measured in backwatchers, protectors, and clients.

Clients. Guilt at her selfishness for not wanting to marry Troy seeped into Alyse's gut like stagnant water. Clients drove a First Family's status. "Leoc was *such* a disappointment," Grandmother Maude often said of her younger brother. Every time her grandmother said that, Alyse wanted to block her ears because she didn't like to hear her beloved uncle belittled. Alyse knew what Maude meant though. Uncle Leoc might be the famed Commander of the Eastern Legions fighting against Caldon's mortal enemy Gaetan, but he wasn't a mage. And only a First or Lesser Family who had a male mage sitting in the Magesterium could have clients. Four generations had passed since the last Dejune mages, Anglia and Angelo Dejune, had been born. Anglia had been the last Dejune archmage and Angelo had been the family's last magestrate.

For four generations, the Dejune receiving hall had remained empty of clients attending their morning greeting to their Dejune patron and accompanying him down The Citadel into the public square for the Magesterium session. And for four generations no death mask of a Dejune chief mage had been added to the family's substantial collection of death masks in the tall black oak cupboard behind the receiving chair. All her short life Alyse hadn't thought much about the empty receiving hall or the vacant receiving chair or the closed cupboard doors. Until now. *Why should I feel guilty for wanting to live my own life instead of following a narrow, prescribed*

path?

Siema's lean fingers danced a staccato beat on the arm of her chair, making sharp *tap tap tap* sounds. Alyse had never seen her great-grandmother so hesitant before. Siema's fingers slowed to a stop, and she focused on Pilar and Maude.

Alyse glanced over her shoulder. Just in time to see her mother and grandmother give what appeared to be reluctant nods to Siema.

Siema's gaze swung to Alyse. "You're third in line of succession. So it's proper you be let into the matriarch's secret." Siema's knuckles turned white as she gripped the cane handle tighter, apparently in reaction to what she was about to say. "We've lost almost all our *magetas*—the prestige that makes us a First Family."

Alyse sucked in a surprised breath. *How could I be so blind?*

"Our family needs mages, magistrates, chief mages, and clients again," Siema said, the pained tone in her voice showing her distress. "Only our alliance with the Estatus gives us what little *magetas* we have left. And the Estatus keep renewing our alliance because we have the Sister charm."

Alyse knew all about the Sister charm. Everyone in Caldon did. Originally the Sister charm belonged to the demigoddess Ulbra Thane, who had bequeathed it to the Dejunes for adopting her illegitimate daughter by Meurdar DeJune. Caldonian society was matrilineal, which meant that children took the mother's name, not the father's. The adoption turned the custom on its head, making the girl a DeJune. Possessing the Sister charm increased the DeJune's status among the First Families. It was the second most powerful charm in existence, less potent than the lost Elder charm but more potent than the demigod Ulbridge Thane's Brother charm. In the thousand years since Caldon's founding, only a few DeJune archmages had been powerful enough to access the Sister charm's potent spells. And Anglia DeJune was one of them.

Siema's chair creaked as she changed positions and spoke in a tone that held a hint of fear. "If the Estatus should learn our secret, they might not renew our bond of friendship."

"What secret?"

Siema's flint-gray eyes locked to Alyse's. "If you reveal this secret to anyone, I'll expel you."

The threat made Alyse's stomach clench tight. "I'll tell no one."

Siema swallowed as if to postpone disclosing the secret. "We can't access the charm vault."

Dumbfounded, Alyse gaped at her great-grandmother. When she was younger, Alyse had tried several times to sneak into the family's charm vault at one end of the passageway under the family library. The door handle had always refused to turn. She'd known where Great-Grandmother Siema kept the key. Once, nerves quivering as if she were walking a narrow path on a high cliff, she'd filched the charm vault key and sneaked down through the hidden trapdoor into the passageway and gone to the charm vault. She'd inserted the key into the lock and turned right, and the tumblers had clicked into place. But when she'd turned the handle and pushed, the door had refused to budge as if it were glued in place. Alyse's mind went blank for a moment. Then realization smashed into her brain, forcing her eyes to pop wide open.

"Someone put wards on the door." Alyse paused. "Angelia."

Siema nodded. "Angelia cast special wards on the charm vault door that only a very powerful archmage can cancel with the Peer charm. Unfortunately, she didn't anticipate it would take this long to produce a powerful Dejune archmage. No one did. You're the fourth generation. And our time is almost up."

The shocking revelation made Alyse's core turn into ice. It took a short time for her to recover. "Why don't you ask Great-Grandfather Locien to cancel the wards? He's our ally. He's a powerful archmage. And he wears the Peer charm."

Siema's face crinkled into a mask of disgust. "And show him our weakness? Foolish girl. You should never trust an ally with such knowledge. They can turn on you in a heartbeat. Ours will if they learn this secret."

"So that's why you wear the Peer charm," Alyse said. "Because there's no archmage in our family to cancel the wards. And you're waiting for one to be born who can."

Pushing herself to her feet with her cane, Siema pulled out a dark-blue, tear-shaped gem surrounded by a scalloped silver frame from behind her bodice and dangled it by its silver chain. “Yes. I told Locien I wore the charm because I coveted it, even though I’m not a mage. He believed me and vowed to keep the secret. I believe he has . . . so far.”

“But there’s more, isn’t there?” Alyse said.

“Yes.” Siema tucked the charm behind her brown bodice and eased her body into the chair, using the cane to steady her herself. “As you know, only three Peer charms exist. The Estatus had two and we had one. But ours was stolen by the Gaetanian illusionist, who murdered her brother, Angelo, when he was making an offering at the family sepulcher on Street of Tombs. When I became engaged to Locien, Angelia demanded that the charm be included or she’d cancel the wedding.”

“Because she was going to cast the wards,” Alyse said.

“The archmage who cancels them will need the Peer charm.” Siema thumped the floor with her cane, and urgency laced her words. “But time’s running out. Some of our allies have already deserted us. Only our bond with the Estatus is stopping the others. If our family goes through one more generation—*your* generation, Alyse—without producing an archmage, the Estatus will abandon us. So will all our other allies. And the House of Dejune will fall.”

Alyse stared wide-eyed at her grandmother while the shocking disclosure twirled dizzily in her mind. She blinked, bringing the room slowly into focus, turned her head, and saw Pilar and Maude staring intently at her. The sight made Alyse’s pulse beat faster. “Let me get this straight. You want me to marry Troy so I can give birth to an archmage who can cancel the wards Angelia cast on our charm vault.”

Siema nodded. “Yes. Preferably a male archmage so he can resume our family’s vacant seat in the Magesterium.”

“That’s a heavy expectation.”

“But not unrealistic,” Siema said. “Troy was named an archmage last year. And he comes from a long line of powerful archmages, in-

cluding his uncle, Deuth. Ulbra Thane's blood runs in your veins. So marrying you to Troy is bound to result in an archmage. A powerful one."

Alyse forced her head into a nod, clenching her jaw so tight her cheek muscles bulged at the thought of being forced into a loveless marriage.

Siema's lips bent into a thin smile. "That's a good child. You must put your family's needs above your own. You'll understand that when you sit in this chair."

*I don't want to sit in that chair. Let Mora. I want—*An idea dropped into Alyse's mind as if a gift from the One Goddess Herself. *I can delay the marriage. That will give me time to come up with a plan to avoid it.* "Umm . . . there's one thing."

Siema's white eyebrows furrowed. "Oh? What's that?"

"My Name Day Celebration is at the end of the month. If I'm named a mage, I won't be able to marry Troy until after my fledgling training."

"I've already considered that."

Alyse's budding hope wilted.

"Here's what's going to happen," Siema said in a firm voice. "You'll be engaged to Troy. The announcement will be next week, on yours and Mora's sixteenth birthdays. At a banquet to be held here. At the end of the month, you will attend your Name Day Celebration. Understood?"

Alyse forced her head to nod.

"If you're named a mage," Siema said, "the wedding will be postponed until the end of your fledgling training. If you're not named a mage, you will marry Troy shortly after Name Day. Understood?"

Alyse forced three foul-tasting words from her mouth. "Yes, Great-Grandmother."

Alyse waited for dismissal, knowing the meeting was over and eager to escape the loathsome room.

Siema readjusted her position in the matriarch's chair. "After Name Day, you will become an adult and a citizen. You will put away your dolls and other childish things. And you will stop those useless

Eulori lessons with Priestess Sybil.”

Alyse strove to keep her anger from appearing on her face.

“Those lessons are a waste of time,” Siema said. “Goddess alone knows why you want to learn a dead language that no one uses anymore.”

Alyse squeezed her mouth shut to prevent objections from bursting through them like sharp-pointed daggers.

“I only agreed to the lessons for Leoc’s sake. He was so insistent that you learn to read, write, and speak it.” Siema shook her head disapprovingly. “My, how your uncle dotes on you.”

Alyse’s eyes slid to the ancient ornamental loom next to Siema’s chair that had stood there for generations. Just as the Five Sisters’ loom on the fresco behind Siema symbolized that they controlled the weft and warp that made up the tapestries of everyone’s lives, Siema’s symbolized that she controlled the weft and warp that made up the tapestries of every DeJune in her family. And every retainer, including Kate. The urge to take an ax and chop the hideous loom to pieces possessed Alyse as if she had been taken over by a demon from Shelar, the Underworld. She had no ax. But she *could* kick the ugly old thing off the dais onto the floor. Alyse resisted the urge, clenching her hands into fists.

Using her cane, Siema pushed herself to her feet. Pilar and Maude stood up too. Siema raised her veined right hand in the matriarch’s benediction, index finger in the air, while daughter, granddaughter, and great-granddaughter bowed their heads.

“May the blessings of the DeJunes—past, present, and future—be with you always.”

While Pilar and Maude stayed behind to speak with Siema, Alyse forced herself to walk out of the room at a normal pace. She strode through the family area, past Kate’s bedroom door, and into her own adjoining bedroom. Alyse was halfway across the room when the connecting door between the bedrooms opened, and Kate walked in.

“I was about to ask how things went,” Kate said. “But I see by your expression they didn’t go well. Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not about everything,” Alyse said. “Because if Siema found out,

you and I both would be expelled.”

“Sometimes your great-grandmother can be overly dramatic.”

“Not this time. But I can tell you this. . . .” Alyse filled Kate in about the engagement with Troy Estati. “It makes me furious because I don’t have any control over my life. I’m expected to marry Troy. I’m expected to be named a mage, hopefully an archmage. And I’m expected to give birth to a child—preferably a male and an archmage—who will take our family’s seat in the Magesterium.”

Kate gave a low whistle and put a hand on Alyse's shoulder. “You’re in a real bind.”

“Yes. I’m expected to do the three things I detest most. Practice magic. Marry against my will. And give up my Eulorian studies. And yet I can’t bear the thought of being expelled. That’s worse than dying.”

“What will you do?”

Alyse shook her head in dismay. “I don’t know. I don’t want to marry Troy—or anyone else, for that matter, unless I love him. But I don’t want to be expelled. I wouldn’t be buried with my ancestors. And my spirit would wander forever between the Underworld and the Afterworld.”

Resolution tangled with despair, and Alyse didn’t know which would win the struggle.

