

Banners in the Wind

Book Three of The Chronicles of the Lescari Revolution

Juliet E McKenna

Tathrin

Triolle Castle, in the Kingdom of Lescar, 10th of For-Winter

They'd come so far together. Now they were leaving. His comrades-in-arms, his allies. All gone, as soon as they were paid the gold they had been promised. Tents were being struck, the picket lines for horses unstrung. Soil was being shovelled back into latrine pits.

His father always said it was much easier to tear something down than it was to rebuild it. Who was going to rebuild Lescar?

Looking down from the battlements of the castle's gatehouse, Tathrin shivered. The sun might be shining but ten days into For-Winter was a far cry from that scorched summer in the northern hills, where he had helped gather this army. Now both halves of autumn were done and so was their campaign.

The Summer Solstice felt like a lifetime ago. No, more than that. It could have been some memory of a different life in the Otherworld. But every priest swore those passing through Saedrin's door to rebirth in this world remembered nothing of any earlier lives. Tathrin recalled every step of the way that had brought him here, from the quiet life of a merchant's apprentice in distant Vanam to cutting men down as a . . .

What was he? He had marched with this mercenary army but he was no sword for hire. He had served as the captain-general's clerk through this swift and brutal conquest of Lescar but Evord had briskly replaced him once his command post was established here in Triolle.

Well, Tathrin was a man of Lescar, if nothing else. Captain-General Evord had reminded him of it that very morning. The time had come for the ordinary folk of Lescar to determine their country's future, the Soluran soldier had said. It was no longer the business of Dalasorians, of mercenaries like Evord himself or of the stocky blond men from the remote Mountains who had been hired to fight these perpetually warring dukes to a standstill.

His army could deny rule to the dukes, Evord had said, but they could not hand it to Tathrin or anyone else, not unless he wanted to pay their wages to keep their boots on the populace's neck, just like every other tyrant who had gone before.

So, like every other Lescari man or woman, Tathrin must look to himself to surmount this winter's challenges. Could they possibly celebrate the Winter Solstice Festival in peace a mere thirty-seven days hence? How would they maintain any such peace after that?

Where would he be celebrating? Tathrin wondered glumly. Not with his family, that much was certain. He'd made the mistake of hastening home just before the Autumn Equinox, only to find his parents aghast to learn of his part in bringing this war to Lescar.

He had fled their condemnation, all the more wounding in the light of his own misgivings once first blood had been shed. But that blood, and all that had followed, could no more be unshed than the smoke escaping a chimney could be recalled.

He looked up at the creamy banner that had been devised in Vanam, when they first swore to end Lescar's strife. Hands made a golden circle, each one grasping a symbol of the peace they sought: the farmer's hayfork, a sheaf of wheat, the goodwife's broom; a scholar's quill. The priest's handbell proclaimed the rule of law rather than ducal caprice, and the foot soldier's halberd asserted every common man's right to defend his hearth and household.

If they could build a lasting peace for Lescar, would that allay his guilt for bringing so much death and destruction to his countrymen?

Tathrin ran a hand through his unkempt dark hair and winced as his fingers caught in a tangle. He was so bone-achingly weary. When had he last had a night's sleep untroubled by dreams of mayhem?

Could he possibly persuade these people of Triolle that their lives had truly changed for the better, now that this army of foreigners and mercenaries had won the autumn's bloody battles? Why should they trust Tathrin? He might be Lescari but he was a Carluse man. Even in the best of times, the dukedom of his birth and this domain of Triolle had eyed each other uneasily over their common border. This was very far from the best of times. Beyond the stream dammed to create the mere defending the castle's flank, Tathrin saw the shuttered windows and barred gates of Triolle Town. Evord's swift campaign had spared Lescar the devastation left by rampaging armies but the meagre trade that the townsfolk counted on to save their families from winter starvation had been thrown into utter confusion.

'They say lowlanders haven't got the sense to come in out of the rain.' A mail-clad man opened the door from the bastion's stair. 'I don't know about a gale.'

'It's barely a breeze.' The banners snapping on the topmost coign gave the lie to his companion's words. His close-cropped hair gleamed golden in the sunshine.

'Gren. Sorgrad.' Tathrin greeted them curtly.

'Some girl undressing with her shutters open, long lad?' Gren leaned on the battlement. He was a little younger and shorter than his brother, though neither man topped Tathrin's shoulder. Neither spoke with the accents of the Mountains they had left nearly two decades since, when they were both younger than Tathrin was now.

'The Dalasorians are leaving.' Tathrin nodded towards the camp whose sprawl rivalled the walled girth of Triolle Town.

Men and women in the dark garb of the northern grasslands were roping long lines of horses; their own dead comrades' steeds and those animals, panicked and riderless, that they had captured in the aftermath of the battles. Whatever animals they caught, they kept. That had been written into the clan lords' terms of service with Captain-General Evord, when they had agreed to risk their necks in this Lescari war. Horses were wealth in their homeland, hundreds of leagues away.

'They're carrying a goodly amount of booty.' Gren's pale-blue eyes fixed on the laden packhorses.

Tathrin could only hope it was mostly plundered from the dukes' mercenaries, who'd stolen it in the first place, leaving their victims with no chance of redress.

'No more than their fair share,' Sorgrad assured his brother.

'It's a difficult time of year on the roads.' The wind tugged strands of Gren's unruly blond hair loose from the leather thong that bound it. 'Why don't the Dalasorians winter here and go home in the spring?'

'So you can win some of their loot for yourself?' Tathrin had seen Gren's talent for throwing a winning hand of runes rather more often than mere chance would predict.

Sorgrad was watching the dancing pennants that indicated the clan lords' personal troops. 'The sooner they leave the better, now that their job is done.'

Was it? Truly? Doubts plagued Tathrin. But they couldn't ask any more of the Dalasorians. One in three of Sia Kersain's regiment had died or been wounded in the sixty days since they had marched on Carluse, on the first day of the Autumn Equinox. Rega Taszar's men hadn't faced such fierce fighting, or such ill-luck, but his force had still lost one in ten of their number.

Every total, every amendment that he had made to the captain general's ledgers was engraved on Tathrin's memory. His facility with numbers, that blessing which had led him

from life as a humble tavern-keeper's son to all the opportunities in the city of Vanam, was now an unforeseen curse.

'They'll be carrying your name far and wide, long lad.' Gren glanced at him, eyes bright with mischief. 'There'll be songs sung in every tavern along the highway praising the Liberator of Lescar.'

'You think so?' Sorgrad looked sceptical. 'Their job's done, my friend, but yours is barely half-finished. Duke Secaris might have lost his heir but he's still safe in Draximal, while Duke Ferdain of Marlier is sitting as pretty as he ever did. Then there's this chaos Reniack and his cronies have cast Parnillesse into.'

'Why is everything my responsibility?' As his protest sounded petulant and foolish, Tathrin could have bitten his tongue. But the words couldn't be recalled any more than shed blood.

'You started this,' Sorgrad reminded him. 'You and Aremil and Master Gruit. There's no going back now. So you'll have to see it all through to the end, whatever that might be.'

Tathrin gritted his teeth to stop another unwise response.

'You'll be heroes, the three of you,' Gren said comfortably, 'in the songs and the broadsheets and whenever the scholars write up their annals in Col and especially Vanam. You're one of their own.'

Tathrin wished he shared the Mountain Man's certainty. But he knew he was nothing like those mighty shapers of history celebrated in tavern tales and learned discourse. How could he possibly see peace truly restored to Lescar when allies like Evord and Dagaran, whose skills and experience had brought him this far, were leaving him bereft?

Looking down at his hands, now tanned and scarred, Tathrin contemplated the silver seal ring that marked him as a scholar of Vanam's famed university. He feared those mentors in their faraway hilltop halls would be far more inclined to condemn him for trying to solve problems with blood and steel rather than words and reason. Their disgust would be all the greater if they suspected any desire for fame and fortune had spurred him on.

He glanced at Sorgrad. 'Do you have any news of Triolle's duke or duchess?'

He knew Sorgrad had been scrying for her, using the arcane skills bestowed by his magebirth.

Sorgrad shook his head, apparently sincere. 'I'm abiding by the Archmage's edict.'

Tathrin found that very hard to believe. On the other side of the coin, he'd be relieved if it was true. Their task of rebuilding trust across Lescar would be a hundred times harder if the guildsmen and yeoman learned they had flagrantly defied the age-old ban on wizardry in Lescar.

So perhaps the brothers had just come up here to tease him, with nothing better to do. Sorgrad knew boredom and Gren was a dangerous combination. The younger Mountain Man relished the chaos of warfare more than any other mercenary Tathrin had encountered this past half-year.

Gren's eyes brightened. 'Dagaran's brought news from the camp.'

Dagaran Esk Breven, summoned from their revolt's headquarters at Carluse Castle to replace Tathrin as the captain-general's clerk. He had long been Evord's most trusted lieutenant, both men born and bred in the ancient kingdom of Solura, a thousand leagues to the west. They had learned the fiercest arts of war against the savages and wild beasts who menaced King Solquen's wilderness border. Lescar's petulant dukes hadn't known what hit them.

'Let's hear it.' Tathrin turned to the narrow spiral staircase descending from the battlements.

Even now, he was glad to have Sorgrad and Gren behind him. Everywhere in this castle, Tathrin listened for following footsteps. Triolle's late and unlamented spymaster

Hamare had been admired from easternmost Tormalin to the most westerly cities of Ensaimin, by anyone whose business was trading information. A few of Master Hamare's eyes and ears must still be lurking, in hopes of learning something of use to their absent duke. Iruvain of Triolle was fled, not dead.

Tathrin fervently hoped none of the sullen-eyed Triollese, who'd chosen grudging submission over the perils of resistance, learned it was Sorgrad who'd stabbed Hamare to death, to stop the spymaster strangling their Vanam-hatched rebellion at birth. That knowledge would surely spark smouldering resentment into blazing defiance.

As they emerged into the castle's broad bailey, Arest, mercenary captain of the Wyvern Hunters company, waved a hand broad as an axe-head. Since they'd captured Triolle Castle, the massive warrior had commanded its guard. The scaly black predator that was their emblem flapped its wings on the banner beside the cream and gold Lescari standard.

'Dagaran's in the Chatelaine's Tower.' Arest's forbidding face creased with a slow smile. 'Shall we serve wine and cakes? Though I don't know if we can find any fresh flowers.'

'Wine and cakes will suffice.' Tathrin wasn't about to give Gren the satisfaction of betraying his irritation.

'As you command.' Chuckling, Arest swept a florid bow, incongruous given his chain-mail hauberk, travel-stained breeches and iron-studded boots.

All the mercenaries were still geared for war, even inside the castle. Before the town gates had been barred to them three days ago, there had been some nasty incidents in the taverns.

How by all that was holy was he supposed to convince the Triollese to trust these battle-hardened men who had swept in to drive out their duke and seize his domains? Tathrin supposed he should be honoured that Captain-General Evord had delegated that task to him, but thus far his efforts had been met with noncommittal words and icy stares. Common folk had scant reason to think these mercenaries would prove any different from the scavenging dogs who'd harried their wretched lives for generations.

He turned for the Chatelaine's Tower, one of two flanking the bastion. Sorgrad and Gren sauntered alongside him. Tathrin knew better than to try and shake them off.

Triolle Castle was notable among Lescar's fortresses for its lack of a central keep. Instead, the massive curtain wall was interrupted by lofty towers, looming over the mere on one side and a deep rock-cut ditch on the other. Arrow slits squinted suspiciously outwards. Triolle was a low-lying dukedom, bracketed by rivers and sodden throughout the winter. Its dukes had no advantageous high ground to claim for their fortifications.

So even if the mighty gatehouse was stormed, each of Triolle Castle's towers was defensible in its own right, linked only by the high wall-walk running around the lofty battlements. None of which had saved it when the Duke of Triolle had taken to his heels, leaving the gates wide open.

Tathrin ran up the steps to the Chatelaine's Tower, traditionally housing the castle's foremost noble lady short of the duchess. Some trusted confidante and holder of the keys would have relieved her from the cares of running the household, most particularly when her liege lady was doing her foremost duty in filling the ducal nursery. But Duchess Litasse had fled along with her husband and they'd not even been wed two years, so there were no infants to slow them down.

Where had Triolle's duke and his duchess ended up in the chaos after the Battle of Pannal? Were their nameless corpses rotting in some ditch, murdered by faithless mercenaries who'd fled that slaughter? Had they fallen victim to the Parnillesse mob, who had risen up to massacre their own duke and his family? Or were Iruvain and Litasse safely holed

up with some unforeseen allies, intent on retaliation once winter was past? How could a decisive battle leave so much unresolved?

Salo, a mercenary whose bandy legs hinted at childhood starvation, was guarding the heavy oak door. 'My lady.'

'Good day to you too.' Tathrin knew any retort would only amuse the mercenaries still teasing him about playing chatelaine to Captain-General Evord's stewardship. Besides, it was a mild enough jest compared to the savage humour the fighting men could delight in.

Dagaran, the Soluran lieutenant, was waiting in the hallway, studying a portrait of some former duchess. A narrow smile relieved his saturnine face. 'I haven't called at an inconvenient time?'

'Not in the least.' Tathrin unlocked the reception room door.

All within was as pristine as any duchess could have demanded, thanks to Tathrin wielding broom and feather duster. He wasn't inclined to trust those castle servants who'd remained and he'd done enough cleaning back in his father's inn, even if being found with a mop had first prompted the mercenaries' mockery.

He swiftly assured himself that no one had touched the coffers on the polished table holding so many confidential letters and lists. Tathrin had the only keys to those locks, unless some key to this elegant room had escaped Arest's vigilance.

Triolle's successive duchesses had increased the castle's comforts, dividing each tower's interior into richly furnished apartments and insisting on broad windows to admit more light. There was a pleasure garden on the far side of the bailey, though the arbours were drab and forlorn, summer's roses long since fallen. Apparently it had been the particular delight of the late Duchess Casatia.

What would Iruvain's mother have thought of his headlong flight? Tathrin grimaced. Every coin has two faces. The disgraced duke might be bereft of father and mother but at least he need never face them to explain his actions.

'There's news from Carluse.' Dagaran crossed the room to look out into the vast courtyard.

'Word of Iruvain?' Sorgrad asked quickly.

'Or his duchess?' Gren shot a sly glance at his brother.

'We've still no notion where Their Graces might be.' The mercenary handed a sealed scrap of parchment to Tathrin. 'The captain-general's compliments and he'd value a prompt response.'

The note was short and to the point, in Evord's elegant penmanship.

My scouts report that the renegade mercenaries who seized and sacked Wyril are now advancing on Ashgil. Please advise how you intend to stop them. Naturally I am happy to offer my advice on your first campaign as captain-general of the Lescari militias.

'Why must I—?' He crushed the parchment in his hand, knuckles whitening.

'Lescar's future is now in Lescari hands.' Dagaran looked steadily at him. 'It's time for you to prove that to anyone who might doubt it.'

'I see.' Reluctant, Tathrin understood nonetheless. Of all who'd plotted to overthrow the dukes back in Vanam, he was the only one who had served Captain-General Evord throughout the autumn's campaign. But could his limited knowledge of warfare possibly meet this challenge?

Sorgrad tugged at the crumpled note still in his hand. 'You can let me have this or I can break your fingers,' he offered.

Tathrin didn't doubt it, so loosened his hold.

'A fight for Ashgil?' As Gren peered over Sorgrad's shoulder, the prospect clearly delighted him. 'That'll shake the stiffness out.'

‘As long as the renegades hold Wyril, they cut the highway to Dalasor. If they can take Ashgil, they’re masters of the most direct route to the Great West Road. They’re looking to rob our northerly friends as they head for home.’ Sorgrad glanced at Tathrin, sapphire eyes penetrating. ‘Failla’s in Ashgil, isn’t she?’

Tathrin cleared his throat. ‘She went to speak to the guildsmen there, on her uncle’s behalf.’

Master Ernout would have gone himself but the priest was still suffering the after-effects of the vicious beatings he’d endured. Duke Garnot’s henchmen hadn’t spared fists or boots on the old man.

Which simplified things for Tathrin. The woman he loved faced mortal peril. He would have to prove himself a worthy commander. Those renegades had murdered countless innocents since slipping their leashes after Lord Cassat, Draximal’s heir, had died in a vain attempt to retake the vital border town of Tyrle, seized from the dukes of Carluse and Triolle by Evord’s army.

‘The captain-general’s already begun paying off his mercenaries.’ A frown creased Sorgrad’s brow. ‘You’ll have to pay twice the coin to rehire them.’

Tathrin shook his head. ‘Those who’ve been paid off can keep on walking.’ He knew Evord had begun by ridding Lescar of those fighting companies whose rank and file hadn’t impressed him in battle, and those whose captains had proved lackadaisical in following orders or imposing discipline.

‘The captain-general will not release any of the mercenary companies still on his muster roll,’ Dagan interjected, apologetic. ‘He insists you Lescari must raise your own militia to meet this threat. Now that the rule of the dukes is done, the sooner you show you’re fit to defend yourselves, the fewer scavengers will be sniffing around.’

Tathrin opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. If that was Evord’s decision, there would be no changing it. His throat tightened.

‘We’ll start by raising a militia in Triolle Town.’ Gren cracked his knuckles in happy anticipation.

Sorgrad frowned. ‘The Guild Council will want to keep every able bodied man here, in case these mercenaries head this way next.’

Relieved to see this pair had no intention of deserting him, Tathrin nodded reluctantly. ‘The Triolle Guilds will say Wyril is Draximal’s concern and Ashgil is in Carluse territory. They’ll say this is none of their affair.’

‘If Draximal could raise half a company, they’d be whiskerless boys and greybeards,’ Gren scoffed. ‘Duke Secaris’s militias were cut to pieces in the battle for Tyrle and these thrice-cursed mercenaries have hunted down those few that escaped.’

Sorgrad was already thinking beyond their immediate task. ‘Once these vermin are beaten back from Ashgil they must be driven out of Wyril, otherwise they’ll just lick their wounds there and attack again.’

‘The captain-general thinks much the same.’ Dagan looked steadily at Tathrin.

He knew they were right. He chewed his lip dubiously all the same. Could he possibly convince the resentful Triollese to take up arms on another dukedom’s behalf? When their sons had so often been forcibly recruited into the militias, to bleed and die in their liege lord’s endless futile quarrels. He knew the tavern chimney-corner sages were saying the dukes of Carluse and Draximal had merely reaped what they had sown.

In all honesty, Tathrin struggled to care as much for those slain in the atrocious sack of Wyril as he now feared for Ashgil. Even if Failla had not been there, Ashgil’s inhabitants were Carlusian. They were his kith and kin in a way the Draximal folk of Wyril simply were not.

But they had come to bring peace for all Lescari. He had to do this. There was no other option. Tathrin resolutely thrust aside all the doubts and preoccupations hanging around him, as dispiriting as the chill mists rising from Triolle's sodden turf. In some perverse fashion, having a clearly defined task came as a relief. Anything was better than contemplating the looming, elusive ordeal of bringing a lasting peace out of all this uncertainty.

He turned to Dagaran. 'If the captain-general won't release his mercenary companies to us, I hope he won't object to us recruiting some sergeants to stiffen our militiamen's backbones?'

The Soluran smiled. 'I'm sure he won't.'

'We can tell you who to tap on the shoulder.' Gren was honing a dagger with his whetstone.

'They'll want paying,' Sorgrad reminded Tathrin.

He nodded. 'So we must ask Aremil what's left in the war chest.'

And surely Aremil would have more success raising a militia inside Carluse, to defend their own people in Ashgil?

Aremil

**Carluse Castle,
10th of For-Winter**

He contemplated the final reports from the mercenary captains in charge of Sharlac and Losand, the first two towns they had captured. Now he needed to decide who to promote in their place, from the militia companies each town had raised against the possibility of the dukes attacking. Given a taste of freedom, none of the guildsmen and merchants was willing to resubmit to their authority.

Which was all well and good, Aremil reflected. But would those same guildmasters begin quarrelling with their rivals in other towns and dukedoms or would they see the benefits of cooperation? If so, who among them would expect to be in charge? Who would make most trouble if they felt overlooked?

Then there were the heaped letters from Lescari nobles, more arriving every day. Captain-General Evord had made it plain that answering those was Aremil's responsibility.

What should he say to those gently born folk who'd swiftly thought better of riding to assist their liege lords, once they'd realised the Soluran was intent on carrying his shocking campaign to a decisive conclusion? A good number wanted recognition and, yes, reward for their forbearance, some share of the plunder they imagined the mercenaries now hoarded.

What of the tear-stained appeals from the families of those who had dutifully answered their dukes' call and paid a brutal price? They begged for news of their loved ones, asking what ransom might buy their freedom. Everyone knew that mercenaries bought and sold their captives as readily as they traded their booty.

Before he could answer those, Aremil must consult Dagan's ledgers, to discover which fathers, sons or brothers had died, to be burned on some battlefield pyre. Then he must discover where those who still lived were being held – not for ransom, but until they gave their oath not to raise a hand in any duke's cause. Was he now responsible for imprisoning those proving obdurate?

Aremil's head ached at the thought of trying to decipher any more scrawl. His eyesight had always been weak, but lately even the clearest writing blurred in all but the strongest light. The grimy windows of this cramped room were already dim as the afternoon slipped into evening.

Letters from the Guild Councils of Lescar's market towns made another pile. Some were defiant, others abusive. All demanded what was to be done regarding highway dues and town gate tolls and rents and levies due at midwinter.

Aremil gazed at the flames dancing in the hearth. How quickly might those letters burn? Especially that one double-sealed with the fire-basket emblem of Draximal pressed deep into the wax? But that would be no answer.

Only he had so little to say to all these people. Yes, their rebellion had overthrown the dukes and taken possession of their castles in Carluse, Sharlac and Triolle. No, they would not stand for the return of the old tyrannical order. But what did they propose in its place?

Why had all this responsibility landed on his twisted shoulders? He contemplated his crutches, propped against the desk. Because he couldn't ride into battle like Tathrin or undertake the vital journeys their fellow conspirators were currently making.

He contemplated the inkwell and the sticky quill. His fingers and cuff were stained and his page was blotted to illegibility. He must find someone reliably discreet to do his scribing since haste made his shaky handwriting even worse.

Some keeper of his secrets could also run up and down Carluse Castle's stairs, even ride a horse when speed was of the essence. Someone hale and strong, unlike Aremil, crippled by his mother's ordeal in her first childbed. Crippled, yet generously provided for. Sent into anonymous exile, but sent to Vanam and its unrivalled scholars once it was apparent his intellect was undimmed, even if his legs were weak and twisted, however much his hands shook and his voice faltered.

He contemplated the Draximal-sealed letter, still unopened. At least Tathrin had faced his father's wrath. Aremil still had to endure his parents' condemnation, their grief over his unknown brother's death. As word of his true parentage spread, how many would whisper behind their hands, wondering how long it would be before this supposed Master Aremil of Vanam claimed his rightful place as Lord Aremil, heir to Draximal, since he was indeed Duke Secaris's first-born son?

Aremil's heart was hollow with a different loss. Branca knew he had no desire to claim any such rank but she was travelling to Tormalin on Lescar's eastern border, carrying their carefully crafted response to Tormalin Imperial outrage at the autumn's slaughters.

With such chaos raging just across the River Asilor, within bowshot of his nobles' holdings, Emperor Tadriol was surely already mustering Tormalin's legions to defend those border domains. Placating him was one of their most urgent and difficult tasks.

Aremil glanced at the modest timepiece over the mantel. How soon would Branca use her enchantments to speak to him, reaching through the unseen aether that offered a conduit between minds to those who had mastered the mysteries of Artifice?

Until then, should he use his own apprentice skills to contact Tathrin? Unlike the elemental magic of wizards, who could only speak to each other through their spells, Artifice offered a skilled adept the enchantments to contact folk with no knowledge or understanding of their craft.

Aremil sighed. It had seemed so simple. Sending information hither and yonder as swiftly as one adept could talk to another would give their rebellion a decisive advantage over enemies still limited to letters carried by horse or courier dove. They could recruit some of Lescari blood from among those scholars studying this ancient, largely forgotten magic.

It was little more than a curiosity after all, offering none of the lethal potential of magecraft. Such ferocious sorcery was expressly forbidden to Lescar's armies. Any duke enlisting a wizard to cast spears of lightning across a battlefield or to summon up elemental floods to drown his foes would face the Archmage's extreme displeasure. No one knew quite what that might be, because no one in recorded memory had dared risk it. But no Archmage had ever claimed suzerainty over Artifice, and as Aremil had predicted, it had proved central to their victory.

Only they hadn't quite understood what they were dealing with. Talking to Tathrin face to face was one thing. Reading his thoughts, Aremil found himself increasingly weighed down by his friend's doubts, with fears that Tathrin surely had no intention of sharing. He saw glimpses of the men Tathrin had killed, and felt echoes of his uneasy dreams, caught between the torments of guilt and defiance, knowing his only choice had been to kill or be killed. He knew how much Tathrin feared falling short of the myriad challenges before him.

He had done his best to reassure his friend, and not with empty platitudes. Aremil had faith in Tathrin's mettle, and besides, he gave far less credence to tales of great men alone determining the destiny of thousands. Cities and dominions rose and fell according to the ebb and flow of circumstance. Their whole conspiracy could never have succeeded thus far without riding the tides of resentment already rippling across Lescar.

That didn't mean he was confident of ultimate success, any more than Tathrin was. Unforeseen events were sweeping them all in different directions. With this daily flood of letters and demands, Aremil felt like some miller desperately trying to manage his sluices

while winter rain swelled an uncaring river, threatening to smash all he had worked for into ruins.

He could only hope his own uncertainties weren't adding to Tathrin's burdens. Aremil knew he was by far the least proficient of the adepts. Branca and her fellow scholar Kerith had studied Artifice in Vanam's peaceful halls long enough to be skilled at veiling their innermost selves from such unwanted intimacies.

As had Jettin. Aremil looked at another pile of letters. Those all demanded to know what was happening in Parnillesse. Had those leading this rebellion planned the brutal execution of Duke Orlin all along? What crimes had his family, his children, committed that warranted their unsanctioned murder?

Aremil, along with Branca and Kerith, burned to ask Jettin those exact same questions. Their most youthful adept, born in Vanam of exiled Lescari parents, had been sent to Parnillesse with Reniack after their decisive victory in battle at Pannal. The rabble-rouser had promised that the common folk of Parnillesse would follow the rebellion's banner. They had not doubted him. After all, his skills had been worth another regiment of mercenaries in their campaign. He had written scurrilous pamphlets to entertain gutter riff-raff. His soberly argued broadsheets persuaded those who fancied themselves loftier thinkers. As thatchers and sweeps, stockmen and peddlers wore out their shoes on the byways crisscrossing Lescar, they carried Reniack's writings. They hummed the engagingly seditious songs that he composed for rough-hewn musicians rolling from tavern to tavern.

Only Reniack had gone his own way now, intent on bloody revenge for all he and his long-time confederates had suffered through their years of defying their duke and his tyranny. Somehow Reniack had convinced Jettin to rebuff any approach through the aether. Now none of them had any idea what might be happening in Parnillesse.

A knock rattled the door. Before Aremil could answer, the unheralded caller entered.

'Master Gruit?' Astonished, Aremil looked at the sleepy little girl in the burly merchant's arms, cloaked and creased from travelling. 'Anilt?'

They should be safe in Abray, in Caladhria, along with Kerith. Master Gruit's task was keeping Caladhria's nobles from interfering in Lescari affairs. Who was doing that now?

'Good day, Master Aremil.' Master Gruit smiled wearily. 'Where's the little one's mother?'

'Mama?' The child twisted in his arms, looking around.

Was she looking for Failla, who had borne her in such secrecy? Or for Lathi, the cousin who had fostered her since birth?

'Failla has gone to Ashgil,' Aremil replied. 'She will be surprised to learn you're both here.'

Surprised and displeased. Had Gruit no notion of his folly in bringing the child to Carluse?

'Delighted too, I'll warrant.' The snowy-haired wine merchant sat on a chair, settling the curly-headed child on his knee.

'Mama coming?' The little girl's brown eyes were huge with uncertainty.

'Soon, chick,' he promised.

'Where is Lathi?' demanded Aremil.

'She had a letter from her husband,' Gruit said tartly, 'insisting that she return to their farm now the battles are done.' His arms closed around the child, a steely glint in his eye. 'Halcarion help the pair of them if they choose to run the gauntlet of beggars and bandits on the road with their own children, but I won't risk Anilt.'

'You think she'll be safe here?' Aremil retorted, taut with anger.

'If she's known to be Failla's child, everyone will guess who her father must be!'

Gruit scowled and the little girl began to grizzle, burying her round face in his cloak's fur collar.

'She needs supper, a bath and a bed.' The merchant's expression brooked no argument.

'Tegel!' Aremil rang the little brass bell beside his inkwell. The youthful lackey came quickly from the outer room.

'He said he was a friend of yours.' He shot an accusing look at Gruit.

'He is,' Aremil assured the youth. 'Please, can you find Serafia?'

The youth nodded. 'Of course.'

'She's another of Failla's cousins,' Aremil explained, low-voiced, as the boy departed. 'She's been nursing the wounded here. She can take Anilt outside the castle, well away from the gossips.'

Serafia's son Kip was another fatherless child, both of them bereft when her beloved Elpin had died in Duke Garnot's militia.

Aremil stifled a qualm. Surely she wouldn't refuse to shelter Anilt, just because the child was Duke Garnot's daughter?

'Very well.' Gruit's jowled face sagged.

Aremil tried to recall the portrait of Lord Ricart that had once hung in this chamberlain's office, before the acknowledged heir to the dukedom had died, along with his formidable mother. What about Anilt's legitimate half-sisters? He tried to recall their faces, before they were sent away to be securely housed with Duke Moncan of Sharlac's widow and orphaned daughters. Overthrowing the dukes was all very well but their relicts were proving yet another unforeseen complication.

Did Anilt bear any striking resemblance to her father? Aremil couldn't decide. It hardly mattered. Everyone in Carluse knew Failla had been Duke Garnot's mistress these past four years. Any child she had borne could only be the duke's bastard. No man would dare trespass in his bed.

Failla had gone to such desperate lengths to protect her child; otherwise Anilt's life would have been spent as a plaything in the dead duchess's diplomacy. When chance had offered the hope of concealing her unwanted pregnancy, Failla had seized it. After giving birth, she had lived for the day when the duke would discard her, to reclaim her child from Lathi and travel far enough away to live in anonymity. That was why she had joined their conspiracy: to see Duke Garnot thrown down, never again to cast a shadow over their lives.

Aremil wondered if Failla had even shed a tear when she learned Garnot had died. He glanced at the letters demanding to know exactly how the Carluse duke had been killed. That was another question he had no answer for. But one thing at a time.

'Why not keep Anilt safe in A Bray?' He looked searchingly at Gruit.

The old man forced himself to his feet, walking around and patting the child's back to soothe her. 'Caladhria's barons are still muttering into their soup, complaining about these feckless Lescari and their squabbles, wondering how best to profit by selling winter fodder and blankets to both sides. It's business as usual for them.'

'There's no word of them summoning their parliament before Solstice?' Tension knotted Aremil's shoulders.

'They won't tear up their customary calendar on our account.' Cradling the child as he resumed his seat, Gruit's tone was certain. 'But we had better have some path to peace pegged out before the barons gather in Ferl. Otherwise this Winter Parliament could be the first in living memory where enough Caladhrian barons agree on the same thing to take some decisive action. Duke Ferdain of Marlier is writing to all his allies on the far banks of the Rel. No end of Carluse and Triolle nobles have washed up in Relshaz and the riverside towns. They're calling in debts and favours and promising both moons and the stars in between to whoever helps them reclaim their own.'

‘Then why aren’t you in Abray to hobble such talk?’ Aremil demanded. ‘Why risk yourself and Anilt on the road? What does Kerith have to say about this?’

Why hadn’t Kerith warned him? The scholar could have reached through the aether before Gruit’s coach had rattled through Abray’s town gates.

‘Kerith thinks I’m visiting Baron Dacren’s country estate, with the chick and her nurse.’ Gruit held Anilt close now the little girl was asleep. ‘Please offer my sincerest apologies.’ He contemplated Anilt’s tear-stained face. ‘Warn him to quit the house in Abray. There’s Tormalin coin in a bag under my bedroom floorboards, enough to pay the servants what they’re owed until Solstice. I settled all the tradesmen’s accounts to the end of Aft-Autumn but there’s no coin to clear For-Winter’s debts. Though Kerith’s name is on nothing. He cannot be held liable at law for anything I have done.’

‘I don’t understand.’ A tremor shook Aremil.

‘There’s no money left.’ A mischievous smile lightened Gruit’s lined face.

‘But . . . the captain-general’s disbursements?’ Tathrin had assured Aremil that the chests of gold coin had arrived, discreetly conveyed to Evord’s camp by the Soluran’s most trusted men. ‘The funds from Lescari exiles?’

There were enough such outcasts, in every town along the great highways running east and west. Over the generations, those who could scrape together enough coin to flee had settled in Tormalin, in Caladhria, among the independent cities and fiefdoms that made up Ensaimin beyond. Those who prospered had long offered shelter to unfortunates cast onto the high roads with what little they could carry when they had failed to pay their duke’s levy at Equinox or Solstice. Other years saw the utterly bereft stumbling along the verges, lucky to salvage the clothes on their backs as their homes and livelihoods burned because smouldering noble hatreds had flared into open warfare.

Such exiles sent gold and silver to their beleaguered families left behind, so their kinsfolk could pay the levies or bribe mercenaries to leave them alone; purchase food and goods, so often in short supply; even buy passage away from their wretched existence for their sons and daughters.

But Aremil had realised that flow of coin merely perpetuated the endless round of blood and pain. That’s why he had approached Gruit. Was there any way to deprive the dukes of their gold and silver without starving the commonalty to death? It had been the first step on the road that had brought them both here.

The lengthening silence finally forced Gruit to speak.

‘That well of goodwill ran dry by the close of For-Autumn. I still had to buy arrows by the barrel-load, and grain for bread and beer, and meat on the hoof, and pay for everything the captain-general’s commissary sergeants have commandeered while he’s been campaigning.’

Now the old man’s grin was boyishly wicked. ‘So I secured more coin with false promises and outright lies. I’ve sold property I don’t own and guaranteed delivery of goods that don’t exist and faked letters of credit from Selerima to Toremal. Come settling-up at Winter Solstice, there’ll be a hue and cry for my blood in Abray, so I intend to be long gone well before then.’

‘So every Caladhrian or Tormalin who’s ever abused the Lescari as fools and thieves, as less than the scum in a pisspot, will feel vindicated.’ Only choking on his outrage silenced Aremil.

‘The men I’ve defrauded are frauds themselves,’ Gruit retorted. ‘I’ve only robbed those who’ve grown fat from Lescari misery. Who’ve sold mouldy rye for the cost of the finest wheat. Who’ve bought Lescari flax and hides for a pittance and sold back the cloth and leather for twice the prices paid in Caladhria. Who’ve sold silks and furs and brassware to our dukes and their duchesses, never caring that Their Graces beggared honest men and women

to scavenge the coin for such finery.’

Aremil simply stared at Gruit. Whatever the merchant’s justifications, how were they to rebuild Lescar if there was no more money to be had?

A knock interrupted his desperation. ‘Enter!’

It was Serafia, slender and wary, drying her chapped hands on the apron protecting her faded green gown. ‘Tegel said you wanted me?’

‘Please, shut the door.’ Aremil waited until she’d done so before continuing. ‘This child—’

‘I can guess who she is.’ Serafia looked apprehensively at Anilt. ‘Very well. I’ll take her.’

Gruit made no move to surrender the little girl. ‘How will you explain her arrival?’

‘Half the town’s households are sheltering infants and their mothers who fled the burning of Tyrle.’ Serafia’s expression hardened. ‘No one will question one more orphan in my Aunt Derou’s kitchen.’

Aremil saw Gruit was still reluctant. ‘Who better to care for her than her own family?’

Gruit grunted. ‘I can call to see her tomorrow?’

‘Aunt Derou will be pleased to see you,’ Serafia promised with deceptive mildness.

Aremil had no doubt that formidable matron would rebuke Gruit with scalding words, for his folly and selfishness in subjecting the child to such a journey in winter weather, all to put her in still greater danger. Which would serve Gruit right.

As the merchant rose to hand her over, the little girl woke with a protesting whimper.

Serafia set her down on her feet and stooped to look her in the eye. ‘Anilt, would you like some bread and milk? And a cosy bed?’

The little girl nodded, her rosebud mouth quivering.

‘Very well.’ Raising Anilt’s hood to hide her face, Serafia led her to the door. She glanced at Aremil. ‘I’ll call on you later.’

Gruit smoothed the rumpled front of his tunic, his aged face momentarily forlorn. Then he turned to Aremil, still defiant. ‘Bread and milk’s hardly to my taste. Where might I find meat and ale?’

‘Try the kitchens.’ Aremil fixed him with a hard stare. ‘Come back as soon as you’ve eaten. I need to know every last detail of your dealings.’

In the meantime, he would use his skills with Artifice to warn Kerith of the strife about to entangle him. But first, he must tell Tathrin what had happened.

As the door slammed behind Gruit, Aremil closed his eyes. The ancient enchantments of Artifice came more readily now. He need only think the words as he focused his thoughts on his tall, long-limbed friend.

Al daera sa Tathrin ne fol. Sast elarmin ash feorin el sur.

There he was, so muscular now, far more soldier than the scholar he had been when they had first met. He was standing in that elegant reception room in Triolle Castle. If Aremil didn’t begrudge Tathrin those light and spacious quarters, he certainly envied them.

‘Aremil?’

Despite all the times they had done this these past seasons, Tathrin still looked startled to hear Aremil’s voice in his head.

‘I’ve troubling news, I’m afraid.’

Aremil could feel Duchess Litasse’s rich carpet under his feet, and smell the beeswax that polished the table. If he turned, he would be able to see out into the dusky courtyard. It was as if he were there in person. Better than that, he could walk as swiftly as he chose, unhampered by his crutches.

But Tathrin couldn’t even see him. Whatever great deeds Tathrin had done, however expert he had become with that sword he wore, Artifice was one skill he didn’t have. Though

Aremil took care to veil his satisfaction. He didn't want Tathrin to think he was so mean-spirited.

'Ashgil? What's happened?'

'Ashgil?' Aremil was confused.

Then he saw all Tathrin's thoughts laid open. Ashgil was menaced by the renegade mercenaries? Appalled, he couldn't shield his dismay from his friend.

'You can't warn Failla?'

'I still haven't mastered that skill.'

Though he hated to admit it, Aremil could still only reach through the aether to other adepts and those closest to his affections like Tathrin.

Could they possibly warn Failla in time? Before those bloodthirsty renegades slaughtered everyone in Ashgil?

Tathrin's stinging rebuke made his head spin.

'Get Kerith to warn her! He can reach her even if you can't!'