

INTRODUCTION

Carala, the rock spider, was once a desert mouse. She and her sisters lived high in the Sieran hills, foraging for stickles and burrs in the starlight. During the day, they toiled in their burrows, digging deep into the hard clay and hiding from the midday sun.

One morning as Helis rose, Carala became weary of her chores, and she wandered from her home and into the desert. After some time she lost her way, and found herself stranded without shelter in the heat of the day.

Carala was afraid, for she could find no rock or shrub for shade, no seed or stickle for food. The clay was too hot and hard to dig, and her family's scent was nowhere on the wind.

The light of Helis was more than Carala could bear. She faltered in the bright of day, stumbling without direction, until at last her breath began to slip away. By midday she lay dying, exhausted and frail, in a thicket of white-flowered cactus plants.

Then Elikor, the Spirit of the Dragon, appeared to Carala on a beam of sunlight. With a soft whisper, Elikor beckoned Carala into the next world. But Carala would not go. She fought back against the spirit of death, grappling with Elikor and pinning them on a cactus thorn. With the Dragon Spirit trapped, Carala bargained for her life.

Elikor argued with Carala for some time, but they finally submitted, promising Carala the gift of long life and fierce strength, in exchange for their freedom. As Carala released Elikor, a drop of the dragon's blood fell on the cactus plant, turning the white flowers pink. We call this flower "el alfiletero," the pincushion.

Carala, mad with thirst, bit into the cactus and devoured the dragon's blood. A dozen spines pierced her mouth and she wailed in pain. Elikor

climbed back to the sun, and left Carala in peace.

As Elikor had promised, Carala did not die, but she was transformed. She became a dreadful, twisted creature: fierce and fireproof, silent and cruel. Her bite held the spines of the pincushion cactus, and the venom of the dragon's blood. And she was no longer afraid of the sun.

From that day on, Carala was racked with a hunger that never died. She hunted day and night for grubs and beetles, birds and burbles, for no seed or stickle could satisfy her. When Carala found her family, they did not recognize her, and they cursed Carala and drove her away.

Determined to rejoin her family, Carala visited them again in darkness. She spoke to them from shadows, and she told them the story of the Dragon Spirit and her magical transformation in the desert.

Her family listened with awe, and spoke to her again as one of their own. But when they saw Carala again in the light, her sisters were deathly afraid. She had grown larger, fierce and spiny, with ten legs and a thousand eyes, and jaws that could crack a stone.

The desert mice tried to run away, to leave Carala alone in her terrible form. But Carala spun thick webs around them, and trapped her sisters in their cave.

Carala pleaded with her sisters, begging that they might accept her back into the family. Over time she promised to become a desert mouse again. But even then, Carala knew this could never be.

Trapped by her webs, her sisters pleaded for their lives, as Carala had once pleaded with the Dragon Spirit. But Carala wept, for she could not share her gift with them, nor unmake the changes wrought upon herself. She had only venom to share, no magic nor dragon's blood.

To keep them safe, Carala bound her sisters one by one, wrapping them ever tighter in her webs, until they could no longer cry out. That night her

sisters fell silent, and soon after, their spirits vanished from this world.

Carala wept. When the last of her sisters had died, she cried black tears for six days and nights. Then at last she was overcome with hunger, and forgetting who she was, Carala devoured them all.

Now Carala lurks alone in the desert sand, hiding in shallow pits and under stones, and trapping creatures in her webs. She is death alive, weeping no more, yearning only for the chance to pass from this world, to be united with her family once again.

When you meet Carala on the road, do not hesitate. Send the spider on her way, or she will surely do the same for you.

PROLOGUE

It is a cold night in the Sieran Desert, and I am headed to a fête at the Palazzo di Caranette. The palace is a sprawling estate, an island of green in the hills above Baronet City.

I am wearing a costume that does not fit.

It is well-tailored, surely, stitched for me by the cleverest fingers in Brickledown. Yet it does not suit me. This morning I was a Merits Bay dustcuff, a street hustler from the bottom of the hill. But tonight I am Ayen Roque-Chalan, cousin of Barón Eric Milemortes DeRêche de Cera, his escort and proxy at the table.

Our carriage clatters up a red dirt road, across a stone bridge, and past a decorated iron gate. The road turns sandy brown as it winds through scrub and tall trees into the hills of the estate. I count a hundred marble statues and fifty potted cypresses along the way.

When we reach the porte cochère, the Barón and I step down into flickering torchlight. Six more carrums wheel in behind us, filling the night

with feathers and silk.

My boots are new and strange, and the heels twist on the ragged flagstones. A flock of chattering servants fuss over the Barón and me, ushering us and a dozen powdered nobles through the palace doors.

Tonight we will play Prima Carta, an illicit street game from the taverns and wayhouses of the Sieran coast. We will play at impossible stakes, in a palace too lofty to be troubled by the law. A prince's purse is here to be won, riches beyond the dreams of common folk.

This is the Barón's goal.

But it is not mine.

I am a red-haired child of the sand, masquerading as a dandy from the swamplands. Pink blush is dabbed on my pale cheeks, black lines scribbled around my narrow eyes. I wear the green jerkin and heavy cloak of a traveler from the East, a stranger to the desert and the game.

In a room of soft-fingered nobles pretending at crime, I am the one true criminal posing as a naïf. "My Lord, what is the bet? How does one play? Shall I proceed with these cards? Apologies, but this is so new."

From Almorran to Carricet, Lucetia to Breva, Sieran gamblers have played Prima Carta since before I was born. Wealthy players spend their lives and their fortunes at this table, risking hand and heart on the turn of every board. Some gamblers bet on the cards, while others bet on the players. And rare fools like myself become trapped in the web of the game.

Now the aristocrats of Sierin have adopted this pastime as their own. They do battle in forums like this, high above the taverns and compañías, while petty thieves from the four arrows pick over their scraps.

For any enterprise that trafficks in gold, either honestly or otherwise, will surely attract its share of spiders. Hustlers and cheats, grifters and

charlatans, who prey on softer creatures and weaker minds, and bring nothing of value to the world. These scoundrels are driven by greed, shored up by fear, governed by no law or code.

These spiders have trapped me in their game, almost from the day I learned to play it. But tonight I shall be free.

I join the table as the Barón's proxy, sitting the Forest with a rack of eighty jade ingots. Each one of these checks is worth one hundred gold sovereigns, enough to buy a small town.

Eighty small towns.

I breathe the perfumed air and listen to the pretentious babble of a hundred self-righteous nobles. Wealthy fools mill about, boasting on their petty conquests, pretending to ignore the game. But in truth, the game is the light that draws them here. Every eye and every heart is fixed on this table.

Tonight the Palazzo di Caranette is the center of the gambling world, a constellation of its brightest stars drawn down from the turning sky. Wealthy gamblers who play for fortunes from Weis to Gill Corin would be satisfied just to stand on the ridge.

I am calm, and I am terrified.

For I am not here to win the game.

I am here to break it.

Chapter 1: THE HERMIT

The clock-scholars in Meere claim that it is our whole world, and not the sun, which moves in circles around the other. But surely, if this whole world should move, then there must be some even larger force, some impossible wind or creature, that propels it. The idea is confounding; for

what force, in turn, could be strong enough to blow such a wind?

In practice this answer makes no difference. One need not waste time arguing over theories that cannot be proved. Indeed, most people are sufficiently vexed by those truths that stand clearly in their sight.

One might show them figures on a slate, or a pet in a box, or even a hand in a card game, then bid them close their eyes and describe what they saw. In response one hears only nonsense, bickering, or silence. Never the judge's truth.

This blindness is why I serve the game.

I was born in Baroba in a common month. It was early summer, the 6th day of Septun, 716. That year was a Wender, a long year, with seven days in the month of Colors.

My mother Ayere died five years later. 721 was a short year, one of the shortest known, with no month of Gerin and 34 days of Seeles.

My father Carlos kept me for three years more. We moved from a home I cannot remember, into a boarding house on Meeker Street, in the heart of Baroba. My father treated me like a servant, while a random collection of relatives and strangers passed through our home. I washed clothes, swept floors, cleaned up table scraps. In all that time, I cannot recall anyone using my name.

When I was eight years old, my father sold me to a caverner in Bratte. I traveled three days south along the Magan Coast, the eastern shore of Sierin. I rode in a jostling cloth-covered wagon with eleven other children, two drivers, and two fat guards. We arrived at a camp on the Voro on 14 Benes, 724. I do not know what price I fetched for my father, but my new mistress Konne liked to complain that she had overpaid for me.

The caverners of the Magan Coast are scavengers and thieves. They cut

holes in the desert, searching for ancient caverns and forgotten gold. Brevia is crisscrossed with hidden tunnels and forgotten warrens, some dug by ancient peoples, some by snakes and monsters. And some few of these tunnels are still filled with treasure.

To Konne's frustration, I was an abominable digger. I was also worthless with a hammer and pail. I could break no rock, carry no burden, and turned scarlet red in the midday sun.

My mistress took pity on me, and brought me under her canvas. She taught me to read and cipher, to clutch and crew. Konne read me the Trials, and I spent my days in the shade, helping with her receipts and records. Tack, gear, supplies, and labor.

Digging was a simple operation, and there was barely enough work to keep us both busy. After nine months, Konne hoisted me into a hard-sider bound for Baronet, with my name and age pinned to my collar.

She called me "Cobite Roje," her Little Red Pail. I was not quite nine years old.

The road to Merits Bay was eight days, and we arrived at Port Sorrow on the evening of 11 Gerin, 725. The convoy had some thirty wagons, carts, and cars, each with a dozen or more children to be sold. The next morning the masters ferried us across the bay to the Master's Dock in Low Harbor, Baronet.

People say that it is lucky to be born in a rare month. The favor of Helis is a blessing for a long and healthy life. But I have known many souls born in Colors, or Benerus, or even Walus, whose true birth days might pass once every five or ten years. And they did not seem any more or less lucky than I.

For luck is a phantom, a ghost. She is a story we tell ourselves, lending shape to the chaos of our lives. Good luck may account for our joy, and

bad luck for our suffering, but neither is the author, merely the tale. Luck is a tailor's thread, stitching the flat stuff of life into the shapes that define us. Pull but a little on that thread, and you see the truth - Helis favors no one.

Is it luckier to celebrate one's birth only in the longest years? I can't imagine why. We all die at the same speed, Seeles and Wenders alike.

Baronet City was a sprawling dragon, a thousand years old, cut into the hard rock of Alcinor. The old port on Merit's Bay is a slow-cooking jambalai, a cauldron bubbling with laborers and travelers from every arrow of the compass. They churn together in the heat, powering the engines of trade.

Some workers dig for gold, some trade in silks and precious stones. Some feed and clothe the city, and keep her well and safe. And some villains make profit from the misery of others.

Through several intermediaries and likely at some great loss, Mistress Konne the caverner sold me to a sohouse in Downstone, Los Alondras. The grouchy man who took my tag did not read well, and so he called me "Red Canyon," after a place he knew on the road to Kalama.

At the Collier Docks I was attached to a crew called the Odd Hands, a dozen scrappy orphans and street rats. We were sent on contracts all over the city. My friends in the Odd Hands called me Red.

The years with Los Alondras were hard. I rarely ate enough to be fed, rarely slept enough to be awake. I remember few names and fewer stories, only random sights, sounds, smells.

A lump of sugar-crusted dough from a pie shop in Tulan.

An old drunkard sleeping in a cobblestone way.

Barrels rolling down alleys past horse-drawn carts. The smell of

summer's rotting trash. A winter night's bitter chill, as water turns to crystals in crevices and keptanks.

The muffled sounds of music and games from windows above the street.

Dyeing and cutting at the tanners in Brickledown. Washing whitestone walls in Novel Garden. Unloading caravels in Case Down and Tetherway.

I slept in dismal barracks beneath the Downstone Docks, and ate in a dank mess filled with spiders and cats. My mates sometimes talked about their lives before the Bay, but usually we spoke in hushed voices about the cruelty of our overseers, and our various clever plans for escape.

"Escape" meant a day or two in the light, followed by a return to darkness. Fugitives from the sohouse were hunted by seekers and snatched up by prowlers. And even if we were never found, we always returned to the docks on our own: tired, bruised, and starving after only a few days in the sun.

There was no true escape from Baronet Low, for a beggar without call or coin, no safe place for a lost child to find a home.

By age 11, I reached journey status in the Odd Hands, overseeing my own crew of ten young rascals. I behaved well and I was treated fairly, granted the occasional liberty to roam the streets of the High City. In truth this "liberty" was just another tactic of the trade. Our keepers shuffled us out to beg our own bread as soon as we were able.

Had I continued in that life, I might have become a seeker or a prowler myself, though I showed little aptitude for either. I would have rather found any way out, but there were none apparent. In the Low City, a fugitive child was always put back to work, after some cruel punishment. But in the High City, squads of red guards prowled the night streets, murdering vagabonds on sight.

Or so we were told.

In the fall of 728, now aged 12 years, I worked five weeks for a baker in Tulan, who taught me to make all varieties of cakes and sweet pies. That winter, I carried sacks and hides for a souter on Wharf Street. But he ran me off when he caught me begging for coppers outside his door.

In the spring of 729, I worked for de Buenas, a block printer on Marit Street. This little shop was operated by a brilliant woman called Grace. She fed me scones and sausages each morning, and in the evenings I helped her balance the accounts.

I operated three screw-presses: setting blocks, rolling ink, and hanging paper. Grace's shop printed wallpapers, book plates, and playing cards. Her specialty was the Postas deck, a 50-card pack for games like Lobo, Postes de Cerca, and Prima Carta.

These cards were block-printed using a single plate for all ten ranks, which was inked with a different color for each suit. Each plate had twenty small movable blocks, for the suit icons. The card backs were often plain, but were sometimes decorated with the shop's own floral designs.

Other shops could produce fancier, multi-plate Postas decks, where each card had a different image, and the finished product seemed almost hand-painted. But most card players preferred a simpler deck at a lower price. I must have printed a thousand of these decks in my months at de Buenas.

To help pass the hours while the ink dried, Grace taught me the game of Prima Carta. I played it strictly as a memory game, watching the cards as I dealt the first pass, and learning to predict the winner before the second. Some years later, I came to learn that no one else played it that way.

Sadly, my friendship with Grace soured after I tried to add a splash of

color to her Postas decks. I ruined a day's run of cards, and wasted a half-lantern of paper stock.

Grace tried her best to forgive me, and I stayed with the shop for a few days after, though I was no longer allowed near the cards. But sadly my mistress had lost her trust in me, thinking me no better than any other rat from Downstone, and soon she showed me back to the street.

THE HERMIT

Card 1 in the Postas deck is the Hermit. He is a man alone in the wilderness, bare-skinned, crouching, and holding a reed flute.

The Hermit is solitude, self-reliance, the aloneness where we begin each day and each life, the nothingness in which we struggle to survive and to find meaning. The Hermit is a solitary figure, living by his wits and strength alone. His flute is art, music, and play; those things that bring meaning to a solitary life.

The Hermit is at the beginning of his journey, but he is also at the end. For the Hermit is also the solitude of death.

Low Harbor is a tangled, ancient port. For a child of the street, she is peppered with decent places to hide and to sleep, to beg and to work. The vendors are kind, the lofts are cozy.

But as the child grows, the hiding places shrink, the competition grows fierce, and the munificence of street merchants wears thin. By age fourteen, I might have had better luck begging in the desert.

In the summer of 730 I was taller, thinner, and paler of skin, and growing too old for the Odd Hands. I had no future as a steward or enforcer, and no interest in either, so ever more I found myself walking

alone in the streets of the lower city.

For three months I ran with a cadre of toughs in Downstone, uncleverly called the Downstones, who included some of my friends from the Odd Hands. We protected each other and kept busy with cheap contract work and the occasional swindle. Our call was “ready hands for honest work,” but in truth our aims were often far more sinister.

I was a terrible failure as a cutpurse, even worse at brawling, and only marginally adept at any role in a confidence scheme. Once in a while I might convince a mark to hand over her loot without a fuss, but more often I scored nothing but a rip in my sleeve and a rotten-egg bruise.

Misdirection is the root of grift, the knack to fool your mark into believing that they are stealing from you, not you from them. In truth, it is harder to cheat an honest soul. But the more deceitful your prey, the faster and farther they will fall.

As with fighting and thieving, I grasped this theory well enough, but often fell short of the art.

My bruises lasted longer than my clothes, and even the shallowest wounds took weeks to knit. I knew that I was not made for this life, and that I must find a way to fly away, or death would surely find me. She had already come for many far stronger and smarter than myself.

I remember Kjaret, a cheery boy with a withering dark stare, who died on the knife of a drunken stevedore.

And Fris, a scheming, bright-eyed girl who disappeared into a dark playhouse, never to return.

And there was Carlos, the wicked boy who shared my father’s name. Carlos was one year my senior in the Odd Hands, and he took obscene pleasure in harassing the new recruits, robbing the weakest among us of what precious little we carried. He never assaulted me, perhaps because I

had nothing to steal, and this had bred in us the weakest foundation of friendship.

One rainy summer afternoon, as work ceased to let the weather pass, Carlos was throttled in plain sight by a cruel dockmistress in Collier. Knowing him as I did, but not she who killed him, I must guess that he deserved it. Carlos was my last friend in the world, if friend he was. That was 6 Benerus, 731, and I was fifteen years old.

In my years at the docks. I had watched a cohort of lost children dwindle to only myself. Perhaps this too was a tactic of Los Alondras: to abandon their graduates, and watch them expire in the streets, thus making way for a fresh convoy of young recruits.

In the days after Carlos, I became desperate to leave the docks, no matter the risk, as if the sun's last ray were searching for me. One week after, I gathered what valuables I could find, and struck out for High Harbor in search of bed, board, prison, or death.

Instead, I found Ella and Van.