

## **Blood in the Water**

### **Book Two of The Chronicles of the Lescari Revolution**

**Juliet E McKenna**

#### *Tathrin*

#### **The Road from Losand to Carluse Town, Autumn Equinox Festival, First Day, Morning**

When Captain-General Evord ordered the army to march at first light, he meant just that. The long column had been walking for nearly two leagues and the sun still hadn't cleared the tops of the oak trees.

Tathrin stifled a yawn. At least dawn wasn't so brutally early now the Equinox was upon them. Though that was a double edged blessing. While the oak trees' leaves were still green, the hedges were showing seasonal gold.

He'd have been up this early at home. On the first day of the Autumn Festival, excitement would have roused him before the sounds of his mother and sisters down in the kitchen. They'd be preparing mutton, fat from the summer's grass, geese plump from gleanings in the wheat fields, succulent mushrooms and puddings sweet with plums and pippins, quinces and pears. His father and brothers by marriage would ensure ale flowed all day, a stronger brew than usual until the five days of festival were done and the year turned to Aft-Autumn.

They'd be joined by aunts and uncles and cousins and any guests still enjoying the hospitality of the Ring of Birches inn— those few who'd suffered some unexpected delay on their journey home. They would all give thanks to Drianon for the bounty of fruit and grain. The motherly goddess's statue was placed by the hearth and every meal concluded with grateful libations.

After sunset, Tathrin's father would set out wine and white brandy, gifts from the merchants who traded along the Great West Road cutting across this country of Lescar. Their mules and wagons carried luxuries and necessities to the wealthy Tormalin Empire in the east and brought different dainties back to the prosperous realm of Caladhria. Some even travelled further westwards to the fiefdoms and city-states that made up the land of Ensaimin. Such men valued clean beds, good food and secure stables and storage lofts. They soon learned that Jerich Sayron hired honest men, found them sound horses and changed their coin without cheating them.

Tathrin's feet mindlessly followed the tramp of the ranks ahead. Banners hung limp from poles slanted over standard-bearers' shoulders, their bright colours muted. Thankfully the dew kept down the dust. It would be a different story by noon, with the recent lack of rain.

Not that they wanted rain. He'd seen a youthful mercenary wishing for a shower harshly rebuked for tempting Dastennin, god of storms. All the experienced swordsmen knew that waging war so late in the year meant the weather could be a foe to equal any enemy.

Tathrin shivered, and not just from the lingering chill after the cloudless night. This was about as far as he could get from a carefree festival. Then again, how often had his family enjoyed a festival of peace and plenty? Only a handful of times that he could recall.

All too often his father had been forced to sell whatever precious liquors he'd garnered to raise the coin for Duke Garnot's quarterly levy. The duke's men would seize livestock and stores from anyone who couldn't pay what the reeve decreed. Tathrin's mother would offer what festival charity she could to those who'd been left destitute. Quarterstaves and fowling

bows to hand, his father and brothers by marriage would keep a nightly watch by the light of the capricious twin moons. Men bereft of home and hope all too often turned to banditry.

Sometimes a dispossessed man or a friendless widow would hammer on the gates of their local lord or lady's manor. They would demand justice, a tenant's rights from this noble who was in turn the sworn vassal of their duke. It never did any good, not that Tathrin heard. A good day saw such appeals fobbed off with insincere sympathy. On a bad day, the suppliant was lucky to escape with a horsewhipping instead of a noose.

And that was in a good year. If Duke Garnot was waging war against one of his neighbours, then his own forces and those of the retaliating duke could lay the country waste between them. Tathrin's mother comforted those mourning brothers, sons or husbands forcibly enrolled in Duke Garnot's militia, already fearing they were as good as dead. His father would retreat to the cellars with the other local guildsmen, grim-faced.

Not that Carluse suffered worse than any other of Lescar's six dukedoms, Tathrin reminded himself.

"Long lad!"

Only two people called him that. Sorgrad and Gren. Sorgrad was away and wouldn't return for a few days. Gren was supposed to be marching with him here at the tail end of

Captain-General Evord's retinue. But Gren preferred to range up and down the column, picking up gossip and grumbles, flirting with the women among the mercenaries and cadging whatever he could for the sackcloth provisions bag slung on his hip.

"You look as glum as a man with a three-day cake baking up his arse. Cheer up. Life will look sunnier once you've dropped some prunes in a ditch." Gren held out a rich orange lump flecked with green herbs. "Want some cheese?"

"Thanks." Tathrin had learned to eat whenever the chance arose.

"The scouts reckon they've seen something." Gren's words were muffled by his mouthful, his blue eyes bright with anticipation.

Tathrin considered the thickly leaved hedges flanking the track. They wouldn't be thinned till Aft-Winter. With no work in the fields and their valuable herds penned, farmers could repair the damage done by malice, misfortune or merely the past year's weather. At the moment, half a company of swordsmen could be lurking in the next field and he'd be hard put to see them, even though he was half a head taller than most. Gren barely topped his shoulder.

He frowned at the shorter man. "The captain-general doesn't expect to encounter Carluse forces today."

From the outset, Tathrin had been present for Evord's meetings with his lieutenants and the gallopers who carried his instructions to every one of the eighty-some companies that made up this army's full strength. After all, as far as anyone knew, Tathrin was Evord's personal clerk, his scholar's ring proof that his writing was legible and his reckoning reliable.

Gren ran a hand through his tousled hair, pale as newly sawn wood in the strengthening light. "Could be brave lads from that last village, slipping their leashes to take us on." His grin broadened. "To save their pretty kittens from a nosing by us dirty dogs."

Tathrin had noted every door and window was shuttered as they'd marched through the village with the sky still darker than a wood pigeon's wing. But it wouldn't be hard for someone who knew the local byways to slip out of a back door and overtake the marching column. Were men and boys hiding out here, clutching mattocks and hoes, believing they must fight to the death to defend their homes and families?

What would Carluse's commonalty know of this army and its true purpose? What would they fear when they saw the companies of blond uplanders like Gren? Mountain Men were rumoured to be brutal savages and marching mercenaries of any stripe only ever brought death and destruction. Until now.

“Arest and his Wyvern Hunters are in the vanguard.” Gren had lived a mercenary life long enough to lose every trace of his Mountain accent. He washed down his cheese with a swallow of ale. “Me, I’d kill them all and they can argue the roll of the runes with Saedrin when they reach the door to the Otherworld, but Arest wants you and Reher to come forward, in case we’re tripping over farmers. If it’s Duke Garnot’s militiamen, you two can fall back while we cut them down. All right?” Without waiting for Tathrin’s answer, Gren headed for the front of the column.

Tathrin looked quickly around for Reher. Gren wasn’t joking when he advocated clearing the road by killing everyone regardless. Arest wasn’t so ready with his swords but the Wyvern Hunters would still repulse any attack, determined to be safe instead of sorry. Hapless peasants would be slaughtered.

There. Reher was marching at the rear of Evord’s personal guard, the mounted swordsmen who made up the bulk of the captain-general’s retinue. That made sense. As a blacksmith, he kept all their horses shod. Would his other talents be called for today? Tathrin fervently hoped not.

Hurrying towards Reher, he felt his armour already weighing him down. Tathrin’s leather jerkin wasn’t as heavy as Gren’s chain mail, even with the steel plates sewn into its linen lining, but its insidious weight still sapped his strength.

Wearing a sheepskin jerkin over his chain-mail hauberk, Reher showed no sign of weariness. He never did and Tathrin didn’t think that was just because the man’s black beard hid so much of his face. Reher was enormous, taller than Tathrin, who seldom had to look up to anyone, and the smith’s arms were as well muscled as most men’s thighs. Tathrin’s own shoulders had broadened considerably after spending both halves of summer and the first half of autumn being drilled in swordplay by Gren. He still felt a weakling next to Reher. But their common Carluse blood gave them a bond he valued.

They weren’t so very far from Tathrin’s own home. Could he end up fighting boys he’d challenged to skip stones across a duck pond? Would he find men who’d clipped him around the ear for teasing a chained hound at the end of his sword?

“Reher!” Once he had the smith’s attention, he lowered his voice. “There’s movement ahead. Arest wants us with him in case it’s Woodsmen.”

Reher’s dark eyes glinted. Like Tathrin and most of the rest, he was dark-haired and deeply tanned after the long summer. “Let’s see.” He handed the rein leading the mule carrying his tools and supplies to another of the retinue’s non-combatants. Surprised, the man accepted it nevertheless. People didn’t argue with Reher.

They soon reached the head of the column. Captain-General Evord wasn’t a commander to hide away at the tail of his troops.

The fields gave way to rough grass dotted with thickets, too far from any village to be safely farmed. Tathrin loosened his blade in its scabbard, tension twisting his gut. This wasn’t a high road with the ground cleared for a bowshot on each side to foil bandits. Evord was marching his army along a little-used route to reach their intended foe, all the better to go undetected.

How were locals to know this mercenary army wasn’t the usual villainous rabble? It was bad enough when militiamen collected the ducal dues but they were Carluse men at least, even if they’d taken the duke’s coin to wear his boar’s head badge. Tathrin’s father had once slapped him for spitting at a militiaman, and not just to save him from the sergeant’s vengeance. Most enlisted to feed their families or because they’d lost all home and livelihood, he’d explained later. Taking what they must to meet the levy, they usually tried to leave a household with enough to survive the hungry winter seasons.

Mercenaries had no kith or kin in Lescar. If they were sent to collect the levy, they descended like ravening curs. All the duke’s reeve demanded of a company’s captain was the

money each household must pay. Whatever else the mercenaries took was theirs to keep. So farmers and craftsmen saw their houses ransacked for hoarded Caladhrian marks or Tormalin crowns.

The mercenaries readily handed over lead-debased Lescari silver for the ducal coffers. They were content to leave the copper pennies that the desperate cut into halves and quarters to make them do twice and four times their duty. The solid coin sent from beyond Lescar's borders would slake the dogs' lust for gambling, whores and drunkenness.

He remembered mercenaries coming to the Ring of Birches just once. Tathrin's father had bought them off with strong liquors saved for just such a crisis. His mother and sisters hid away upstairs. In his farrier's apron, Tathrin's eldest brother by marriage had barred the way, a hammer in one hand, an iron bar in the other. None of the mercenaries had challenged him.

Such men were cowards at heart, that's what his father had said. After these long seasons spent in their company, Tathrin would argue that point. If he ever got safe home and had the chance. He resolutely thrust such thoughts aside as they reached the front ranks of the column.

Men, and not a few women, were marching beneath a grey banner bearing a white gull. Their shields bore white wings with black tips, the paint old and chipped. A new design shone beneath them: a bright yellow quill. Tathrin was still trying to get the measure of such women, all warriors in their own right. Captain-General Evord had decreed no trail of whores and cooks would slow this army.

"There's Gren." Reher whistled a snatch of a flax-finch's song.

It took Tathrin a moment to spot the short mercenary sliding through the tangled undergrowth. Hearing Reher's whistle the second time, Gren glanced over his shoulder and beckoned them onwards.

Tathrin stooped, uncomfortably aware of his height. Reher showed no such concerns as they halted in the lee of a birch tree.

"What's the game?"

"A double handful lurking a hundred paces beyond that twisted thorn." Gren pointed. "Listen and you'll hear their stones rattling in their breeches, they're so scared."

"Where's Arest?" Tathrin couldn't believe the mercenary captain could hide behind anything less than a full-grown oak. If he wasn't as tall as Reher, he was even more massively built.

"He's playing the swordwing." Gren nodded to his offside. "Zeil and his mates are the corbies there." He jerked his head a second time. "Awn's the tufted owl and we're the spotted thrushes."

Fighting was just a game to these men. Like white raven, where men shifted little wooden trees and carved forest birds around the boards scored into his father's taproom tables. The other player must evade all such traps set for the mythical white bird. Who was going to win today? Tathrin wondered. How much blood would be spilled instead of ale?

Reher nodded, frowning. "We need to know who they are."

"Follow me." Gren darted down a narrow path worn by deer or foresters.

They had reached the edge of Duke Garnot's hunting preserve, where the price of a poached deer was a severed hand. Men living off the woods wouldn't be eager to explain themselves to anyone, Tathrin reflected.

"Stay behind me and stay out of trouble," Reher warned in a low tone.

They all spoke to him like that. Was it because he was still of an age when most youths were just ending their apprenticeships? Or because he wore a scholar's silver ring, bearing the arms of the city of Vanam, far away in distant Ensaimin? Tathrin had soon learned

mercenary swordsmen and craftsmen like Reher all assumed a university education eradicated most of a scholar's common sense.

Well, Tathrin knew woods and fields better than any townsman. An autumn morning should be full of birdsong. These thickets were silent, tense. Tathrin fixed his eyes on Gren's mailed back slipping through the bushes ahead. He strained his ears for some hint of anything bigger than a coney making its escape.

Ahead, a man dashed across open ground. Tathrin saw he wasn't wearing the cream surcoat of Arest's mercenaries, the black wyvern lashing its tail. He had no neckerchief of unbleached linen and bold yellow, the colours of Evord's army. He wasn't one of their own.

"Stand and identify yourself!" Reher bellowed.

In the thorn bushes, Gren halted, tense as a hunting hound.

The man stared horrified at Reher and Tathrin. Shouts erupted and someone screamed. Swords clashed in scuffles hidden by the trees. The man fled.

Gren stepped out and extended his arm, chest-high. The man couldn't stop himself. He crashed to the ground, flat on his back, gasping like a stranded fish. Gren barely wavered, his iron-studded boots planted solidly in the leaf litter. Just for good measure, he drove a steel-capped toe into the man's thigh. Tathrin winced.

Even before Gren had rebelled to become a mercenary, his muscles had been hardened by boyhood among the mines of the peaks and lakes, on long trips hunting fox and beaver.

The blond man looked down with satisfaction. "Floored like a market-day whore."

The man writhed on the ground, his shrieks pathetic as he struggled to catch his breath. He was a wretched specimen, left bandy-legged by a poverty-stricken childhood, chapped lips drawn back from rotted teeth. Tathrin wondered how long it was since he'd lost everything and taken to the forests.

"So what have we got here?" Reher planted a boot on the fallen man's chest and scowled down. "Not Duke Garnot's cully?"

He wasn't wearing Carluse black and white. Tathrin bent to rip open his grimy jerkin and the sweat-stained shirt beneath, in case he wore some hidden boar's head pendant. The duke's men might go in disguise but they'd always keep something to prove their allegiance in case they were threatened by one of their own.

"We're just woodsmen, you bastards," gasped the man.

Gren chuckled. "Or do you mean *Woodsmen*?"

Tathrin had been barely breeched when he'd first heard the rumours. Tales of supplies meant for the duke's mercenaries unaccountably seized on the road. An honest family who'd seen their livestock driven off found a flitch of bacon hidden in their woodpile, so the story went. A bag of coin had dropped down a widow's chimney, enough to save her son from the militia's clutches, her daughter from worse. All thanks to the Woodsmen, so the whispers said.

Now Tathrin knew the truth. He knew how much the unfortunate owed his father and his fellow guildsmen. They didn't just drink white brandy and abuse the duke's name when they met in the Ring of Birches' cellar. They did all the good attributed to the Woodsmen and more besides. Who was better placed than an innkeeper to encourage the tavern stories that kept Duke Garnot's men hunting for mythical Woodsmen, and to see a youthful packman or a fresh-faced cook's maid unobtrusively joining a merchant's wagons, heading for sanctuary among those who had long since fled Lescar for exile in cities like Vanam and Col?

But this sorry vagabond didn't look like any of the guildsmen's allies that Tathrin had seen slipping out of the inn's back door in the dead of night.

"How many of you?" Reher took his boot off the man's chest and hauled him up by his collar.

"I won't say." The man spat on Tathrin's boots.

Gren clouted the back of his head. "Mind your manners. He's here to help you."

"Him and the rest of you pissing thieves," the man retorted, unexpectedly bold.

One of Gren's many daggers was already in his hand. He gestured towards the man's crotch. "Do you want to keep your berries on their twig?"

"Don't." Tathrin saw their captive's fingers twitch towards his own knife. "You've no hope of making a fight of this."

The man subsided, seeing the Wyvern Hunters emerging from the thickets, sunlight glinting on their swords. They walked behind men wearing ragged and dirty clothes, some with bruised faces and shallow wounds to forearms and thighs. Most had their hands prudently clasped on top of their heads. To Tathrin's acute relief, he recognised none of them.

"That's them all flushed out." Arest waved a massive hand, broad as a spade. "Salo, run and tell the captain-general's adjutant."

Reher surveyed them. "Any of you from Carluse Town?"

"I am, and I can hear it in your voice." A man with a broken nose, too furious to be cowed, stepped forwards. "What are you doing with these dogs?"

"Do you know Master Ernout?" demanded Reher.

"Priest at the shrine of Saedrin?" The Carluse Town man was confused. "Of course."

But Tathrin could see he didn't know that the courageous old man was one of those priests conspiring with the master craftsmen to stop the abuse of honest men and women. Along with his niece, Failla. Tathrin allowed himself a moment to wonder how she was. When would he see her again? How long before peace allowed him to pursue their tentative understanding? If she hadn't already forgotten him.

"If you swear, all of you, not to raise a hand against us as we pass, we'll leave you unharmed." The smith looked around the vagabonds, his dark eyes intent. "I swear it by Saedrin's keys. If you doubt me, send to Master Ernout in Carluse Town and ask him if Reher's word can be trusted."

For an instant, Tathrin was horrified. Did Reher want to forewarn their enemy? Then he realised there was no way these men would give themselves up to Duke Garnot. Come to that, the chances were minimal of anyone here reaching Carluse Town before the duke knew exactly what threatened him.

"Will you take his word for it?" Arest enquired genially. "Or do we have to kill you?"

Now the ragged men's eyes were irresistibly drawn to the main track. The first companies were marching past. Tathrin saw the vagrants blanch as the tramp of the approaching column shook the ground beneath their feet. Well, Tathrin wouldn't have believed the army that Evord had assembled if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

The vagabonds muttered among themselves as they saw the battle standard fluttering above Evord's retinue. Against the unbleached linen, the circle of hands stitched from cloth of gold shone like a sunburst. Each fist grasped a symbol of honest toil, of learning, of home and family. This army was bringing peace for all Lescari to enjoy such things, or so Tathrin fervently hoped.

"But—" the broken-nosed man gaped at Reher, unable to frame a question.

"You'll know what it means soon enough," the smith promised him.

"Till then, why don't you run off and hide up your own arseholes?" Arest menaced the vagrants impersonally with his sword.

The ragged men swiftly melted into the woods. Tathrin could only hope they had the sense to stay lost.

"Come on." Reher began walking back to the column as Arest reassembled his men for their duties in the vanguard.

The smith glanced at Tathrin. "Your friends need to tell that Parnillesse man, Reniack, to spread his pamphlets and songs towards Carluse as fast as he can."

“Do you think these strays can read?” But Tathrin knew he was right.

“We can’t afford delay each time we trip over some runaway.” Reher lowered his voice to a rumble. “I could drive them off but I don’t want to show my hand.”

“No,” Tathrin said hastily.

Did anyone suspect the two of them shared more secrets than Carluse blood? If someone did, would explaining that Tathrin’s father and Reher both worked with the Woodsmen suffice?

Tathrin didn’t relish the thought of anyone else knowing he was the conduit for magical communications between Captain-General Evord and Losand and Sharlac, the towns they had already conquered. Because everyone knew magic was forbidden in Lescar’s ceaseless wars. The Archmage Planir was adamant, like all his predecessors. The bold, destructive power of wizardry hadn’t been seen on a Lescari battlefield in time out of mind.

Reher would be in more trouble than him, Tathrin thought guiltily. If the smith hadn’t studied at the Wizards’ Isle of Hadrumal, he was undeniably mageborn with the control over fire that arcane talent granted him. Tathrin was only the passive recipient of information from his friend Aremil. And Aremil was using Artifice, the ancient magic of mind and emotion. Planir had never claimed suzerainty over that.

Few people even remembered this subtle magic existed. It was the scholars of the ancient universities who had rediscovered the lost enchantments. Scholars were still diligently searching for more in the learned halls of Col and Vanam, which was how he and Aremil had heard of it. They had soon seen how it could serve them, as they had sought the best way to truly end Lescar’s enduring misery.

Would such arguments convince anyone outraged by Evord’s use of magic? Wouldn’t the dukes use such an accusation to rally men to their cause?

Tathrin sighed. It had seemed so simple when he and Aremil had discussed all this back in Vanam, merely intent on bringing peace to Lescar.

## *Aremil*

### **Losand, in the Lescari Dukedom of Carluse, Autumn Equinox Festival, Second Day, Morning**

He would feel much safer with the door locked. But then he would have to get up and open it when someone knocked, and they would wonder why he'd locked it. Anyway, what was he afraid of? Aremil forced himself to assess the situation as dispassionately as the scholar he claimed to be. With the rigorous logic he and Tathrin had both learned in Vanam's university halls.

Captain-General Evord's men had driven Duke Garnot's foulmouthed and vicious mercenaries clean out of Losand. The town's guildmasters were recruiting an honest militia under the guidance of Evord's lieutenant, Dagaran. He was another mercenary come all the way from Solura, a man of similar mettle to the Captain-General. Aremil himself was safely accommodated on the upper floor of this merchants' exchange. How could he admit to feeling imperilled in the heart of this solidly walled town with guards on every gate and the fighting moving further away with every passing day? He couldn't. Not without sounding like an arrant coward, and his pride wouldn't stand for that.

Aremil looked out of the window, at the mercenary army's banner flapping in the wind. He smiled crookedly. It wasn't as bright as Evord's. Only the captain-general's banner bore the insignia in cloth of gold.

Trust Master Gruit to spend his coin on such a flamboyant gesture. The wine merchant had a fine instinct for the dramatic. His impassioned denunciation of his fellow merchants in Vanam, attacking those of Lescari blood who let their kinsmen suffer, had been the first toppling rock that set this whole landslide in motion. When Aremil and Tathrin had trusted Gruit with their own longing to see peace in Lescar, he had proved a staunch ally.

Now he was invaluable, organising the astonishing quantities of supplies that the marching army needed.

Aremil's smile faded, his thin face returning to its customary immobility. What would Gruit have to say when the dust had settled? After their careful planning had brought blood and death to Lescar in the name of peace? He would have welcomed the chance to talk to the older man, but Gruit had already left for Abray, the town commanding the crucial junction where the Great West Road crossed from Caladhria into Lescar. Someone had to persuade the merchants and barons of Caladhria to sit on their hands while Captain-General Evord waged this campaign. Gruit was undeniably the best man to do it.

But it was hard on them all, Aremil felt. When everyone's dearest wish was to celebrate festival with family and loved ones, all those who'd united in Vanam to plot this overthrow of Lescar's dukes had scattered to the four winds, even before the fires consuming Sharlac Town stopped smouldering.

Gruit was on the road heading west towards Abray, with Failla and Kerith the dour scholar and aetheric adept. Tathrin and Gren were marching with Captain-General Evord's army. Sorgrad was currently escorting Charoleia and her maid eastwards to Tormalin. The beautiful intelligence broker would use her formidable web of friends and allies there to dissuade the Emperor from interfering.

Branca was with them and Aremil missed her most of all. Did Tathrin know? Aremil felt every pang of his friend's longing for Failla when he wrought Artifice's enchantments to reach through the aether to tell Tathrin all the news from the territory they had already conquered, and to find out all that the captain-general's army was doing.

Aremil missed Branca so sorely. But did she miss him? He couldn't tell. She was so much more skilled with aetheric enchantment, his teacher in the ancient discipline, even if

she was a few years his junior. So her innermost thoughts were always wrapped in veils impenetrable to him. Perhaps that was for the best. He was almost afraid to find out what she truly felt.

Which was ridiculous. Had he spent his life schooling his intellect only for the discipline of rational thought to fail him now? Aremil reminded himself how Vanam's university mentors rebuked anyone falling prey to unreasoned emotion. Once the source of any unease was identified, they insisted, it could be dismissed with logical argument.

Aremil decided he didn't mind Tathrin knowing that his respect for Branca was deepening to affection. Though he didn't particularly want the older scholar Kerith to know, nor yet their younger ally Jettin. He barely knew either man. But Aetheric adepts were thin on the ground, and those with Lescari blood, who could be recruited to their cause, were rarer still.

The advantage they offered this rebellion was beyond price. To be able to communicate across countless leagues in the blink of an eye could make the difference between victory and defeat. Artifice's enchantments could reach instantly through the aether, that mysterious medium that somehow linked mind to mind, while their foes' letters were limited to the flight of courier doves or the speed of the fastest horse.

If the price of Kerith's help, and Jettin's, was the two men learning more than Aremil cared to share of himself, it would have to be paid. It was little enough to ask, when so many others would pay with blood and pain.

Aremil only hoped Tathrin would come through unscathed. And Jettin, who was riding with a different contingent of the army, he recalled hastily. At least Branca would be safe, well away from any fighting, enjoying Tormalin's affluent calm. One day, Lescar would benefit from just such prosperity and all this cataclysm would be worth it.

Aremil looked around the room. Losand's merchants had violently evicted the clerk who'd recorded their dealings for the duke's reeve. The shelves were empty of all but a few scraps of ribbon. The chest for his ledgers gaped open, its locks smashed.

A draught played across his neck and Aremil shivered. His sitting room in Vanam had been cosy and warm. Lyrlen, ever attentive, would have lit a fire before he got up. He'd be at leisure to pursue his studies, only interrupted by her bringing his meals or by Tathrin visiting to drink a glass of wine.

Perhaps that was why he felt so uncertain. He was simply homesick. Well, he was in Losand by his own choice, so he had better apply himself to the matters in hand. There was plenty to do without sitting here moping.

Aremil looked at the door. He could find out how both Tathrin and Branca fared using his Artifice. But Branca didn't expect him to contact her before evening. He wasn't due to send his thoughts in search of Tathrin until the noon chimes, when Evord's lieutenant would guard the door in person. Of all the secrets their plots depended on, aetheric magic was the most closely guarded. They could not risk any duke's spies finding out.

He looked at the timepiece on the wall. The brass arrow seemed to have barely moved down the long scale dividing the daylight into ten equal measures. At least at this season, with both For- and Aft-Autumn bracketing the Equinox, the chimes of daylight and darkness were the same. Summer's long hours would be far greater torment. Winter's short days need not be contemplated. One way or another, Evord had said, their venture must be concluded before any timepiece's faceplate was changed with the turn of For-Winter.

Could they do that? True, they had conquered one dukedom already, but Sharlac had been little challenge. Duke Moncan had withdrawn into his castle seasons ago, to mourn his dead son. His vassals and militias had grown soft and complacent. Aremil didn't think any of the remaining five dukes would be caught unawares, not once news of Sharlac's fate reached them.

He hurriedly smoothed his expression as the door flew open, crashing against an empty shelf.

“Fair festival.” Reniack bowed with a flourish worthy of the Tormalin Emperor’s court. “What do you think? Not bad for the son of a Carif whore?”

“Fair festival to you.” Aremil inclined his head stiffly. “You look more elegant than last night.”

Reniack wore a blue doublet with silver buttons over a lace trimmed shirt. Jewels on the knee-buckles of his breeches might be sapphires, though Aremil thought they were more probably glass. His snowy stockings were immaculate.

The burly man chuckled. “Last night I drank to Duke Garnot’s ill-health with the scaff and raff of Losand’s gutters. A ragged shirt and a charcoal-burner’s jerkin made me a prince among the spigot-suckers.”

Aremil refused to react to the vulgarity. “And today?”

Reniack pressed a hand to his barrel chest, his expression lofty, his short beard jutting. “I join the sober elders and goodwives of Losand among the midday rites at Drianon’s shrine.”

“What do you have to share with them?” Aremil asked sardonically.

Reniack grinned and reached inside his doublet for a sheaf of papers. “I honour Drianon as goddess of harvest but let’s not forget her care for hearth and home. Her sacred eagle will always fight for her eaglets.”

Aremil studied the crisply printed pamphlet that Reniack laid on the desk. The engraving showed a ferocious and somehow indefinably female eagle clawing at a polecat which was sneaking along a crag towards a nest of anxious chicks.

He looked up at Reniack. “Is it my imagination or does that polecat look like Duchess Tadira?”

“Women hate her more than they fear her husband. They resent their husbands’ toil buying her silk gowns to drape her bony buttocks, putting jewels around her scrawny neck.” Reniack’s voice thickened with his own loathing. “If we persuade the ordinary women that we’re fighting for their sake, they’ll persuade the men, once the bed curtains are drawn and they’re hoping for open thighs.”

Reniack’s hand strayed to his brown hair, as if to brush it behind his ears. Aremil saw him curb the gesture. The astute pamphleteer wouldn’t want the staid folk of Losand wondering at his ragged earlobes. They wouldn’t be impressed to learn that the Duke of Parnillesse had ordered Reniack’s ears nailed to the wood when he was pilloried for nailing letters to shrine doors in the dead of night, accusing the duke and his brothers of conspiring to poison their father.

The man had spent years stirring up hatred against Parnillesse’s duke, concocting inflammatory pamphlets, writing more measured arguments for market-day broadsheets, even turning tavern songs to his purpose, and recruiting a small army of rabble-rousers to help him. His loathing was implacable. That Carluse’s Duchess Tadira was Duke Orlin’s sister was sufficient to earn her Reniack’s spite.

Aremil was glad he had no cause to reach into Reniack’s thoughts, to learn what prompted such rancour. He was also glad he was so practised at hiding his own emotions. He really didn’t like Reniack, with his coarse language and cynical view of humanity. Though he had no reason to mistrust the pamphleteer.

Reniack had proven time and again that he could keep the conspiracy’s secrets as close as his own skin. If any duke’s spies learned they were using Artifice, it wouldn’t be through him.

The pamphleteer had other concerns. “Dagaran said you wanted to see me. What’s the latest news from Tathrin?”

“The army is making steady progress through the forest towards Carluse. They’ve been encountering runaways and vagabonds all through the woods,” Aremil explained. “Do you have anyone to send to explain what Evord’s army intends? The last thing the captain-general needs is skirmishing delaying his advance.”

“Tell Dagaran to give me a handful of fast horses and my men will spread the word all the way to Carluse.” Reniack narrowed his eyes. “Can I throw Failla’s treachery in the duke’s face just yet?”

“No!” Though Aremil didn’t know why he was shocked. Reniack never attempted to hide his lack of scruple.

“It might knock Duke Garnot off balance, if everyone knew his whore ran off and faked her own death rather than rub bellies with him any longer.” The pamphleteer chuckled. “If his militiamen are gossiping around their campfires, they’re not sleeping or making ready to fight.”

“No.” Aremil tried to think of some argument to dissuade him. That it would distress Tathrin wouldn’t weigh a pennyworth with Reniack. Nor would the pamphleteer much care that Failla was desperate to stay hidden, fearing Duke Garnot’s reprisals when he found out she had long since betrayed his secrets to Carluse’s guildmasters’ plots.

Reniack shrugged. “That’s an arrow we can keep in our quiver for another day. When does Tathrin think they’ll join battle?”

“Evord expects to force Duke Garnot into a fight tomorrow.”

Reniack nodded, eyes distant. “How soon can we realistically have news of the outcome?” He answered his own question. “If we say we had it by courier bird, someone will ask who gave us doves hatched in Losand. How far is it to Carluse? Forty-five leagues? The battle will be closer than that. A man on a fast horse could do it in a day and a half—”

“Only if he didn’t mind the horse dropping dead,” Aremil objected.

Reniack waved away that concern. “I’ll have something ready for the first day of Aft-Autumn. A little shock to wake up the townsfolk after they’ve slept off their last festival drunk.”

“But we don’t know what will happen.” Aremil coughed on his indignation.

“We’ll win, or we’ll do well enough to claim we’ve won. We have to.” Reniack nodded at Aremil’s crutches, leaning against the side of the desk. “Otherwise we’d all better take to our heels, as best we can.”

“I imagine I’ll find a seat in a coach,” Aremil said curtly.

Reniack wasn’t listening, the jerk of the brass arrow on the timepiece catching his eye. “I’ll get some of my lads on the road before I head for the shrine. I may even breathe a prayer to Drianon,” he added mockingly. “I’ll call back tomorrow evening and you can tell me all Tathrin’s news.”

“Very well.” Aremil nodded as the Parnillesse man departed with a cursory wave.

With his broad shoulders and sturdy build, Reniack didn’t look as if he’d suffered a day’s illness in his life. Was that why he disliked him, because he made no allowance for Aremil’s infirmities, the lifelong curse of his near-fatal birth?

But Aremil could hardly complain. He wanted people to see him as more than some cripple with twisted legs, weak eyes and hesitant speech. That was why he had put himself through the torment of the journey here from Vanam. That was why he was so determined to master the secrets of Artifice. If he couldn’t take up a sword like Tathrin, he’d serve the cause of peace in Lescar some other way.

Was he more afraid that Reniack would discover his true birth? As long as the pamphleteer thought Aremil was merely the crippled son of some minor noble, sent to Vanam to live in seclusion, all he had to endure were barbed reminders that humble men’s

labours paid for his idleness. What would Reniack say if he knew Aremil was in fact the eldest son of Duke Secaris of Draximal?

Would he suffer the full force of the man's contempt for all those born to rank and privilege? Or would Reniack condemn Duke Secaris for discarding his own child once it was clear Aremil would never walk unaided, never ride a horse or command an army?

What might Branca learn about his unknown family as her journey took her through Draximal? About the mother and father he couldn't even remember. About Lord Cassat, the acknowledged heir who was so widely praised as handsome and accomplished. Did he even know he had once had a brother?

Aremil shifted in his uncomfortable chair. The cushions he relied on had slipped and there was no one to ease his cramps with warm flannel and relaxing tinctures. Was that why he was so out of sorts? Because he was in such pain? Lyrten, his nurse since birth, would have known how to soothe his discomforts but she was all the way back in Vanam. He shouldn't have been so ready to rebuke her when she'd warned what tribulations he was bringing on himself.

Reniack said his life had been sheltered. Aremil could hardly deny it. The only Lescari commoner he knew was Tathrin and that friendship was mere chance. They'd never have met if the poorer man hadn't needed to work as a wealthier scholar's servant, to earn his bed and board as he pursued his own studies.

But was he biased as well as uninformed because his knowledge of human nature had been culled from books and plays, as Reniack had once accused? Aremil honestly didn't believe so. With no one to see his drawn face twisting grotesquely, Aremil allowed himself a scowl. He had plenty of reasons to be wary of Reniack that had nothing to do with his personal dislike.

Similarly, he didn't mistrust Failla just because she'd spent the past few years as Duke Garnot's mistress. As Tathrin had said, she'd risked her neck to pass the duke's secrets to her uncle, the Carluse priest. He distrusted her because she'd so thoroughly deceived them all.

She'd borne Duke Garnot's bastard daughter and no one had known that, not even the duke. Desperate to escape and reclaim the girl from the cousin who was rearing her, Failla had told no one when the Duke of Triolle's spy had coerced her into giving up ciphered letters detailing the guildsmen's plots and even hinting at the Vanam conspiracy. There was no telling what damage that might have done, and might still do.

Well, Failla was in Abray with Master Gruit now. With Kerith, who'd used his own Artifice to read her thoughts and uncover her treachery. She could do no more harm and her knowledge of the Carluse guildsmen's plots might still serve their rebellion. They couldn't afford to discard her. If Duke Garnot's men ever caught her, torture would spill out all she knew.

He would continue to trust his instincts, Aremil decided. After all, if he was inclined to blind prejudice, he would never have trusted Branca. She didn't have Failla's beauty to recommend her, and she'd made no attempt to win him with charm. Aremil had had to challenge her scorn for Lescar's endless quarrels. Albeit of Lescari blood, she was Vanam born and bred, in the humblest of circumstances. She'd seen no reason to involve herself in futile strife so far away. Until he had convinced her with scholarly argument, appealing to the intellect that had raised her from a life of toil in Vanam's lower town to studying in the upper town's halls and libraries, even if she had to scrub their floors to pay her way.

Aremil sighed heavily. Failla was in Abray and Branca was on her way to Toremal. Reniack was running loose doing who knew what and Lady Derenna had gone off on some errand of her own, without even telling them when to expect her return. At least he knew where Nath the mapmaker and Welgren the apothecary were. Both were following the army, confident that their different skills would soon prove useful.

All he could do was sit and fret, time hanging heavy on his feeble hands. Could the threads of their plotting possibly hold together long enough for Captain-General Evord to defeat all the dukes on the field of battle?