

Chapter 2: THE SISTERS

I left the docks at midnight.

From Downstone I followed Dellabara to Roughlan, the best route up the cliff. Roughlan was an ancient road etched into the side of the blackrock, a thoroughfare connecting the high and low. I dodged a hundred wagons in the dark, with a stone wall to my left and a sheer drop to my right, until Roughlan met Basil Street at the crest of the hill.

Basil was a simple blue-bricked avenue, winding north towards Novel Garden. There was less traffic here, and more light. But the high city offered nowhere to rest. There were no dark corners, no blind alleys, no cargo nets or empty lofts to hide in. Just broad cobbled streets, flickering lanterns, and the peaceful sounds of a city asleep.

Vagrants from the docks were tolerated, even welcomed, in Baronet Low, and we were common as cooks in Tulan and Brickledown. But up the hill we were sure to be captured and jailed, or sent back to our masters in the harbor. In my younger days I had spent many nights hiding from Los Alondras in the alleys and parks of the lower city, but I had never strayed this far.

At three bells I stopped in a tiny green space on Basil Street, aptly called Hyde Park. I hid in a copse of cerioles and slept two hours on a bed of crackling brown leaves. The air smelled of stew and coffee and tobacco and all the delights of the city, and when the sun rose over Merits Bay, I woke with a hunger like a hole in my chest.

My park was a tiny slice of land, too small and steep for a house, where Cinter and Light rose up to meet Basil Street. This tiny tail of greensward twisted down the hill, a hundred feet long and barely twenty feet wide.

Along the top of the park was a small iron bench, where I sat for an

hour to watch the morning unfold. Basil was a broad street of shops, flanked by four-story houses built tight as teeth. The way was just wide enough to turn a cart, and as the sun rose, Basil Street filled with merchants and travelers of every description.

At the corner of Basil and Cinter, across from the park, was a small tea shop. Shortly after seven bells, two plump little children spilled out of it, playing on the street. I brushed off the leaves, straightened my hair, and walked over to greet them.

As I approached, the elder child called out to her mistress within. I saw a wrinkled nose at the window, heard a motherly “harumph,” and then a return to quiet.

Apparently the nose deemed me safe enough to ignore.

The girls were seven and nine. Animated, well-dressed, and fiercely adorable. We chatted about their schooling, their favorite animals, and my own adventures in the lower city, tailored for tender ears. Their names were Catalan and Brianne, nieces to the owners of the shop, Ella and Van Courtlan.

The elder girl, Catalan, made it clear that Van, her aunt’s name, was short for Venera, in the same way that her friends called her Cat instead of Catalan. She also explained that her family name was Spyer, not Courtlan, since Catalan Courtlan would be a very silly name indeed.

I agreed cordially with this sweet nonsense. In my opinion, “Cat Spyer” was equally absurd, sounding rather like a person charged with watching civets without being seen. But I kept that thought to myself, for today I aimed to make new friends.

As we chatted in the street, I heard numbers falling from the window above. Ella and Van were going over their accounts, rather loudly, as they were having some difficulty resolving the ledger.

I let Brie and Cat play quietly for a spell, letting the numbers fall into my ears. Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one-oh-five and ten. I sang out the figures as I saw them in my mind.

“Are you hungry?” asked Brie, the little one. I think she heard my stomach rumbling.

“I am,” I confessed, and the numbers clattered from my head.

“We are having apples with ginger,” she exclaimed. “But you can’t have any, because you’re poor.”

Oh yes. Such a sweet girl.

Van Courtlan was the elder by two years, but stronger and taller than her sister Ella. Van stood at her door now, seven steps above the street, and beckoned her nieces inside.

“Good morning, my Lady. I’m Red,” I said, as the little girls mounted the steps.

“From the Docks,” Brie explained.

“Yes,” said Van, dismissively. And then as cold as a cat’s breakfast, she bade me have a pleasant day, ushered the children inside, and closed the door.

The smell of baked apples tumbled into the street, and my stomach growled again.

“Your ledger won’t balance?” I called through the door.

Ella’s nose appeared at the window. Her wrinkled mouth said “No,” as her tired hands drew the window closed. This was not really an answer about the ledger, as much as it was a declaration of the end of the conversation.

But I was not finished.

I sat on the stoop and closed my eyes, pushing away the hunger and

conjuring the figures in my mind. I sang out the columns as they formed in my sight, eighty-five here, eighty-nine there. A pass to the top, a carry to the side.

Once or twice I opened my eyes, expecting to find a knot of red guards gathered on Basil Street, ready to beat me blue and toss me into a skid wagon. But there was no danger, no patrol. Only a lively broad avenue filled with people going everywhere except this little shop.

The entrance to the tea shop was below street level, a few steps down beside the stoop. Ella and Van were on the first floor above, tending to their nieces, and for half an hour as I contemplated their books, I saw no one even approach the ground floor.

I sang the numbers and pictured the ledger, quietly puzzling over how such an enterprise could make a profit with no customers, until Ella threw open the kitchen window and once more instructed me to leave.

“Your books need balancing,” I said.

“We are fine,” Ella barked.

“You are not,” I replied, “and if you show me your pages, I might could help you.”

“No beggars here,” she said.

“None here neither,” I said. “Just ready hands for honest work.”

Ella withdrew but did not close the window. I heard hushed voices inside, and some giggling from Brie and Cat, which the sisters did not shush. The children’s laughter was a whisper of hope.

Moments later, Van emerged onto the stoop with a huge black book and a bowl of baked apples.

I rose to greet her. I was a ragged mess, smelling of old clothes and cerioles. She did not seem to mind.

I received the book first, not the apples. Van quietly approved.

“My sister likes you,” she said. The first of a thousand well-meaning lies.

“Let’s have a look at this ledger,” I said, and so we sat on the steps and got to work.

Later that day, business at the tea shop did improve slightly. Brie and Cat disappeared into the upper floors, and Ella tended to the shop below. A few well-dressed clients went in and out of the lower door, while Van and I perched on the stoop and puzzled over the accounts.

“Who was it taught you to cipher?” she asked me after some time.

I thought for a moment. “I worked a season at a card printer’s.” I replied. I thought it best not to mention my time as a caverner, hiding in a sweltering tent, adding up columns of horse tack while my mistress read the cases.

By now I had devoured the baked apples, as well as some bread and cheese. We discovered the principal flaw in the ledger, which was that Van and her sister used a different method to record inventory purchases. It was a small difference, but after a few hundred entries it compounded into a major error.

It was no secret why I had not yet been allowed inside the house. Ella found me thoroughly disgusting, which she made plain in her attitude each time she emerged with a question or a notion for her sister.

As the sun drifted home and the shadows crept up the city walls, Ella emerged once more, this time with a small pouch of coins. By then Van and I had finished the books, and we were chatting pleasantly on the steps about nothing in particular.

Ella pressed one silver fiorin into my hand, and pointed north along Basil Street. “Two blocks up, two blocks left,” she said. Van chuckled.

"A room?" I asked.

"A bath," said Van. "At the House of the Golden Swan."

"Sounds fancy," I said. "But might it be a waste, if I haven't a place to sleep?"

"Not our problem," grumbled Ella.

"You should stay with us," said Van, with a stern glance at her sister. "The girls will be gone in the morning, back to their mother's in Icton."

Ella clearly did not want me inside her shop, bath or no, and said as much with her eyes.

"Oh, cave and cavern!" cried Van. "We let Barón Cera into this house twice every week. Surely this poor child can bed in our spare room."

I had no idea who this Barón was, or how his custom could be worth tolerating someone more wretched than myself, but I saved my questions for another time. The bath, and the bed, were welcome gifts.

And the next morning, we burned my clothes.

THE SISTERS

The second card is The Sisters, two old women stirring a cauldron. The Sisters represent community, the coming-together of wanderers into groups, each soul providing that which they are suited to give, and taking only what they need.

The cauldron is a stew, a mix of many traits and skills. As the metaphor suggests, each member contributes what they can, and the result is greater, stronger, than any of the parts.

The Sisters are the social contract, the unspoken bond between civilized people, to share our gifts and live in harmony. It is a promise that we presume of each child at birth, a promise that is enforced only through the

morality of common souls.

This pledge is the foundation, and the lie, of all civilization.

Over the next few days, I helped the Sisters square their books. In digging through the records, I discovered that they had been paying queer prices indeed for some of their most valued stock.

We found that a lean trader from LaForêt, called Berantor DiSimon, was overcharging for several staples: coffee, tobacco, cinnamon, and the like. But his apprentices had not been apprised of his scam, which explained the occasional discrepancies. DiSimon's seconds had made the critical error of charging a fair price.

But the Sisters were not ruffled by this thievery, or the many other loopholes and dead ends I found in their records. Many huge losses were dismissed with a wave, and the ladies gave the impression that there were many secrets to running a tea shop that I simply would not understand.

I understood well enough, that the costs of their goods meant very little to the Courtlan Sisters. They treated their Basil Street shop as more of a pastime than an enterprise, and they cared not a sentime that some days would pass with no sales at all.

I soon met the dreaded Barón Cera, whose appearance was not so dire as the descriptions would suggest. But he did give me the most lecherous stare and a rather unwelcome caress, which made more clear what the Sisters despised about him.

Along with the Barón, the Sisters received many other wealthy nobles and travelers in their little shop. These customers usually came alone, often at odd hours, and always for the shortest of visits. They sometimes purchased something small, but they rarely browsed the shop, and they usually took away only what the sisters had prepared for them, neat little

packages with mysterious contents.

As the weeks passed, I gained the Sisters' trust. They let me watch over the shop in the slow hours, and I learned the daily chores of the business. Van taught me fine lettering for shop tags and signs, and at midwinter we repainted the shopfront and hung a new shingle.

We could have hung a thousand shingles from here to Iona for all the difference it made. But the busyness of their business didn't trouble Ella and Van. Their true profession was a mystery to me, until I started playing cards.

In one of his many attempts to ingratiate himself, Barón Cera had given me a Postas deck. It was a fine deck, not from de Buenas, but made by some exotic printer on the Shackun Coast. The cards were exquisitely hand-tinted, and each version of the rank art was tailored to its suit. It felt almost a shame to mix these cards, for fear of wearing them out, but to my relief they were sturdy and took to play with ease.

To pass the afternoons in my quiet corner of the shop, I sat on the floor and dealt Prima Carta to myself. I had a little ivory lapin (another gift from the Barón), and after first pass I would try to see the winning suit, and mark it with the lapin. Then I would deal the game out, to check that I was right.

The game of Prima Carta is not fast. One hand can take five minutes, even if one is playing alone, and it's much slower in a proper djego, as a hundred players make bets on the turn of every card.

With the Barón's beautiful deck and some weeks of practice, I became half-decent with the deal and the shuffle, though I still spilled the cards from time to time. But I honed one talent to perfection: I could predict the winner every time.

I thought very little of this. It was only a way to pass the hours, until

the day Van caught me at it. She had seen me play before, but hadn't bothered to watch an entire hand until one particularly slow afternoon in Colors.

I dealt first pass, dropped my lapin on the Faith, and finished out the deal. Faith was the winner. Van chuckled.

I dealt another hand. This time I marked the Crown. "Honor to the Crown," I declared, as I saw that I had an audience. I dropped my lapin squarely on the red stack.

"It's 'Glory to the Crown,'" Van corrected me. I had heard the phrase somewhere, and perhaps I had remembered it wrong. Or perhaps it was different from place to place. But Van spoke with the confidence of an expert, so I deferred to her.

"Glory to the Crown," I repeated, and began the second pass.

Van replied with the proper answer, "Glory be." She settled on her high stool behind the counter, and watched me deal out the rest of the game.

When the Faith rushed ahead on the second pass, Van shook her head and made a show of returning to other duties. But in the discards were a string of three Crowns waiting to pour out, and ultimately the Crown did win the hand.

At this victory, Van leaned forward, resting her elbows on the counter and watching me closely. I had very little skill at shuffling, but even so, I began to think that she suspected me of cheating. That was hardly my way, but suspicion breeds.

For her benefit, I mixed the cards thoroughly, and offered that she could do the same. "Just make a fair cut," she directed, and I complied.

The shop filled slowly with a reddish glow as the last rays of daylight played across Basil Street. Specks of dust danced on golden sunbeams, and the light stuttered through passing cartwheels in the final moments of the

day.

Van called upstairs. "Sister, come and see!" She fixed her eyes on my hands. I paused, ready to deal. Should I wait? Van motioned for me to proceed.

I dealt first pass. Ella descended halfway through this, cranky about something in the kitchen. Van tugged on her sleeve and pointed at me and my game.

After first pass, I stopped and looked up at them. Van bit her lip and smiled. Ella stared at us like bodies in the way.

"The Watch?" asked Van. A fair guess, as the brown suit was ahead by four cards to three. It was the safest choice if you didn't know the truth. But the Faith, the purple suit, was going to win.

I placed my lapin gently on the Watch, then pretended to second-guess myself. After a moment I quietly nudged it over to the Faith.

Ella spoke at last. "What is all this?" she asked her sister, still unimpressed.

Van squeezed her sister's hand and motioned me to continue.

"I'll take the Crown," barked Ella. The red suit had ended first pass with just two cards, and Ella was simply making the cheapest bet. A fair wager if you can get good odds for it.

I smiled at Van. "You've got the Watch?" I asked.

Van shrugged. "Aye, the Watch," she said. I think she felt certain I'd be right about the Faith, but there was no money at risk, so she might as well choose another suit.

I dealt second pass and my suit moved ahead. And it stayed ahead until the end. The Faith won, the Watch in second, and Van let out a squeal. Ella rolled her eyes and settled to. She took her sister's point that this was not my first accurate guess.

“How are you doing that?” asked Ella, with some interest.

I admit that this was a difficult question. Not because the answer was hard, but because it was easy. Seeing the winner in Prima Carta was rather like looking into a box that contains a cat, closing that box, and then recalling that there is a cat inside.

If you ask someone how they can possibly know that there is a cat in that box, they will answer you with much the same tone as I answered Ella.

“How am I doing what?”

Of course I understood that to see and remember the order of a stack of thirty-odd cards, and to run them out through several passes, is certainly harder than remembering that there is a cat in a box. But what I did not understand was the sheer breadth of the difference.

Indeed, as I would eventually learn, predicting the winner in Prima Carta was a pure impossibility for almost everyone else. Most people could look into this box, see the cat, and seconds later have no idea what was inside.

Prima Carta players placed their bets on hunches, or on the tiny clues they could remember. Some guessed right, and some guessed wrong. Some bet on leaders, some bought low stacks at good odds, and some doggedly played their favorite suit. Some players even made their living at the game, as Ella and Van would soon show me.

Despite being outlawed by the Crown, games of Prima Carta could be found in taverns and palaces all over the Principality of Sierin. It was the most popular game of the age, earning vast wealth for the gaming houses and their masters, mainly the aristocrats and merchant families of Baronet City.

The Courtlan Sisters were connected to this business. And soon I would

be too.