

# The Whispered War

Volume 1

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Alpine Line Publishers

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ISBN-13: 978-1540787774

ISBN-10: 154078777X

**Authors' Note:** Throughout the course of this novel many different noble houses and members of noble families will be mentioned, each with ties to different houses and scandals they're keeping hidden. For the reader's convenience, we have included the following Index of Houses. Please understand that not all characters in this novel will be included here so as not to ruin any surprises. Furthermore, for those of you reading this as a serial, note that the index may change and receive additions from time to time.

## Index of the Noble Houses of Salia

### **House Renart**

Head of House: Duke Lucien. A well-respected cousin to the Salian Emperor.

Wife: Duchess Beatrice, formerly of house Roche. Duke Lucien's third wife.

Heir: Lord Leon. Duke Lucien's oldest son. An athletic young man who admires soldiers and the military arts while detesting the "Jeu Fatal." (The Deadly Game)

Other Children of Note: Cecile, Leon's twin sister, a young lady with many suitors. Andre, the second-born son, a total hedonist. Annette, the second daughter, a young lady studying to become a priestess. Edmund, the third-born son, kept in solitude because of his mental illness.

Right Hand: Lucilla, an accomplished diplomat.

Left Hand: Amadeus Fitzroy, a brilliant spy-master and skilled assassin.

### **House Armand**

Head of House: Duke Jehan, a man who previously studied to be a cleric before his older brother's death forced him to inherit. Maintains strong ties with several bishops.

Wife: Duchess Mallory, formerly of house LaCroix. She is a devoted wife and mother, but has only ever provided Jehan with daughters.

Heir: None.

Children of Note: Corina, Abrielle, Giselle, Maika, Alaina, and Pauline.

Right Hand: Blaise, a war veteran who lost his leg fighting foreign barbarians.

### **House Loup**

Head of House: Duke Raul, a ruthless man who cares only for gain and despises the Church.

Right Hand: Michaedon, a merchant prince from the foreign land of Piast.

### **House Corbeau**

Head of House: Baron Damond Corbeau

Wife: Babette Corbeau, formerly of house Aimon.

### **House Aimon**

Head of House: Count Bastien Aimon.

Heir: Alexandre Aimon.

### **House Forbin**

Head of House: Marquis Maxemilien, a decorated war veteran who has repelled many invasions and barbarian raids.

Heir: Lord Marc, a soldier known for his sense of honor. Recently lost an eye in battle.

Children of Note: Lord Magnus Forbin, a soldier and close friend to Leon Renart

**House Baleine, the Imperial Family**

Head of House: Empress Mariette VII, a woman supposedly descended from the sea god Allod. Like all members of her house, she is revered as a Demi-God.

## Chapitre Un Sotto Voce Leon

*The Salian aristocrats; they'll embrace you with the right hand, then stab you with the left.*

The old saying could not be more true. Leon pondered this as he overlooked the masquerade ball. All the subtle hints of danger, deceit, secrets, and vulgarity permeated every whisper, every glance, every handshake. His stomach turned.

He turned to his father who stood amongst his guests with Beatrice hanging off his arm. That expensive powdered wig, the royal blue coat, and the golden mask upon his face; all reminders that everyone here was putting on a show, even the host. As if on stage with her husband, Beatrice fanned herself and laughed at whatever jokes the guests told.

Leon had seen no sign of Monsieur Fitzroy, perhaps an ideal skill for an assassin attending to his bloody craft. Who was the target this time? Who did the great Duke Lucien intend to have murdered at this event? Or did his father wish simply to gather information on his enemies?

With his father's schemes in mind, he poured another glass of wine for himself. Dulling his senses might help him to stomach all the politics.

Lucilla stood at the door, greeting and announcing each guest as they entered.

"Duke Jehan of house Armand and his wife, Duchess Mallory Armand."

The flat murmur which blanketed Duke Lucien's ears broke. Leon looked on as his father crossed the ballroom to greet the stiff-necked duke who'd just entered the room. Duke Jehan's mask was a humble one, made of porcelain rather than gold or silver. His clothes were also out of place at such an event, a black soutane without its clerical collar. Jehan's smile when Lucien took his hand was clearly fake. He was not so skilled at the *Jeu Fatal* as the glorious Duke Lucien.

Why would the duke leave his wife's side to greet this particular guest? Either Duke Jehan was the object of the game tonight or the whole exchange was a misdirect in the spirit of true sport.

Leon finished his glass and immediately grabbed the decanter to refill it. If he was going to survive the night he'd need all the drink he could handle; if not more.

"What troubles you, son?" The soft, sweet voice sung from behind Leon as he poured.

He turned to face his stepmother. “Ah, Beatrice. You know I’m... always uncomfortable at these events.”

“Oh, my dear boy,” Beatrice said with a hint of a giggle.

Leon felt a twinge of resentment at the idea of a woman barely one year older than he calling him “*dear boy*.”

Beatrice touched Leon’s shoulder. “This is supposed to be a party! Have some fun! I’m sure if you spoke to someone here you could make new friends.”

Anyone unfamiliar with *le Jeu Fatal*, the Deadly Game, would have heard her comment and thought it merely encouragement for him to socialize and enjoy himself. But even Leon, who was himself a novice, knew the subtext there. He should have been rooting out information from the sons of other noblemen. He should have been cultivating alliances and harboring favors for future reclamation.

“I doubt I would *make friends* with any of them,” said Leon, waving his hand dismissively. “Do you think any of them want to discuss Polo? Maglio? Football even? Or would you have me directly ask them about their fathers’ affairs? No. Every feint deserves a lunge and I’m afraid I’m not in the mood.” Pride in his own fencing quips made him wish his friend Magnus were there. He wouldn’t need the comfort of wine if only he could escape in the glory of Magnus’ war stories.

“Oh? So determined to be miserable, are you?” asked Beatrice. The band started to play a waltz, and she smiled at him. “Would you indulge your mother with a dance?”

When he was a child, after his mother had died, he had taken every opportunity to remind his first stepmother that she was not his real mother. Every time it broke the poor woman’s heart. Because he was only a boy, he did not care until the day that she died giving birth to his youngest sister. Since then, he’d sworn he would never correct any woman his father took as wife when she referred to herself as his “*mother*.”

“If it pleases you,” said Leon, taking her hand.

The two dancing partners bowed to each other and Leon moved with her to the music; the slow, flowing waltz.

One, two, three.

One, two, three.

It had been so long since Leon had danced that he was sure he would forget the steps.

“Is there truly no one at this ball that deserves your attention?” Beatrice asked.

“I wouldn’t say that,” said Leon, leading her into a twirl and back. “At the moment, you have my full attention.”

Music filled the room and nuzzled up to every ear drum. Beatrice spoke just above a whisper. Not even the dancers beside them would hear

her words. "I know you detest *Le Jeu Fatal*. So do I, if I am being honest. But our survival depends on it. Consider it mere etiquette for lords and ladies such as ourselves."

One, two, three.

One, two, three.

"Just as you may be reluctant to dance, still it is expected at a ball. Propriety simply demands it. Not to do so would be a faux pas of disastrous consequence. After all..."

Her right hand tightened around his and the fingers of her left dug sharply into his shoulder, "The game can only be played in close quarters."

Leon dipped Beatrice, his chin mere inches from her chest as he did. The perfume upon her neck crept into his nostrils. He shook his head to clear himself of the intoxicating effect, hiding the movement with a snap, pulling her back.

Beatrice always held at least one eye of every man in a room. Women had long been masters of *Le Jeu Fatal*; a consideration which the Duke had never overlooked in any of his wives. Hungry eyes make for loose tongues. The greater a nobleman's desire for her, the more likely they were to make a mistake. However, in Beatrice's case, her charm often flowed to unintended targets, resulting in mistakes of her own.

"Is it survival to spread the whispers of bedchambers and powder rooms?" Leon quipped as he spun her.

Beatrice smiled. "You can be so endearingly innocent sometimes."

"*Innocent.*" To be treated as a child by one so near to his own age was deeply grating. Had they both not seen nineteen summers come and go?

Leon lifted Beatrice, his hand tight around her narrow waist. "Oh, I'm not so innocent as you might think," he said with a smirk.

"Oh?" Beatrice said. "Do tell. What sorts of wild stories do you have to share?"

"Should I really regale such scandals with my *mother*?" Leon asked, twirling with her again.

"I won't tell your father," Beatrice said. "This I promise."

"Do you recall the football game I played at Marquis Forbin's estate?"

"I do," said Beatrice. "You were in rare form."

"I seduced a servant in the Marquis' home," said Leon. "Magnus lent me his room."

Beatrice laughed. "The Marquis would faint with embarrassment if he knew."

"He would indeed," said Leon. He twirled her out away from him, then pulled her close again. Beatrice gasped, and he felt her hot breath on his chin. "Look again. Am I such an innocent boy?"



## The Whispered War

She looked almost dizzy as she said, “No...you—you are a troublesome young man.”

He felt his face burn as the blood rushed to his cheeks. Perhaps he’d taken a step too far to prove to her he wasn’t a child. But he couldn’t let her, or anyone else, see that he was embarrassed. Too many questions would arise.

“And proud to be so,” said Leon, turning his chin up with feigned arrogance.

The song concluded and Leon released Beatrice, bowing to her and kissing the ring upon her left hand. “Now, if you don’t mind, I will take my leave.”

“So soon?” Beatrice asked. “I thought we were having a lovely conversation.”

“We were, my lady,” said Leon, raising his index finger. “But the song has ended and another matter urgently beckons me.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes and laughed. “I understand.”

He left the ballroom and headed off to the privies. Really, he felt he needed cold water on his face.

He looked into the mirror. His cheeks were red. The effect of the wine, or so he tried to convince himself.

Maybe he should start referring to Beatrice as “*Mother*” more often. It might remind him in the future to keep his wits about him. For a brief moment, during that waltz, he’d thought of her in a way he’d never done before. *A dangerous line of thought*, he told himself.

Leon filled the basin with water from the pitcher and splashed his face. The cold was shocking, but it felt soothing, in its own way. A relief from what he’d felt mere moments ago.

He took the towel and dried his face, taking a deep breath. When he looked in the mirror again his heart nearly stopped when he saw Amadeus Fitzroy standing behind him. Leon spun around and jumped back against the basin.

“Fitzroy, what the...” But Leon had the answer to his question before the words even left his lips. On the floor, between him and Fitzroy lay a dead man in a pool of his own blood.

Fitzroy bent down and picked up a knife from the floor, next to the dead man’s hand. “An assassin. You were the target.”

“How did you two...” Leon looked back and forth between the dead man and Fitzroy. “I didn’t even hear...”

“We’re professionals,” said Fitzroy, cleaning his stiletto dagger. “Only an amateur makes a sound. My lord, please, return to the dance floor and speak to no one of this. Try to act as if nothing happened.”

Leon swallowed hard. “Why did the assassin target me?”

“I don’t know,” said Fitzroy. “But my spies will find out.”

Leon took a deep breath and calmed his nerves as best as he could.

“Thank you, Fitzroy.”

“Simply my duty.”

“Still...”

“You want to repay me?”

“I would like to, yes,” said Leon.

“Get back out there and enjoy yourself.” Fitzroy pointed to the door. “I need to clean this up as soon as possible. It won’t do to have your father’s guests actually see bloodshed tonight, and I cannot take care of this with you observing my every move.”