

Irons in the Fire

Book One of The Chronicles of the Lescari Revolution

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Tathrin

The City of Vanam, Northern Ensaimin, Spring Equinox Festival, Third Day, Evening

He stood still in the midst of the chaos. Fear threw his wits into utter confusion, robbing his legs of any strength.

“Make way! Make way!”

Voices bellowed, brutal with panic. Festival garlands of green leaves and spring flowers were knocked from doors and cornices to be crushed underfoot.

Sweat beaded Tathrin’s forehead. His heart was racing, breath catching painfully in his throat. He felt as if he were choking.

This was how it had been when the gutters had run red and the agonies of the dying had echoed around the houses. Their cries had mingled with the murderous exultation of their assailants, so it was impossible to know which way to run for safety, or which way would take you straight onto the killers’ sword-points.

Men and women, old and young, fought blindly to outstrip the others. There was simply no escape from the fleeing crowd confined between the tall wood and brick houses. Screams of pain pierced the hubbub. Tathrin saw a burly man trip on a loose cobblestone and fall to be trampled by uncaring boots.

A glimpse of a woman’s stockings, petticoats hitched high as she jumped over the fallen man, recalled the dreadful sights he’d seen. The sobbing girl cradling the half-severed head of her lover, her brother or merely some friend. Whoever he had been, her skirts were sodden with his lifeblood, her bare legs exposed for all to see.

Hooves scraped on the cobbles. Horsemen were coming.

He’d seen what mounted warriors could do. Riding down the helpless and unarmed townsfolk, slashing at unprotected heads and shoulders with their heavy swords. Driving their frenzied steeds to trample those lying injured in the open. The leader’s white mount had been splashed with so much blood it had looked like a painted sorrel.

He had to move. Blindly struggling, he fought his way up the sloping street, away from the approaching riders. A vicious elbow dug into his ribs and a hobnailed shoe scraped down his anklebone, the sudden pain excruciating.

The only way to escape their murderous rampage was to find some recess too deep for their swords to reach, some alleyway so narrow that even their whip-scarred horses would balk at entering it.

Dread lending strength to his already impressive height, Tathrin forced a path to the dubious shelter offered by the overhang of a house’s upper floors. As soon as he reached it, though, he regretted the choice. Now he was trapped, the carved wood of the frontage digging painfully into his back.

“Saedrin save us!”

Two women shrieked hysterically, grabbing for their children as the swirling confusion of the crowd threatened to tear them apart. One of them, a little maid, wailed, her festival dress torn and fouled. Tathrin would have gone to help them but he couldn’t move, crushed as he was against the building.

Saedrin had saved precious few before. The mounted mercenaries had shown the shrine of even the greatest of gods no respect. Throwing blazing torches in among those who'd vainly sought shelter there, the murderous scum had slammed the door and barred it shut. Every last person inside had died, their charred corpses crushed amid the funeral urns of their forebears when the shrine's roof had collapsed.

He heard a horse's whinny rise above some bestial noise halfway between a snarl and a squeal.

"Fair festival and Trimon's grace, if you please." A robust townsman and his wife, both too stout and too canny to succumb to unnecessary alarm, pushed past, arms linked as they made their way composedly up the street.

Others who'd been braving the muck of the cobbles joined those crowding the paved walk in front of shops and taverns.

Tathrin finally saw what was happening.

"Make way for Talagrin's hunters!"

Cheerful voices shouted appeals in the hunting god's name. Their exuberant horns were deafening.

"Go shit on your own doorstep!" a surly householder shouted from an upper window, prompting laughter and agreement from the crowd.

A half-grown russet pig was running up the sloping street, two men on horses harrying it with lances. Already bleeding from gashes on its shoulders and hindquarters, the infuriated beast was unable to decide where to attack first.

"Get back! Get back!"

Budding sprigs of ash pinned to their tunics, hunters on foot rushed up to level sturdier spears and make an impromptu barrier between the infuriated beast and the jostling crowd.

Others stood ready, their broad blades pointing downwards.

"You kill the beast and welcome, but don't you leave blood and guts spread all over here," a stern matron warned belligerently from her doorstep, "bringing rats and dogs to plague us!"

Some onlookers were cheering. More were still doing their best to leave the perilous hunt behind. Even a young pig could inflict murderous injuries.

Squealing with fury, the pig lunged, only for the nearest sweating horse to dance nimbly aside. The second hunter took his chance and stabbed at the pig's rump. The tormented beast whirled around, screaming with ear-splitting ferocity. The hunter wrenched his mount's head sideways to urge it out of the way. Bloody foam dripped from the horse's mouth as it half-jumped, half-stumbled on the slippery cobbles. The first hunter dug his spurs into his steed's sweating flanks. As the pig charged, he drove his lance deep between its neck and its bristling shoulders.

A cheer of relief went up as the pig fell, thrashing and squealing. One of the foot-hunters hurried up to dispatch the hapless animal with a thrust to the heart.

"Fair festival!" The first hunter waved his bloody lance exuberantly. "Fresh meat for the paupers' feast at the shrine of Ostrin!"

The cheers grew more enthusiastic as the crowd flowed back into the street.

Tathrin didn't feel the carved wooden post digging into his shoulder. He wasn't hearing the hunters' congratulations. Shrieks and curses and dying pleas still echoed in his ears. The scent of men's lives spilled out across a little town's market square filled his nostrils, not the mingled sweat and perfumes of this sprawling city's holiday crowd.

Instead of the hunters' jerkins bright with new ash leaves, Tathrin saw ragged leather tunics and chain mail clotted with muck and blood. He had cowered behind a stinking privy as the riders had passed by. Stained rags bound gashes on their arms, their legs, even their heads, but none of them seemed to care. All with their naked swords still gory in their hands,

any one of them would still have killed him as soon as look at him. All he had been able to do was hide like a frightened child.

“Tathrin! Stay there, lad!”

Master Wyess’s triangular black velvet cap headed towards him, fighting against the flow of people. If Wyess was a head shorter than Tathrin, he was broader in the shoulder and made short work of clearing a path.

At least being taller than most meant he was easy to spot in a crowd, Tathrin thought numbly. But he could not have moved even if no one had been standing in his way. Recollection of that earlier slaughter still paralysed him.

“Come on, lad, let’s try a different route.” The burly merchant puffed as he reached him.

Tathrin clenched his fists to stop his hands shaking. Why had this hunt brought back memories he’d taken such pains to stifle? He hadn’t even dreamed of that appalling day for more than a year.

“No harm done and that’s one less hog menacing the streets.” Wyess’s voice slowed, concerned. “Lad? Are you all right? You’re as white as my lady’s linen.”

“Yes.” Tathrin cleared his throat. “Yes, Master. I’m fine.”

“Let’s get there before all the good wine’s drunk, then.” Wyess urged him back down the sloping street.

Tathrin was about to ask why they were retracing their steps. Belatedly he saw that the way ahead was blocked by the hunters and their horses. Some of the householders had emerged to castigate the men trying to lash the pig’s trotters together before slinging it on a spear for carrying triumphantly away. As he turned and followed Wyess, he swallowed, trying to ease the dryness in his throat. The shivers running down his back were slow to fade.

He looked up. With every storey of Vanam’s tall houses built out further into the streets than the one below, only the barest strip of twilight sky was visible above. Torches already burned in nearby brackets. With the Lesser Moon absent and the Greater Moon rapidly shrinking through its last handful of days, this festival’s nights were dark ones. The flames struck a gleam from the golden brooch on Master Wyess’s hat.

“This way.” Wyess caught Tathrin’s elbow to draw him into an alleyway. There was no gainsaying him. The merchant was still strong enough to wrestle the barrels of furs in his warehouse should the need arise.

The cutting between two buildings might originally have been wide enough for two men to pass each other. Now Tathrin found his shoulders brushing plastered walls on both sides where the wooden-framed houses had warped and settled so closely together over the generations.

They reached a small courtyard with darkened windows looking down on three sides. In a door’s recess on the far side, Tathrin saw shadows surround a candle lantern. Pewter clinked and a girl’s giggles gave the lie to her coy protests. Not love, just festival’s passing pretence of devotion. Such sweet nonsense wouldn’t silence the echoes of distant death still ringing in Tathrin’s head. He knew. He’d tried.

“Still got your purse and your ring?” Wyess pounded loudly on a solid wooden gate set in the wall on the fourth side of the courtyard. “Mind them both. The city’s full of thieves at festival and any number could be drinking in here.”

That prosaic reminder recalled more immediate concerns. Tathrin felt the solid silver of his scholar’s ring secure on his finger and the discreet lump of his purse belted not merely inside his doublet but within his shirt. “Yes, sir.”

A hatch in the wooden gate slid open. “Who’s knocking?” someone growled in the darkness beyond.

“Lastel Wyess.”

“Fair festival to you, Master.”

The unseen voice turned cheery and Tathrin heard the bolts withdrawn.

“Come to drink Raeponin’s health?” A grizzled man with a hefty cudgel opened the gate.

“Not tonight.” Wyess shook a coin out of his glove and tossed it to the porter. “My compliments to Master Avin, but we’re just cutting through.”

As Tathrin followed Wyess through the narrow garden and into a paved yard, the damp scents of brick and soil were the closest he’d come to a breath of fresh air all day. The quiet after the cacophony of the festival streets prompted happier memories of peaceful days at home. He gathered his wits, resolutely setting aside the pig’s death and the unwelcome recollections it had forced on him. “Master, where are we?”

“Taking the back way into the Dancing Stoat.” Wyess laid a hand on the latch of a door. “Start learning your way around the back alleys of the lower town.” He turned to wag a finger at him. “Make some friends among the lesser classes, especially among our countrymen. I’m relying on you.”

“I know, Master.” Tathrin found it ironic. He’d spent two years striving to soften his Lescari accent, finding it so often disdained by the university’s mentors. Then he had completed his studies and been forced to look for employment, and his despised birthplace had proved to be as much of an asset in Wyess’s eyes as his proficiency with mathematics.

Although Wyess’s own voice no longer betrayed his Lescari origins. Did he ever think of whatever family he had left behind? Tathrin wondered. Did he recall the constant fear and uncertainty? The quarter days when paying the ducal levies meant everyone going hungry to bed? There were no festival feasts for paupers in Lescar.

But who was he to judge Wyess? How many days went past when he barely spared a thought for his own mother and father, for his sisters? Ashamed, Tathrin hurried through the busy kitchen after the merchant.

The noise in the vast taproom struck him like a physical blow. Every conversation seemed to be trying to outdo the ones on either side. Rune stones were cast in trios across the scarred tables, gamblers shouting blessings to Halcarion or pained laments that the fickle goddess’s favour had deserted them.

“Fair festival! Come and join us!” Cries of delight from all sides greeted Wyess. Gesturing hands invited him to sit, brandished flagons slopping incautious ale.

“Fair dealings and Raeponin’s blessings!”

As far as Tathrin could see, Wyess acknowledged every hail with a cheery smile and a wave. The merchant didn’t slow, though, as he threaded through the crowded tables and benches. They soon emerged onto the wide thoroughfare in front of the tavern.

Tathrin took a moment to orientate himself. As the lower town sprawled around the great lake’s margin, it wasn’t always easy to see the slope of the land towards the water. It had been much simpler when he was living in the upper town. Streets either had to scale the undulating hills or bridge the steep gullies between them.

“That’s saved us fighting through the crush around Misaen’s shrine,” Wyess said with satisfaction, straightening his hat, “but you do need to visit the booksellers before the end of festival. Buy a good book of maps and start making notes in it. A sound one, mind. The cheap ones are only good for wiping your arse.”

“Yes, Master.” Tathrin focused resolutely on the challenges that lay ahead this evening. He mustn’t let anyone think him a fool, even if his two years at the university hadn’t given him half the knowledge he was going to need in Master Wyess’s furtrading business. These first two days in the merchant’s employ had already taught him that much.

How could Vanam’s scholars be so wilfully ignorant? Granted, they grudgingly respected their rival university in the southern city-state of Col and acknowledged some of

the learned societies in Selerima and Drede. Beyond that, the mentors largely ignored the towns threaded along the high roads. Unless one of them happened to be the birthplace of some particularly notable scholar.

Whereas even the junior clerks in Wyess's counting-house could list every trader's speciality, not just in the major towns like Peorle and Drede, but in every remote corner of this vast region between the western forests and those countries to the east that had once made up the long-fallen Old Tormalin Empire. At least, that's what it felt like to Tathrin. Furthermore, as they laboured for the master merchants, those apprentices so scorned by the scholars of the upper town learned to cannily negotiate the complex web of obligation and alliance connecting the Guilds in Vanam with trading partners everywhere. And how to judge the likely outcome of a prospective business deal.

At least that was something Tathrin had learned from his father. A good innkeeper gets the measure of a man inside a few moments. But he was starting to wish he'd had the leisure to spend more time in the lower town when he was studying at the university. Then he might not have felt at such a disadvantage at that moment.

"Write down everything you've heard when we get home tonight, before you go to sleep." Wyess shot Tathrin a glance as a coach rattled past. "We'll discuss your notes tomorrow and I'll tell you what you've missed."

"Thank you." Tathrin recalled one of the other clerks assuring him that Wyess would examine him as closely as any of the mentors he'd studied under. Only the merchant's tests could happen at any time, not just at the quarter-year festivals, and mostly without notice.

As they crossed the high road something stung him sharply on the cheek. As he slapped a startled hand to his face, more pale missiles pattered on his chest and fell to the ground.

"Enough!" Wyess waved a hand at some giggling boys clutching lengths of reed. He chuckled as he tossed them a handful of halved and quartered pennies. "I take it there are no rains of peas at this season back home."

"No one would be so wasteful," Tathrin said curtly. Nor could anyone afford to discard cut-pieces, even if the Vanamese scorned tokens of such slight value.

Wyess halted and laid a hand on the younger man's arm.

"Have you truly never come down to the lower town for any festival?"

"No, Master, on my honour." Tathrin cleared his throat. "The university prefects advise students to keep to the upper town."

"Short of a riot that gives them the excuse to lock the citadel gates, they can hardly insist." Wyess regarded Tathrin for a moment. "So you were a student who abided by the prefecture's wishes." He started walking again, chuckling. "That must make you as rare as a fox with no taste for ducks."

"I travelled home for any festival I could." Which was true, even if he'd only ever got home for Winter Solstice. It took him all year to save up the price of a seat on a courier's coach.

The merchant nodded. "Ah, yes, of course you'd want to see your family."

Tathrin hoped the shadows hid the colour rising from his collar. He didn't like being less than honest with Wyess, but telling him the full truth would mean questions, and avoiding awkward answers could mean lying outright and he really didn't want to do that.

"Scented hair powders." As the street broadened into a marketplace, peddlers eased their laden trays through the crowds. Horns and drums sounded above the din of the milling throng, different tunes rising and falling, competing with exuberant snatches of song.

"Ribbons and combs." A huckster planted herself in front of Wyess. Her hair was ornately dressed to display the wares in her basket. "A fairing for your lady?"

"Not today," Wyess said courteously.

Tathrin recalled the other clerks' gossip as they combed their hair and polished their shoe-buckles. If he'd thought they might envy him, the newcomer, for having this duty as Master Wyess's attendant tonight, he'd soon learned different.

The other clerks had very different amusements in mind. His gaze followed the huckster as she accosted another prospective customer.

"Ribbons and combs is all that she's selling, in case you're wondering," Wyess commented. "If you're fancying a touch of lace, don't go looking for it on the streets, especially not at festival time. I can introduce you to an accommodation house with nice clean girls."

"No, Master." Embarrassed, Tathrin tried to explain. "I was just thinking I might buy some ribbons for my sisters." He should have thought of that sooner, he chided himself.

If he hadn't been so wrapped up in moving from his old lodging in the upper town to his new place in Master Wyess's counting-house.

Wyess didn't hear him, intent on pressing on. They soon reached the portico of the largest hall on the far side of the marketplace.

"Timing is the key to so many matters of trade, my lad." The fur merchant looked up with satisfaction as the bells in the tower united to proclaim the first of the night's ten hours. "Arrive too early at a gathering and people will think you don't have enough business to occupy your time. Arriving late smacks of disorganisation, and no explanation for that will do you any credit."

He shrugged to settle his mossy green mantle on his shoulders and smoothed the sable fur trimming the front. His amiable face turned serious.

"Now, lad, this gathering will be mostly those of us with Lescari blood. As a rule, we've left all those quarrels behind us, but sometimes wine reminds a man of old grudges. Think before you speak, and don't give too much of yourself away."

"Yes, Master." Tathrin tugged at the hem of his new grey doublet to make sure it hadn't ridden up to reveal his wellworn shirt.

The gates to the lower floors were all locked, the storerooms where visiting merchants could warehouse their goods securely barred. Only the stairway to the upper hall was open. A handful of Furriers' Guild servants waited by the door, warming their hands over a blazing fire-basket.

"Master Wyess, Raeponin grant you fair festival." The steward bowed low before studying Tathrin. "And this is...?"

Tathrin noted the quarterstaffs propped just inside the door. These men were ready to deter anyone keen to sample the Guild's hospitality without an invitation.

"Tathrin Sayron, newly accepted into my counting-house," Wyess said with satisfaction. "A scholar sealed by the university this last Winter Solstice."

"Master Scholar." The steward inclined his head.

"Fair festival to you." Tathrin bowed.

Wyess started up the stairs as a coach drew to a halt behind them. "Right, let's see who's already here."

Tathrin took a deep breath and followed.

The Furriers' Guildhall, in the City of Vanam, Spring Equinox Festival, Third Day, Evening

Most of the merchants invited to this festival gathering apparently shared Wyess's opinion about arriving nicely to time. As Tathrin reached the top of the broad stair opening onto the long hall, he saw that four other men and two shrewd-faced women had also just arrived. They were still handing their cloaks and gloves to their own attendants.

"Shall I take your hat, Master?"

"No, we'll only forget to fetch it back at the end of the evening. Why do you think I said not to bother with a cloak?" Wyess was scanning the room. "Let's see what we can learn before dinner's served."

If Wyess hadn't told him this was an occasion for the Lescari living in the city to gather together, Tathrin would hardly have known it. All were dressed in Vanam fashions, few of the overlapping conversations betraying accents learned elsewhere.

As the merchant headed purposefully for a trio of richly dressed men, one of their attendants whispered in his master's ear. The man broke off from whatever he was saying. "Wyess, it's good to see you."

"Fair festival, Malcot. How's business in the cloth trade?" Wyess smiled and bowed, so Tathrin did the same.

The first merchant shrugged russet shoulders, his broadcloth mantle embroidered with scarlet. "Ask me when I know how many customers haven't settled their accounts by the fifth day of festival."

"Garvan, Kierst, fair festival." Wyess looked at the other two men. "Any news you care to share?"

"I hear the ice has broken above Ferile," a thin-faced individual in a black velvet robe observed.

Tathrin knew he must remember that. It meant that the first boatloads of raw skins would be coming down the river from the mountains. The stink of tanning and curing would soon hang over the city, reaching even the university's lofty halls when the wind was in the wrong quarter.

"There's talk of another levy for repairs on the roads around Hanchet, Trimon curse it." The third man scowled. "Why aren't the Hanchet Guilds bearing the cost? That's what I'd like to know."

"Spend a penny to earn a gold mark." Malcot the cloth merchant was philosophical. "We can't shift our goods if our wagons can't roll."

"We smiths will be paying," the black-gowned man agreed.

So the man was a smith, but all manner of metal working was done in the city. What exactly was his trade, and what was his name? Tathrin tensed as he realised he didn't remember it from Master Wyess's greeting. He listened more closely.

"You can afford to, Garvan. You and Malcot make more profit than Wyess and I do with furs, wagon weight for wagon weight." The dissatisfied man sniffed. "I shall be voting against it."

His long nose was red with the thread-like veins that Tathrin's father had warned him indicated an unwise drinker. He'd note that down against this man's name. Kierst, he remembered that one.

"You get the better bargain trading towards Selerima, Wyess," the disgruntled fur trader continued. "More than any of us who trade to the south and west. All those towns along the East Road know it's in their best interests to keep the highway in good repair."

"Wine, masters?" A Guild servant proffered a tray of goblets.

Tathrin waited to see the other three attendants each take one before doing so himself. As Wyess drank, Tathrin merely moistened his own lips. He wondered how he might go about learning the names of the other merchants' attendants since they evidently weren't going to be introduced.

"Aldabreshin glass." Garvan, the black-clad smith who'd heard that the mountain rivers were flowing again, studied the elegant goblet. "Does anyone know what the Guilds of Col are planning to do about those accursed corsairs plaguing the Caladhrian coast? I had a half-share in a cargo that left the Archipelago last Summer Solstice. It was lost somewhere, never to be seen again."

Tathrin listened carefully. He thought the smith was from Lescar, but whatever dialect coloured his words was so faint as to be unidentifiable.

"I hear the Justiciars are issuing licences to any privateer who can round up a ship and a crew," Wyess commented. "There's rumour the Guilds are planning to approach the Archmage, to ask him to send wizards to defend their waters."

"You don't have much to worry about," sniffed Kierst, the fur merchant who was so unhappy with the notion of a road levy. "No corsair ship has ever yet come as far north as Col and that's as far south as you trade." He raised his glass and drained it.

Tathrin wondered how much the man had already drunk that evening. His accent wasn't Lescari, nor yet of Vanam. Was he from one of the unschooled city-states like Friern, to which the university paid little heed for all the volume of their commerce?

"Rumour?" Garvan shook his head, his black hair sleek with perfumed oil. "I'll believe in wizards getting their hands dirty when I see it."

Malcot, the russet-clad cloth merchant, was more hopeful. "This Archmage has interested himself in mainland affairs more than most of his predecessors. He might be persuaded it's in everyone's interests to send those corsairs to the depths. Let them explain themselves to Dastennin." He lifted his glass in a salute to the god of the sea.

"I'll gladly see them all drowned," Wyess agreed. "But even if the Guilds ask, I cannot see Archmage Planir breaking with so many generations of tradition and sanctioning the use of magic against them."

Kierst the other furrier was still aggrieved. "The Guilds of Col will squeeze as much coin as they can out of us to cover whatever costs they claim to be bearing to ward off these corsairs. Why aren't the Caladhrian lords unlocking their strongboxes to buy in some mercenaries?"

"The coastal lords would hire in swords and ships readily enough," Malcot the cloth merchant protested, "but they cannot do anything without a majority vote and a decree sealed by that parliament of theirs."

"While the inland lords won't agree to financing ships they don't need," Garvan the smith observed.

"So they carry on as they have done for countless generations," Kierst scoffed. "No individual lord will undertake anything of substance on his own initiative because they're all bound by their oaths to Ostrin and Drianon to uphold harmony and unity." He snapped his fingers to attract a lackey with a tray of full goblets. "Hidebound and hobbled, more like. Fools and farmers, the lot of them."

At least if all the Caladhrian lords do is talk, Tathrin thought bleakly, it keeps them from fighting each other.

Malcot was clearly thinking along similar lines. "Your dukes of Lescar and their endless quarrels are all the warning the Caladhrians need of the dangers of uncontrolled dissent among their lords."

That remark merely confirmed Tathrin's initial conclusion that the cloth merchant was Vanam, born and bred.

He watched the Guild servants covering trestle tables with snowy linen cloths, bringing out the first of the rich dishes. The merchants would be feasting on rabbit and bacon pies, braised fowl, minced mutton, artichoke hearts stewed with beef marrow, cinnamon wine-sops and apple fritters.

His father and the guildmasters back home might share a bottle of wine over a dish of stewed herring, if they had managed to save some coin after paying their spring rents. They couldn't vote on the need for road repairs. If they didn't pay up, the dukes would send their militias to collect the coin. Or worse, sell the right to collect the levy to some mercenary band who would ransack houses and break open strongboxes and seize whatever silver they found over and above the sums owed.

Tathrin regarded the freshly garlanded statue of Talagrin at the far end of the hall with dislike. The Furriers' Guild might honour the god of the wild places but Tathrin couldn't forget how many mercenaries claimed his sanction for their abuses.

Had the sight of Talagrin's tokens on the men hunting the lower town's feral pigs sparked such hateful memories? he wondered.

"Caladhrians." Kierst drained his second glass and handed it to his silent attendant. "When it's *our* wagons left with broken axles and *our* horses lamed by ruts in the Great West Road, they're so sorry but they cannot make repairs without the vote of their parliament. Come the turn of For-Autumn, when their cattle are fat and their fields and vineyards are ripe for harvest, they're quick enough to find the money."

"It's a good thing wheat and cattle don't need the parliament's permission to thrive," Garvan commented dryly.

That prompted a laugh from Wyess and Malcot and dutiful smiles from the other merchants' attendants.

Tathrin struggled to match their expressions. These people mocked the Caladhrians but that wouldn't curb the trade each merchant did with Caladhrian lords. The guildmasters and merchant families of Ensaimin's greatest cities of Col, Vanam and Selerima didn't much like each other. They didn't have to. They all knew the value of cooperation as surely as they knew the value of every coin struck in each different city's mint.

Which is why these people can waste peas and beans on children's festival games, Tathrin thought bitterly, instead of hoarding every last one for spring sowing and then praying their crop doesn't get crushed by a battle before summer's end.

If the dukes of Lescar could only set their differences aside, just for a while, surely they'd see how peace and trade could improve life for everyone, from highest to lowest?

"Does anyone have news about the state of the high road beyond Caladhria?" Wyess asked casually. "Or the current relations between Lescar's dukes?"

"You're looking eastwards?" Garvan studied him with raised brows. "Thinking of expanding your trade into Tormalin?"

Wyess smiled easily. "It never hurts to keep one's ears open."

"And one's options." The black-gowned smith nodded. "I hear some ill-feeling boiled up between Draximal and Parnillesse over the winter. Though I've yet to hear any two explanations that agree."

"Do you think it'll come to anything?" Malcot was interested. "My cousins made a handsome profit a few years back lending Duke Orlin of Parnillesse money to equip his militias."

"Did you hear how much the Silversmiths' Guild lost when they lent Duke Secaris of Draximal a chest of coin to pay his mercenaries?" Garvan countered. "When bandits stole it?"

Kierst shook his head belligerently. "I'll sell goods to any duke who pays me in Tormalin gold, but Lescar's no place to make money through speculation."

Tathrin did his best to keep his face expressionless. At least Parnillesse and Draximal were on the far side of Lescar, over towards the Tormalin Empire. Any fighting between those two dukedoms shouldn't come near his family in Carluse, which was closer to the Caladhrian border on the western side of Lescar. As long as Carluse's Duke Garnot didn't see some advantage to involving himself in the quarrel.

"It'll just be the same old nonsense over their claims to be High King," Kierst continued with loud contempt. "You might as well expect sense from hounds snapping over a mouldy bone."

Tathrin's jaw tightened with indignation. As he looked away, lest his expression betray his resentment to the other merchants' attendants, he noticed that the disgruntled furrier's loud voice was turning heads nearby.

"I wouldn't trust anything to the Great West Road. If you're looking to trade into Tormalin, Wyess, send your goods down the White River to Peorle. Have them carried across Caladhria by wagon, and then ship them down the Rel on sail-barges. The Relshazri will cut themselves a fat slice from your profits but it'll still be worth your while paying to get the goods onto a galley that can take them straight to Toremal."

What of the livelihoods of all those people, his own family included, who earned their bread by sheltering and supplying the travellers along the highway? Tathrin burned to ask Kierst that question.

"I don't think I'd send goods by that route," Garvan said thoughtfully. "If Parnillesse goes to war, mercenaries will flock to the ports all along the Lescari coast. The ones who can't find a captain to hire them often turn pirate."

Tathrin saw that one of the other merchants was listening intently. An older man, his bushy white brows were drawing together in a frown.

"Risk good furs on the road through Lescar and brigands will seize the lot." Kierst shook his head disdainfully. "Appeal to whichever duke supposedly rules the land where your goods were taken and he'll just throw up his hands, claiming it's nothing to do with him." He laughed without humour. "When the chances are better than even that the thieves were in his pay all along and he'll be selling your goods to line his own pockets."

"You can prove such accusations, Kierst?" The white-haired merchant strode over to poke a gnarled finger hard into the fur trader's chest. "You can introduce me to someone who's actually suffered such a loss and been scorned by a duke? Or is this merely one of your tales, some friend of a cousin's misfortune?"

"Everyone knows—" Kierst began feebly.

"No one knows," the white-haired merchant snapped before turning on Wyess. "You'll let him abuse our countrymen, will you? Not a word in defence of your Carluse blood?"

"Come now, Gruit." The philosophical cloth merchant raised placatory hands.

"Come now, Malcot," the white-haired merchant mocked. "You should be ashamed of yourself," he said with sudden savagery. "Is that all warfare in Lescar means to you? Opportunity to lend money for profit? Why not lend money to both Draximal and Parnillesse and be certain of a good return, whoever wins? No need to concern yourself if the coin comes stained with blood. Innocent or guilty, water and lye will wash it off."

"No one wishes warfare on anyone," Garvan protested.

"No?" Incensed, Gruit rounded on him. "When half the Smiths' Guild keeps journeymen busy through the winter hammering out swords and spear-points? Selling wire to the mail-makers so they have a stock of hauberks ready and waiting? Don't you think there might be a year without fighting if you weren't so ready to sell blades and armour to whichever dukes Malcot and his cronies lend their coin to?"

The entire room fell silent as the last threads of other conversations died away. Everyone stared at the white-haired merchant.

“Have you nothing to say for yourselves?” Gruit challenged them all. “I hope you have some answer when Saedrin calls you to account at the doors to the Otherworld!”

“What’s it to you if Draximal and Parnillesse go to war?” Kierst rallied. “You’re from Marlier.”

“What of it?” Gruit picked a stony-faced man out of the gathering with a jab of his forefinger. “You were born in Draximal. And you—” he fixed another individual with a ferocious glare “—how many brothers did you leave in Carluse?” His probing finger found another target, and another, and another. “Your wife’s from Triolle, isn’t she? As were your mother and father. You, you’ve one grandsire from Sharlac and the other from Parnillesse.”

He turned his wrath on the whole gathering. “How many of you acknowledge the blood that runs through your heart or in the veins of the wife who tends your hearth, who bore your children? You wrap yourself in Vanam cloth and muffle your true voices. Have you no pride? Have you no honour? Our fine guests here joke about Lescari folly and Lescari thieves and you show your teeth in a meek little smile. You should be snarling!”

He waved at the waiting banquet, spitting with fury.

“Am I the only one sick to my stomach of festival gatherings where we sit on our fat arses and cuddle our fat purses? Have you no feeling for your kith and kin who can only fear the lengthening days as the year turns to Aft-Spring? Will For-Summer bring armies to plunder their crops again, militias to enlist their sons or mercenaries to despoil their daughters? Doesn’t this fine white bread taste of bitter ashes when you know Caladhria’s farmers will be giving thanks to Drianon this Spring Festival for last year’s fine harvest? As they debate whether they’ll earn more gold selling their wheat to the mercenary camps or to the dukes as they lure men to sign up for militia service to save their children from starvation.”

Tathrin saw the whole gathering standing frozen, some faces appalled, more ashamed.

The old man continued before anyone could attempt a reply. “Whatever duke presumed to claim our allegiance when we were born, we all left such quarrels behind when we came to Vanam, to any of the cities across Ensaimin. For the love of whatever gods your beleaguered families cherish...” His voice cracked with anguish, tears standing in his faded eyes. “Can we not find a way to stop this strife that curses our unhappy homeland?”

The hall erupted. Anguished voices protested how often they sent coin to salve the worst hurts of warfare. Men and women insisted they offered friends and relatives a safe haven in times of trial, even securing apprenticeships for their sons and respectable marriages for their daughters.

His heart racing, Tathrin tried to pick out the most earnest faces. He did his utmost to find some distinguishing feature, some quirk of dress. An enamelled collar here, a fistful of diamond rings there—anything that might help him identify the men and women who seemed to be in fiercest agreement with the old man.

“Wyess, Garvan.” The cloth merchant spread apologetic hands, colouring with embarrassment. “You know I hold you in the highest esteem—”

“Gruit’s been drinking too much of his own wine,” Kierst sneered. “Too much time on his hands since he buried his wife and married off his daughters.”

To Tathrin’s utter astonishment, Wyess spun around and knocked the long-nosed man clean off his feet with a single colossal punch.