

The Whispered
War

Volume 2

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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.

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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: Michaeldon, 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 Deux Derrière le Masque Lucien

Onward! To battle! Every nobleman, a soldier. Every lady hoisting the colors. Each fought with secrets rather than swords, lies rather than muskets. The battlefield was his very own manor, and the ball had just begun. Each guest challenged to battle by formal invitation. Hundreds had been beckoned to don armaments of mystery and intrigue, golden face plates for their armor. The sun had set on the era of knights shedding blood in broad daylight. In its afterglow, the shadows of the aristocrats drew blood with none the wiser.

And what of his own shadows?

Fitzroy was hard at work behind the scenes.

Leon was staring around the room with his tiresome look of scorn. At times, Lucien feared for the boy. Anyone who dared to play *Le Jeu Fatal* without the intention of mastery was a fledgling amongst the serpents.

Cecile, however, played beautifully. Lucien had lost what little faith he had in the stars to see two, born under the same heavens, the same moon, the same constellations, only moments apart, yet so estranged were each of their fates. Unlike her brother, Cecile stood, fanning herself, attended by a dozen young suitors. Every flirtatious laugh, every bat of her eyes would drive them into a frenzy of secrets. Each of them would soon be ready to

destroy each other's lives at the chance to succeed over their rivals.

Andre had already left the dance floor. Good. Let him bed whichever nobleman's wife or daughter he'd managed to woo tonight.

Even Annette was present, back from the parish to discuss theology and religion with her father's guests.

Despite Leon's lack of prowess, Lucien counted himself blessed to look on at his other son's duty and his daughters' aptitude.

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

Lucien looked up as Lucilla announced the new arrivals. Exactly the man Lucien wanted to see!

"Pardon me, darling," said Lucien to his wife. "I must greet Duke Armand."

"Don't keep me waiting too long," said Beatrice as she let go of Lucien's arm.

He thought it better that she kept her distance from Jehan. She was not yet skilled enough to face one so judicious. Though Beatrice was an excellent protégé, she was a student nonetheless.

"My dear friend!" said Lucien, bowing to Jehan. The lanky, older man nodded his head and barely cracked a smile. "Cheerful as ever, I see. And you, my lady." Lucien took Mallory's hand and kissed it. "Wonderful to see you both again, truly. I hold you both in my heart of hearts. Your daughters could not attend?"

Jehan's feigned smile completely disappeared at Lucien's question. "They are at home. Corina, our eldest, is dutiful in her studies. The others are simply too young."

Lucien chuckled. “A learned woman always makes a handsome wife, I always say. Good that she has such a strong head on her shoulders.”

“I’m surprised you invited me to such a soiree,” said Jehan, scrunching his nose as he looked around the room. “You know I’m a terrible dancer.”

“One cannot learn without practice,” said Lucien. “Don’t worry, none would dare mock your steps.”

“And who could notice?” said Jehan, glaring. “They are far too distracted. Tell me, if they wore the mask at home do you think they’d be this close with their own wives?”

“Come now,” said Lucien, “It’s just innocent dancing.”

Jehan snorted and shook his head.

Mallory chimed in. “No man and woman can be so close to each other and not feel something inappropriate.”

Jehan nodded. “Quite right. Then, one cannot ignore the fact that so many witches’ rituals incite trances through dancing. They subdue the conscience to enhance the debauchery. But lack of remorse is not true guiltlessness before the Judge.”

Such a strict way to live! Even the Bishops who came to these parties would sometimes dance, for the Church had certainly not forbidden it. Indeed, even the Empress, who was believed a descendant of their God, danced at these events. Only the strictest of ascetics wished to deny themselves even so simple a joy as moving to music.

But it would not further Lucien's goals were he to criticize Jehan's way of life.

Lucien stroked his beard and said, "You may have a point. See my son, Leon, over there?"

"I'm not blind," said Jehan.

"He is... more of your persuasion," said Lucien. "See how he stares at the ballroom with such scorn? He's far too pious for such revelry."

"Not pious enough to limit his drink," said Jehan as Leon poured himself another glass of wine.

"True," said Lucien. "That's why I think the boy could use a teacher. A learned wife who will teach him the commandments of Lyr."

"Blessed be Lyr, our God," said Mallory, clasping her hands together.

"What are you truly getting at?" asked Jehan, rolling his eyes.

"Is it not obvious, my friend?" Lucien leaned in close and whispered to Jehan. "I'm proposing a match. Your Corina is what, fourteen years of age?"

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen?" Lucien repeated. "Then you'd best hurry to make a match for her! Another year and most noblemen will assume her spoiled, not fit to marry their sons." Lucien clasped Jehan's hand tightly in his own. "My Leon would make an excellent husband for your Corina. He's an athlete, a gentleman, and far more pious than most men his age. What say you, Jehan? Shall we join our houses?"

"It's an attractive proposal," said Jehan, nodding and trying to hide the hint of a smile.

Lucien grinned widely. Perfect! The battle strategy had been implemented superbly! Jehan had no sons, only daughters. If Leon married Corina he stood to inherit the estates of both House Renart and House Armand! The Armand name would be no more, and Leon's son would be the most powerful duke in Salia. He might even rival the Empress herself!

Jehan tapped Lucien's shoulder and pointed to the dance floor. "Are you sure he's as... reserved as you claim?"

The sight before Lucien's eyes was a mountain dropped upon his shoulders. He had arranged this whole ball with the understanding that Leon would be himself, and that Lucien could use that to convince Jehan that Leon was the one white sheep of the family.

But there Leon was, dancing with Beatrice. Their hands interlocking, their bodies so close. To Duke Armand this must have appeared a terrible show of incestuous desire, not an innocent dance, as Lucien knew it to be.

"He's merely trying to be kind," said Lucien. "My wife does so enjoy the dance, but my back isn't as strong as it used to be."

Jehan snorted again. "Pray this is the only way he does what you yourself are incapable of doing to please your wife."

Lucien clenched his fists, but the friendly smile never left his face. "There is very little I'm incapable of doing to please her. Still, look now," Lucien pointed to his eldest son. "The way he blushes as the dance ends. He's torn. Torn between pleasing his new mother and pleasing God."

“You’ve an imaginative mind,” said Jehan. “If you’ll excuse me, I would like to speak with some of your other guests. Thank you.”

Lucien watched as Duke Armand walked off with his wife on his arm, off to mingle and pretend he had more than simple disdain for the crowd.

Across the ballroom Lucien spotted Duke Raul of House Loup. He’d not greeted the broad-jawed, bulky lord of coin when he’d first entered. It was his sincere hope that Raul felt truly offended. Lucien’s subtle way of showing disrespect to the Duke who’d recently made intended-to-be-secret deals with bandit lords in the east. Every insult Lucien heaped upon Raul that the duke did not repay undermined his authority, but Lucien had to be careful, lest he step too far and Raul have grounds to challenge him to a duel. His invitation to the soiree had been his due diligence in peacekeeping.

Lucien crossed the room and leaned up against the wall beside Raul.

Both were silent a moment, then Lucien let out a deep sigh. “There’s just no pleasing the pious, is there?”

“I stopped trying a long time ago,” said Raul. “Let them keep their delusions of God. It is no concern of mine if they wish to live their lives in misery.”

Lucien chuckled. “You see, Raul, this is why we’re friends.”

Raul groaned. “I do not have friends.”

Lucien looked Raul intently in the eyes, a grin spread across his cheeks. “Neither do I.”

“Seems your son has lost all taste for this crowd,” said Raul, gesturing towards the dance floor with his chin while his arms stayed folded in front of his chest.

Leon walked off the dance floor, still as red as he’d been when the waltz ended.

“Yes, well...” Lucien struggled to come up with a good excuse, a good lie to tell Raul about why Leon had left. But of all his guests Duke Loup was the hardest to read by far. The man was a stone wall. It was impossible to tell what might possibly motivate such a man beyond basic, material gain. Had he a sense of honor? A sense of duty? Even any compassion for his fellow man? Every spy report and every moment of his body language seemed to disprove any of these.

How could one manipulate a man who seemed so inhuman?

“Has the Empress already arrived?” asked Raul. “I wish to pay her majesty my respects.”

“She has not arrived,” said Lucien. “From what I understand she could not make it.”

“Such a shame,” said Raul, hiding the smirk that Lucien was so sure wanted to creep across his face. “She was such a delight at my soiree last month.”

The crass implication that Raul was more important than Lucien was plain as day, and all nearby who overheard the conversation would know it. Already Lucien could hear a few stifled chuckles, laughter at his expense.

He needed to say something to win them back over, to pay back Raul’s insult.

“From what I understand your men stopped yet another bandit raid recently?” asked Lucien, breaking eye contact with Raul to watch the dancers on the floor.

“Indeed,” said Raul. “They’ve done their job well.”

“Oh, are they close to capturing the bandit lords responsible for the raids then?” asked Lucien. “That ought to teach those foolish knaves not to doubt you!”

“Doubt me?” Raul repeated, confused.

“Have you not heard the rumors?” asked Lucien, feigning surprise. “Oh, cruel slanders, my friend! The silly stories that commoners dream up these days! The fools suggest that the bandit lords have paid you for their right to do business.” Raul bit his lower lip, clearly stifling his anger. Lucien tried not to show his excitement at having turned the tables on his rival. “They say the bandits have free reign to attack any trade caravan which does not pay you a special fee.” Lucien patted Raul on the shoulder. “Of course, we both know it’s hogwash! Such a thing would be a crime, one worthy of the Empress’ justice.”

“That’s the problem with sensationalism and scandal,” said Raul. “Minions must speak of the Masters in order to cultivate any interest.”

Truth, perhaps, but the damage was done. The eavesdroppers all around them were all a murmur about these rumors. Lucien guessed that in a fortnight half the empire would believe Raul a sleazy, underhanded, criminal lord.

And well they should, from what Lucien’s spies had told him.

“I’m going to help myself to some caviar,” said Lucien, walking away from a silent Raul. For a moment he stopped and looked over his shoulder at the smoldering duke behind him. “Do try to have fun tonight. This is a party, after all.”