

Chapter 10: PEACE

Barón Eric Milemortes DeRêche would be the perfect partner for my final act, if I could convince him to place me into the biggest game in the Six Kingdoms and stake me to a king's dot.

After further negotiation in his office, the Barón removed my bonds, and we adjourned to more amenable circumstances.

I learned that we were at La Maison Des Marées, the Barón's home in Pritchard Park. This meant that I must have been unconscious for at least eight hours, asleep for the bumpy carriage ride from Carpo to Baronet.

Barón DeRêche led me to a comfortable and well-lit lounge, a small room attached to the great hall. It overlooked the gardens and contained a pair of divans, a handsome gaming table, and well-stocked liquor console.

I chose a seat and plotted my fastest route to every exit.

"Petel?" offered the Barón, grasping for my preferences. "Or perhaps something stronger?"

"Copper ale, if you have it."

The Barón pursed his lips and shook his head. "This is not a Downstone wayhouse." He chose a green glass bottle and poured out two glasses of sherry.

"Surely," he asked with a smile, "you must have acquired some manner of taste in your days with the Courtlans?"

"Aye," I replied, "I learned not to judge a person by what they drink."

DeRêche chuckled and handed me a glass, gently stroking my finger as he did. I withdrew sharply.

"And you, my Lord Barón?"

He paused, still uncomfortably close to me, but gazing into his own glass. "I drink whatever is being served."

The Barón slowly sucked a tiny bubble between his front teeth. I struggled not to imagine all the things we were actually talking about.

I raised my glass. "To business."

The Barón did the same, with a wink. "To business."

I took a sip of the sticky brown sherry and winced, then set the glass on a small blackwood table. I looked the Barón square in the eye.

He understood my meaning and repeated the words again, but sincerely. "To business."

The Banker's Game was four days away, and I knew the Barón could get me into the room, if I could promise him a healthy return. In fact, the Barón had already been invited, with first choice of seats, but he had not yet replied in the affirmative.

I told him that I was desperate, on the run from the Tanweyrs and the monsters of Coronet Hill. This was true enough, though I didn't tell him why.

I promised that I could quadruple any book, without risk, and had done it many times before. In truth I had rarely sat the center table, and never for stakes of this level. But this was an easy lie, because the Barón wanted to believe it.

To strengthen the lie, I haggled fiercely over the split, though in truth I expected there would be nothing to split.

For the next three days, the Barón and I acted the closest of friends. I performed my talents at his gaming table, without quite explaining how I did it. We spent long nights reviewing the details of our plan: the stories, the secret signals, and the character I would play.

I was to sit as the Barón's second-cousin, Ayen Roque-Chalan, his guest from distant LeBâton. Ayen's long-suffering parents in Lac Viève had

allowed the Barón this singular indulgence for the month, in exchange for a ten-acre vineyard near Pileta. It was an awkward and disgusting alibi, but it fit the Barón like a favorite suit.

Barón DeRêche introduced me to the city's most expensive tailor, their finest wig maker, and most exclusive souter. They worked brilliantly and quickly, and in my finished disguise I could barely recognize myself.

On the night before the Banker's Game, I lay awake at Des Marées, sweating through my sheets. I watched every falling star and listened to every step and cartwheel in the street. At treclochet, a drifter argued with an alley cat. At four bells, a squall blew through the city, and the streets stayed wet until dawn.

That evening, 14 Seeles 738, I strode into the Palazzo di Caranette on the arm of the Barón DeRêche. We were perfumed and decadent, proper and perfect. Like many of the Lord Protégé's guests, we arrived later than the appointed time, but not too late for the game.

After introductions and explanations, courtesies and lies, I took my seat at the center table. I sat the Forest with a rack of eighty jade ingots, each one worth a hundred gold sovereigns.

The Barón carried no money to guarantee these checks. He secured my rack without a word, just a wave of his fat hand and the services of a shiny little bank runner.

I breathed the perfumed air and listened to the pretentious conversations. I overheard various nobles bemoaning their imaginary struggles and dismissing this game as a commoner's pastime. But whatever their words, every heart and eye was fixed on that table. The wealthiest centrales from Naven to Gill Corin were in attendance, ready to be transfixed by the turn of every card.

I was calm and I was terrified.

I introduced myself to the other players, as Ayen Roque from LeBâton, and apologized that I knew so very little of the game. My competitors were cordial and reserved. Each of them spoke to the Barón far more than to me, a quiet acknowledgment that I was but his proxy in the chair.

In the first position, the Crown, was the Lord Protégé's niece Peridot. She was a girl of sixteen, doubtless filling the seat for some rich noble who never quite made it to the door.

In the second seat, the Bank, was Lord Carrol Dryer, a quiet man from Kingsgate who was master of the Merits Bay shipwrights. His titles included several naval ranks which no one quoted exactly the same way, but which Lord Dryer never bothered to correct.

As the Forest player, I sat in the center chair.

Alerro Fontanie, Baronet's Master of Coin, sat the Watch. I was surprised to see such a high-ranking government official at this table, but in this place nothing really should have surprised me.

In the last seat, at the Faith, was a quiet, masked figure called Vis Prelator. They never spoke, never laughed, never engaged with the game but for the slightest gesture. The Prelator family were known as powerful figures within the Capristine faith, shadowy masters of a network of spies. But, mysterious as they were, Vis seemed well known to all in this place.

The Barón greeted each of these players as an old friend, even Vis, smiling and making self-deprecating excuses about his own failing vision. Explaining, without being asked, why he had installed a proxy at the table.

My partner's excuses apparently carried pitch with these players. They would not have held in any other game.

Our plan was simple: I would play like a novice, often looking to the Barón for advice, and making a few believable mistakes. I would run close

to even, winning and losing here and there, and by the end of the night I would be even with the boards, or perhaps slightly ahead.

Meanwhile, the Barón would watch for my signals, and place large bets on selected hands, each wager the size of the full stake I had before me. The Barón would be the hero of the evening, building an impossible book through a string of unlikely winners, as if my one-month campaign against the Tanweyrs were compressed into a single night.

The Barón might feign superstition about his favorite suit, betting long on the Forest when his hunch was correct. Or he might play all suits with equal vigor, all depending on the cards, my signs, and my window into the box.

But our plan was a lie. I held the reins, and I had an entirely different plan of my own. Tonight I would lay bare the hardest truth of the game, though every whispering bone told me I should not.

It felt like stepping from a cliff.

The game began with official remarks from the master of the house, Lord Protégé Lairish Monterrie, Steward of the Palazzo di Caranette. Monterrie introduced each player at the table, listing the Barón's name instead of my own. My sponsor courteously acknowledged his introduction from the floor, and I was all but ignored.

Following were the usual pleasantries, each member of the senior staff introduced, and their credentials listed in detail. Viscompte Reglan Bûcheron, headmaster of the game. Madeira Relés, first dealer. And so on, down to the barkeeps and the counting table staff.

As the boards started turning, I withdrew a little ivory lapin from my snuff pocket. This was the selfsame creature that Ella had returned to me on Pritchard Park, the totem that the Barón had gifted me at her tea shop

nearly nine years before. My little champion.

I hoped they could see her from the ridge.

I knew the dealer from my days in Jasper. Madeira Relés was talented and sharp-witted, a hilarious joker when not at the table, but deadly serious when the boards were turning. She knew every cheat and every grift, better than I did, but luckily she did not know me. I had watched her often from my secret *balcón*, but we never met in person.

Madeira's integrity was beyond reproach. She was just the sort of dealer one should hire for a game like this. If there were any other games like this.

As soon as Madeira took up the cards, I made careful sure that she was authentically herself. I pretended to marvel at her tattoos, recognizing each one as genuine, while she reminded me to place my opening bet.

I carefully picked up one of the Barón's jade ingots, a small town in my hand. I realized one aspect of my performance was genuine: I was not comfortable playing for stakes this high. My hands did not even know what to do.

The Forest started late in the first game, anchored by the green six at card twelve. Madeira soon found the seven, but not before she had buried the eight. I would be facing the cap with a stack of two.

One by one the boards ran down. A short run in red. A broken back-run in blue. A few more cards of my color in a tight reverse, split up by keys in purple and brown. Despite being short, I saw that my suit would have a long discard run on the third pass, and it would rally to win early in the fourth.

At the second bet, I paid my cap, two more ingots, and placed my little rabbit atop my first card. Players do not usually touch the cards, except in tavern games, but I assumed that my marker would be permitted. Or at

least, my alter-ego, Ayen Roque-Chalan, assumed that it would be.

Madeira Relés gave a quizzical look to the banker. He was a stern young man, dressed all in black, watching the game from a chair behind the counting table. He shrugged. The dealer let my lapin stand.

My ivory mascot was certainly not the sign the Barón was expecting. To signal the Forest, I was supposed to scratch my left elbow. He was flustered for a moment, waiting for my secret gesture. After a few exasperated noises, he scratched his own elbow, and I nodded. The Barón hurried to find a ticket runner before the start of second pass.

A casual game of Prima Carta can be rowdy and fast. Palace games are usually more reserved. The Banker's game was almost painfully slow and deliberate. Even after all his confusion, my master still had plenty of time to make his bet.

Meanwhile I was on the lookout for anything untoward at the center table. I assumed that in a game like this, the action must be too slow and the observers too sharp for any dealer to cheat. Still, I kept my eyes fixed on Madeira, feigning awe, but making sure some other secret scheme would not interfere with my own.

The Barón placed a large bet on our suit, and thanks to Madeira's honest hands it came true, paying long odds from a short start. I gathered the pot for my win, as the Barón cashed a ticket for five times his bet. With the money he won on that hand, most players could retire.

And he should have. Barón DeRêche would have been wise to walk away at that moment, from the game, from the scheme, from gambling in general. But I could trust him to be a fool for just a while longer.

To prepare for the next hand, Madeira washed the cards, spreading them around in a giant mess, first face-up and then again face-down. This

was an unassailable fair shuffle in itself, but even more shuffling followed it: the usual riffles and overhand mixes to thoroughly confound the order of the cards.

After the shuffling came a pause for betting. Every player placed one jade ingot on the space in front of them, officially betting their own suit to win. It was strange to see Vis Prelator move at all, but the betting did require it.

Madeira started dealing first pass, discarding one card at a time, and promoting the first card of each suit as the foundation of its stack.

Once a stack had begun, only the next card in sequence could be played up. Others were discarded for now, perhaps to be promoted later. The eight on my seven. A blue six on the blue five, and so on. Ten was the highest card, and so it was followed by the ace, and then the deuce, and so on back around the circle.

The deal continued to the bottom of the deck.

At the end of first pass, every card had been shown, and the discards would not be shuffled. Nothing now could alter the winner, though none but myself could see it. For a moment the cards danced and sorted themselves in my imagination, until the deck was played out full and I saw the winning suit.

And then it was time for the second bet.

If any player wished to remain in the hand, they paid a cover, or "cap," equal to the number of cards now played up in their chosen suit. My suit, the Forest, had a stack of four cards. This was a good start, and indeed mine was the tallest stack.

A flurry of side bets were happening all around me. But as a centrale, my only decision was whether to pay my cap and continue, or to bow out and surrender. I could not typically bet on anyone else's stack, or make

any other side bets, except by way of an agent in the crowd. And although centrales normally assessed and accepted side bets from the *secondi*, this task was handled for me by the *Barón*.

Indeed, all of these centrales seemed to have aides to manage their side bets. In my time at the table, I never saw these players negotiate a single *seconde* bet.

As to my cap, any other player would have bought it. If you are in the lead, but don't know the order of the cards, backing up the leading stack is the only smart play. In fact, centrales rarely pass on the cap unless they are far behind, or can't afford the price, or if they have some strong feeling about how the cards will run out.

I had more than a strong feeling, of course. I had watched the deal and simply knew the answer: that despite my early lead, Crowns would win this hand. The red suit had a reasonable first pass, collecting three cards to my four. And in the end, Crowns would play up first, a promise that no fair dealer could break.

Despite my apparent lead, I passed on my option to continue, which drew confused murmurs from all around me, including from the *Barón* himself. Instead, I quietly placed my *lapin* on the string of Crowns.

Madeira Relés did not know what to make of this. She exchanged confused looks with the banker, who was also at a loss. He, in turn, motioned to *Viscompte Reglan Bûcheron*, the headmaster, who conferred briefly with Lord Monterrie. This was quite amusing to the centrales, despite the delay.

After ten minutes of discussion, Lord Monterrie approached the game, a *lorgnette* clutched in his nimble fingers.

"What are you playing at, my dear?" the Lord Protégé begged of me directly. It was the first time someone had asked me anything without first

acknowledging the Barón.

“My suit is the Forest,” I replied innocently, as if I did not take his meaning.

“Yes, child. But why have you not made your cap?” He wiggled his thin fingers at my rack of checks, as if willing the bet to place itself.

“A hunch,” I said. “I favor the Crown to win.” I humbly gestured towards my lapin.

Lord Monterrie glanced quizzically at Barón DeRêche, who was as confused as any of them. After a pause both the Lord and the headmaster shrugged again.

“Will any players object?” Monterrie asked of the table. No one raised a hand. “Will the Barón allow?” My master, still confused, gestured in the affirmative. “Then carry on,” Monterrie exclaimed with a twist of his hand, and shot the banker a coarse look for having so delayed his game.

The Crown player, Peridot, giggled quietly and found all of this quite amusing. Her cheerful disposition set the tone for the rest of the table. Vis Prelator remained coldly silent, but in what appeared to be a friendly manner.

When the game resumed, the Barón signaled to me again, asking which suit was favored to win, as if my prediction was not abundantly clear. True, I had failed to give him the secret hand-sign for the Crown. But I assumed that my lapin spoke loudly enough.

I could hear several secondi betting the Crown. Peridot conferred with the dealer as to her options. They were quite limited; she could bet her suit, which she had done already; she could buy any unclaimed suit (which included mine), or she could stand away and forfeit her opening wager. This she most certainly did not wish to do.

The rest of the table behaved as expected. Each centrale paid their cap,

as centrales usually do, especially when there are fewer opponents in the pot.

The deck played out. After five passes and some hoots from the crowd when either a red or a green card fell, the Crown did indeed triumph, to a few hearty cheers of "Glory to the Crown."

Doubtless some players in the audience were familiar with the traditions of tavern games. Glory to the Crown indeed.

And so it went for the next hour. We played five more games in which my lapin correctly foretold the winner, games where I refused to bet when I would not win, despite any apparent lead. And the Barón threw a small tantrum each time I refused to use our secret hand signals. Twice I used them simply to put him at ease, though he could just as easily have followed my lapin.

Rather than growing restless, the audience became quieter with each hand. For a while, they seemed to be holding their breath at the turn of each board, as if watching an acrobat step along the last few measures of rope. But eventually the mystery seemed to disappear, as the novice from LeBâton predicted the winner of every hand.

The Watch player, Coinmaster Alerro Fontaine, was clearly the most practical among my opponents, and was the first to believe my predictions. On the third hand, Alerro passed his cap when my lapin did not favor him. Peridot followed his example on the fourth hand, and the other two joined step on the fifth.

My lapin earned a nickname, "Folly," and the crowd began to speak as though she had magical powers.

After the sixth hand went to the Faith, with none but Vis Prelator paying their cap, Headmaster Bûcheron changed out the cards. The

interruption included a quiet but stern conversation with Madeira Relés. As Madeira dealt the seventh hand, Bûcheron made a thorough examination of the original deck. Two hands after that, Bûcheron asked Madeira to surrender the chair.

We played three more hands with Bûcheron at the deal. At every cap, I placed my lapin squarely on the winning suit. Bûcheron scrutinized every move, my own and the others. He dealt every hand to the last card, and checked every one for marks, daubs, nicks, and flaws.

By the tenth hand, two hours into the night, the audience had started to withdraw. Their mood changed from cheering to stunned silence to indifference, like a long day fading slowly into night.

Players who had come for an explosive night of Prima Carta soon found better ways to pass their time. Those few who remained in the hall took their direction from Folly, but by this point the house would no longer honor their bets.

When the last of the *secondi* withdrew, the bankers closed down the counting table. By midnight there was no game, and there would not be again as long as Folly and I remained on the table.

As the game broke, Peridot asked me where I had acquired my clever little lapin. I explained that it had been a gift from Barón DeRêche, and all eyes fell squarely on my sponsor.

By this time I had earned a nickname as well, a crude insult I won't repeat. I didn't mind the abuse; it was the price of the exhibition. And Ayen Roque-Chalan was no more real than the traveling stair; she would vanish on the morning tide.

Some who witnessed that game at the Palazzo di Caranette claimed that Ayen was magical, or possessed by spirits. Some more credibly assumed

that there was a conspiracy with the house. But the only magic in that room was that within Prima Carta itself, a game that lost its glow in one night, in the sight of all present, the biggest players in the game.

PEACE

The tenth card is Peace. A solitary warrior stands with a spear and round shield, alone on an empty field. She is the nothingness to which all things return.

After the great war, after masters and monsters and destruction, only Peace remains. She is neither good nor evil, neither weak nor strong. She is the end of all, reigning over nothing, her weapons idle in her hands.

With Peace, the story begins again. A Hermit will rise from the emptiness, struggling to find his way. The Sisters will give him comfort, the Bandits will betray their trust, the Family will make them safe, and so on, again and again, repeating the cycle forever.

My plan worked a little, and it failed a little.

As Ayen Roque-Chalan, I was led to the deepest chambers of the Palazzo di Caranette, and sternly lectured by faces I have never seen before or since. The mysterious stranger was enjoined to return promptly to LaForêt, and never to approach a Prima Carta game again.

I gave Folly back to the Barón, for she could never be seen in my hand again. And the next morning, we burned my clothes.

Barón DeRêche did win a mountain of money, but the bankers never paid him. They felt that he must have been cheating, though they could not say how. So as promised, I did make him extremely wealthy, but only for one night.

I did shortly track down my accomplices, Los Timidos, who had left me a trail to Feuette and The Copper Sow. I secured from Heriet the full measure of my share in their combined winnings: eighty Crowns, or about 2400 fiora. Enough, at least, to live a few months away from the gambling halls. Of all my partners in this cycle, the most honest had been the little thieves from Hope.

With my alter ego vanished, Barón DeRêche found himself dragged before various constables, the Merchant's Guild, the Capristine Council, and a few other official and unofficial agencies, whose membership included all the disappointed criminals who once took profit from the game.

At each of these inquiries he was forced to explain, as well as he could, the root of his cousin's ability. I had never explained it to him, so I wonder how he ever managed. Perhaps he claimed ignorance, or impossible luck, that Folly was a clockwork miracle crafted by the artificers of Fris.

Most of these panels concluded that the Barón and his cousin had played the game fairly, without cheats or confederates, scams or steals. It was the game itself, not the Barón or his cousin, that was in trouble.

I wished the old man no grave harm, but I also believe this torment served him right. He should have walked away as soon as I changed the plan.

In the years that followed, Prima Carta all but disappeared. Djegos switched their offerings to card games like Monde, Tantalos, and Postes, or dice games like Lío and Tablero.

Having watched one stranger see into that box, in a house whose integrity was beyond question, Prima Carta players began to lose interest in the game. And no djego would back it, for fear of the same fate as the

bank at the Palazzo di Caranette.

Some houses introduced a 55-card deck, adding an eleventh “Emperor” rank, and called their game “Primo” to lure old players into the new game. But this version was a game of pure luck. The dealers shuffled the deck after first pass, removing any hope of seeing the winner at the cap.

Primo was far less engrossing, being less worthy to those players who ever had some small talent for seeing into the box, and all those who thought they did. The new game would never be the same phenomenon as its mother.

The great tickling lure of Prima Carta had always been the notion that one could glimpse a tiny bit into the box; that a clever player could have an edge over the others at the table, by remembering what few cards they could.

The new games could be cheated by all the same players in most of the same ways, but no one could win them purely by memory. To save Prima Carta from players like me, the djegos ruined it for everyone.

With no one trying to beat Prima Carta, and no one trying to protect it, I was finally free. I was once again a citizen of the street, older and wiser, no longer trapped in the service of the game or the spiders who controlled it.

Luckily, only Barón DeRêche knew the identity of his cousin from LeBâton. To my surprise, that the old man held our secret to his grave, perhaps vainly hoping that I might show him some favor because of it.

Whenever the topic of that famous game arose in conversation, I feigned ignorance. I pretended to have my own theories about what happened, as anyone might, and I joined my friends in speculating about how Prima Carta might have been a children’s game in the East, where

everyone has a magic charm to help them see the winner. A lapin? I heard it was a dacet. Ten games? Surely they did not stop so soon.

Even players who were in that room, who saw me play at that table, couldn't tell you who I was, or exactly what had happened. I remember seventy faces from that night: the dealer, the bankers, the runners, the Lord Protégé. None of them remembered me. I would have been embarrassed by this, if it were not so convenient.

We show them the box, and then we close it, and they cannot remember what they saw.

The game of Prima Carta was only one of a thousand wheels in the machine that drove the Principality of Sierin. After that cog was broken, the engine tinkered on, very much as it always had. But to my enduring satisfaction, I had no skills at any of the others.

The djegos faded away in time; no other game could attract the crowds of eager speculators. Gambling houses reverted to ordinary taverns, or rebuilt themselves around a collection of smaller games, like the many tables at The Copper Sow.

The marble platform at Meyer Court became a fountain once again.

With their considerable winnings, Ella and Van bought new names and titles. They opened a tobacco shop near the port of Lejano, far away from their rivals and former lives.

Nikah Fero, their charming dealer-prince, traveled north with the Sisters, and inherited their business and their fortune when they passed from this world.

Lady Merelin Tanweyr earned a fast promotion to Capister of Merits Bay, thanks in large part to my efforts to protect her games. Over the years she rose even higher, and she now holds a seat on the Council of

Merchants, where she pulls threads that lead across the world.

And my poor fat Barón grew ever more feeble over the next few months. He died quietly at Des Marées, alone in his bed.

In the summer of 740, I took a job at Perfecta, a print shop in Aburrida, hand-painting Primo decks. Ready hands still looking for honest work.

I labored there for ten years, and became a printing master, building up enough stake in the enterprise to call myself an owner. We brought fine pulp from the mills at Navene and made our own card paper, printing blacklines on my mistress' steel-sharp press, adding flat colors with a small Fireston, and hand-tinting each detail with care.

Our fine Postas decks were merely curiosities by this time, collector's items for the few punters who still played the old game at home. Prima Carta was once again a rare game for weary travelers, far from the outrageous excess of the castles and djegos of an earlier age.

I sometimes sailed downriver to find a tavern game in Navene, or Briarhaven, but the travelers there preferred the newer, faster games. They could not see the majesty of the game we left behind.

Some years later, at the age of 42, I followed my passion for figures back to the University at Las Vientos, where now I study mathematics with the masters of the art. My colleagues sometimes speak in reverent tones of the mysterious naïf from LeBâton who triumphed over the game of Prima Carta.

In my first year at the University, I helped to restart the famous Professor's Game, now the last traditional djego in Sierin. Our monthly event breathes new life into this treasured pastime, and gives my friends some small hope that the mysterious stranger might someday return.

Canyon Red, 12 Colors, AC 758, Mailand Library, Corin, at the
University at Los Vientos.

Glory to the Crown.