

### Chapter 3: THE BANDITS

Van grabbed her coat and satchel. "We're going out," she declared, and no matter what business Ella might have been up to, she clearly needed to abandon it and come along.

I was required as well, though I felt thoroughly unprepared. Since coming to live with the Sisters, I had rarely left the shop except to run their errands, and once to fetch new clothes. Now we were going "out," to a place the Sisters knew, but would not say.

Ella looked me up and down, trying to decide whether I was dressed for this. I watched her eyes tell the story.

You can't go out looking like this, she thought. Ah, but then, you have nothing else to wear, have you?

She snatched a floppy red hat from a high shelf, knocked off the dust, and plopped it onto my head.

"There it is," she said, like a last roll. "Out we go."

There it was, and out we went.

Baronet is a cluster of cities. A grimy port, a bustling metropolis, an ancient fortress, a glittering seat of power. It is a ribbon of white walls and red tile, perched atop a black stone cliff at the edge of a trackless desert. It is the capital of Sierin, the beginning and end of a thousand roads.

The new city is above, and the old city below, with long fingers stretching around the north end of Merit's Bay, and ancient tunnels cut deep into the blackrock. In some places the city towers seven stories above ground, and five more beneath.

The first people on the Magan Coast were cave-dwellers, desert folk who burrowed into the cliffs. They lived in winding ink-black tunnels,

running deep into the mountains and down to the sea.

Over the ages, Sierin became a waypoint for every trader and conqueror from the four points of the compass. Great battles raged, with dragons and fire and blood. Tribes from every land marched over the freckled desert, building their cities on this hallowed ground.

Slowly the wars of blood and sand gave way to new battles: factions and families, spirits and prophets, foxes and lions, fighting with words in the courtyards and counting houses of this modern world.

But the threat of war is always there, simmering beneath the surface, a hundred ancient grudges ready to erupt into flames. We cannot live in fear of this, so we ignore the danger for the sake of our sanity, like barabas at the edge of the volcano.

As the sun disappeared behind the Alcinor, the Sisters and I walked the few short blocks from Basil Street up to For Cater, where we hired a coach to the Lower City.

While our wagon rattled down Roughlan Way, we devised a set of hand signals, representing the five suits in the Postas deck. Three fingers up for the Crown, an open palm for the Faith, and so on. The Sisters explained that we might need these signals later, to communicate across a crowded room.

From Dellabara we continued on foot, through the maze of narrow streets along the base of the blackrock. We wound through dark alleys and underways until we were deep inside the cliff itself, splashing through tunnels in the dark.

The Sisters surely knew where they were going, but they seemed to have no idea what to say about me. I was described as their valet, or their child, or their cousin, depending on where we were and who we passed.

Without their help I would never have found this place. But somewhere in a secret chamber far beneath the Old City, a game of Prima Carta was playing tonight, and the sisters wanted me to see it.

A strange energy travels through the blackrock. The tunnels sing a dull, knocking song that carries forever, like nothing above the ground. The sound of two men chatting in a cave can echo for miles. Not their words, but the rhythm of their speech.

As we approached the chamber I heard a hundred voices muttering through the walls of stone. They cheered, they argued, they rejoiced as one. As we drew down the final passage and into the light of the djego, it sounded as if the earth herself were singing to us.

We met one more gatekeeper, and Ella once again described me as her valet. My absurd red hat made this an ungainly proposition. But the guard seemed not to care in the slightest, and she took one silver fiorin for each of us, to bend the rope and let us pass.

The room was a sort of tavern-theater, a gathering place carved deep in the solid rock, like nothing I have ever seen. The Sisters called it Kerat's Corner.

Here in this secret space we were safe from law, safe from heat, safe from the light of day. This place might once have been a coldroom or a cistern, a jail or a crypt. But tonight it was a bustling djego, a literal underground game of Prima Carta.

The ceiling was twelve feet at the center, braced by fat oaken pillars and ironclad beams. At the center of the room was a raised platform, about waist-high, with a cloth-covered gaming table upon it. There were five seats for players, and one more for a dealer, and all were empty. Surrounding the platform were twenty smaller tables, and at the back of the room was a sparkling longwood bar stocked with ales and spirits.

Passages and doors led away from this hall into untold side rooms, perhaps to a kitchen, and almost certainly up through stairways and tunnels into White Hill. I could not begin to guess where those paths might emerge, for we seemed to have walked half a mile underground.

Ella and Van chose a quiet spot on the ridge, the periphery of the djego. After a few minutes, a spirited housekeeper called Carla emerged to welcome her players and prepare for the game.

Runners and brokers buzzed about the room, making introductions and marking up lines of credit. An attendant came to our table with drinks. I sampled Ella's lager, but she would not let me take one of my own.

"Keep a sharp head," she said. And so I drank clearwater.

One by one, the centrales entered and took their seats. These were the key players, the wealthy gamblers at the center table who interacted directly with the cards, while everyone else placed bets on them.

I recognized the first centrale from the tea shop. He was called Hector Grietz, a gaunt sea-talker whose whiskers shot from his face like cactus thorns. Hector sat in the fourth seat, taking the Watch.

The Forest player, in the middle seat, was an elderly lady from Meere wearing a red feathered cap. Coriol Dower, whom I also knew from the tea shop, sat the Crown, the first chair. I did not recognize the players sitting the Bank or the Faith.

A short, plump barker climbed up onto the bar at the back of the room, welcoming the audience and explaining the laws of the house. These were mostly a list of betting rules that I didn't understand, as well as a detailed catalog of the available refreshments, with heartfelt apologies for those favorites not in the supply. It was apparent that no one here needed to hear the basic rules of the game.

The barker introduced the dealer, who was waiting at a low table

beside the platform. He was a taut little man named Heller, and he acknowledged the introduction and the applause, and bounded up and into the dealer's seat.

Heller wore a tight waistcoat and leather breeches, with arms bare to the shoulder. Down his arms were strings of colorful tattoos, which Van explained were the lauds of his career. More important, she explained, his naked arms made it harder for him to cheat.

I could not contain my amusement at the pageantry of this event. Was all of this spectacle necessary for a simple game of cards?

Van leaned into me with a whisper, pointing at the racks of silver ingots stacked before of each player. "Each of those checks," she explained, "is worth two hundred fiora."

I was appropriately impressed. And this was not nearly the biggest game in town.

## THE BANDITS

The third card is the Bandits, three rough-looking characters with short knives and bags of loot. They represent the lowest among us, those who take for themselves without giving back.

The Bandits are but the first wave of ills that befall any civilized group. They are simple, selfish thieves, unwilling to bend to the law or to abide the common standard.

The bandits do not represent evil, merely disconnection. They point up the core flaw in any society, which is that no single set of rules can accommodate all players. And those who see no value in the covenant will always find a way to live without it.

As Heller dealt the first round, I realized that we were in a terrible position. From our table, and indeed from almost anywhere in the room, it was impossible to see the cards in play. The room had no heights, no vantage points, no places where one could stand and watch the deal, unless they were very close to the center.

I could sometimes glimpse a card as it turned over, but usually I could not, and there didn't seem to be any good position in the room where I could.

The Sisters understood, but they were at a loss. I apologized for being useless. I could have demonstrated my skills just as easily back at the shop, without all this fuss. It had surely been informative to see the game in action, but I wasn't likely to predict any winners in here.

"Is there a spotter?" Asked Van. "Surely they can see."

Ella shrugged and nodded towards the back of the room, near the bar.

Van explained that djegos sometimes employed a spotter, an expert at the game, quietly watching the turn of every card and checking for anything irregular. We studied the back of the room, to see if someone were there, but we could not see anything from our position.

Directly above the center table, slung on chains from the rafters, was a small black board. Ella suggested that it might be a mirror, which might provide a clear view to a spotter behind the bar.

Van walked over to explore, moving across the room through the thick knot of side tables and secondi. These, the second rank of players, were gathered around the center table, watching and betting on the game. The secondi could place bets against the house, or against the centrales, via a system of runners and tickets. As the game proceeded, many eager players gathered around the center table, blocking our view even more.

We briefly lost Van in the crowd, but she emerged on the other side, in

a clear spot by the bar. She shook her head and shrugged, then vanished back into the crowd.

While Van was scouting, Ella and I watched two full games, enjoying the thrill of the crowd, but not all that invested in the outcome.

Van returned at the end of the second game. "It's a lost cause, I think," she explained. "There is a spotter, but I couldn't see the cards in his mirror. He is seated on a trap stool behind the bar, writing notes and muttering to himself. I think we couldn't use his mirror unless we were sitting on his lap."

"What is he muttering?" I asked.

Van thought about it for a moment, struggling to recall. "The names of the cards, I think."

I decided to take a look for myself.

I left the Sisters and moved into a position near the spotter. He was indeed muttering card names to himself, names I did not know. Each card in the deck had a clever nickname, perhaps based on tradition, or his own imagination. The Red Nine was called Red Burn, or Red Sun, or something similar depending on his mood. As the deal went down, he called these names and scribbled marks on a little black slate.

For three full games I listened to the spotter's cant and watched him make his marks. When he chatted with the barmen between passes, I learned that his name was Steed Holla, that he preferred dark ales, and that he was engaged in some sort of never-ending squabble with his wife, or ex-wife, or lover. That last detail was not clear. There might have been more than one.

Steed Holla was a sour man with sad eyes, forty long years old. His chin was flecked with stubble too short to call a beard. He was neither thin nor plump, neither tall nor short, but was singularly cruel in his words and

thoughts.

When the boards were idle, Steed Holla was a fountain of cavils for anyone who could hear. He was a man determined to be wronged by the travails of his ordinary life. But when the cards were in play, Steed Holla became a Solen blade: a sharp, focused, card-tracking machine.

He muttered a new name with every turn. Great Gannet, the Red six. Holly Tree, the Green three. I could not guess where these names came from, though I was determined to learn them all.

I found an empty barstool behind the spotter, and slightly to his left, to get a better look at his notes. He was tracking the game with a mess of lines and arrows, which suggested that he was trying to see the winner. But his system was awful, and was probably hurting more than it helped. Regardless of its efficacy, this cipher seemed only for his own amusement. He wasn't sharing his predictions with anyone, as far as I could tell.

But I was.

After six games, about an hour of play, I felt that I was seeing or hearing every card as it fell. After the first pass of game seven, when all the stars were hung, I caught Ella's eye and twisted my wrist in the air, as if working a key. This was our signal for Locks, the Bank. She repeated the signal to me, and then fell to chattering with her sister.

A few tense minutes later, Locks did win the hand. This was not much of a surprise, as the suit had been leading the whole way. But nevertheless, the Sisters were animated with delight.

Before the next game, Steed rubbed the marks from his slate, and I noticed that he had chosen The Watch in that game. Clearly his system needed work. I almost offered to help him, but then I remembered who had brought me.

On the next game I missed three cards on the first pass, but Steed's



notes were helpful. I pictured the cards again and couldn't see the winner, so I shrugged at the Sisters as I had done many times already. Ella made a gesture that said "just make a guess" but I shrugged again.

As the bets were closing, I caught a glimpse. Purple pushed every other color out of my mind. I signaled The Faith with an open palm, albeit with some hesitation.

The Faith didn't win that round. It finished second to The Crown. I must have reversed two cards in my head.

Over the next ten games, I predicted the winner eight times, gave one more wrong answer, and one more complete shrug. Reading marks over Steed's shoulder and translating his coded muttering did not provide the strongest foundation for this trial. Especially since he sometimes used the same name for two different cards, and also seemed to have an endless number of nicknames for the Ten of Cups. Marjer, Satin, Lila, Banice. I deduced this must be a list of every ex-lover in his diary of disappointed souls.

I later learned that the Ten of Cups was commonly called Alana Caprice, which made sense. But Steed never called her by that name.

In the end, the experiment at Kerat's Corner worked to the Sisters' satisfaction, but not to mine. I told them that I would prefer to work in a place where I could actually see the cards.

And soon I would.

Later that night, as our coach clattered up Roughlan in the moonlight, the Sisters and I reviewed our results. Over six hours in Kerat's Corner, we had watched about thirty games of Prima Carta. Of these, I had correctly predicted only nine winners, but in my defense, I had only wrongly predicted two. The others, I argued, should be ignored.

As we neared the tea shop, the sisters spoke in conspiratorial half-sentences. They had been keeping some secret from me, and they smiled coyly to each other as we all descended from the coach.

Van paid our driver and sent him along, then handed me a small pouch of silver. It contained seventeen fiora, just over half a crown. I poured the coins into my palm and they glittered in the lamplight.

“You can find your own bed now,” cackled Ella, delighted at the notion of moving me out of her home.

Ella then asked if I wished to gather my things, and laughed cruelly, as if pretending to have briefly forgotten that I had no things to gather. Van gave her sister a look that was both loving and withering, as only a sister can do.

And with that, they disappeared up their front steps and left me alone on the street, much as they had found me, but with the book for a week’s rest cooling my hand.

I still had their absurd red hat.

I slept that night on the street, of course. It was nearly dawn, and I wasn’t wasting a silver piece on some half-night at the Golden Swan.

The next day I invested in new shoes and a bath, which ran me dear. But I wanted to make a fair impression to secure a decent room at a good price, so it seemed a worthy expense.

With twelve fiora remaining, I found a wayhouse six blocks from Basil Street. It was a lovely little inn at the edge of the Colina, called the Olan Whail (the Elder Whale). My twelve silver coins would buy me a room and supper each day, for the next twelve days.

I assumed that Ella and Van would seek my help again shortly, and so I

looked for them morning and night. But to my dismay, their shop was closed, and the Sisters were nowhere to be found.

On the sixth night, with five fiora left in my pocket, I decided to hunt for a Prima game on my own. I thought I might play a little and double my stake, to raise the book for another week at the Old Whale.

I tried to find my way to Kerat's Corner, which proved quite the half-dance. There was no sign of the gatekeepers we had seen a week before, no familiar faces on the street. I had no idea where that djego might be buried, or indeed if that game was even happening.

I cast about in Tetherway, asking strangers where a punter might find a game. I was rewarded with laughter and quiet stares. Prima Carta was forbidden by the Crown, and so speaking openly of the game was a risky business. If the Sisters had been asking the way to their game, it must have been in some secret code. But they probably knew the way.

I searched the docks for clues, or for anyone I might recognize from Kerat's Corner or the tea shop. I thought perhaps I might even meet Heller, the bare-armed dealer, or the angry spotter Steed Holla, for surely they lived nearby. I checked in the Brewer Street taverns with no success. But late in the evening I did find a small game, in a taphouse on Water Street.

As I downed the alley towards Water, still searching for a face in the street, I heard a stout voice calling through a tavern window, shouting out the cards as they fell. Little Brownie, Dragon Seed, The Red Man. The calls tumbled from a back room window in a house called the Duck and Trumpet.

Knowing that it might be unwise to ask the barkeep directly, I stood at the bar and quietly set my pouch of five silver coins on the polished longwood.

The barkeep gave me a puzzled look.

“Glory to the Crown,” I whispered with a wink.

The barkeep weighed my purse in her hand, dumped the five coins on the bar, shook her head, and gestured towards the back room door, to indicate that I should look beyond it.

I thanked her kindly and gathered my stake.

Tavern games of Prima Carta are far less structured than in a proper djego. This is the game in its simplest form, just a few travelers gathered around a table, each taking their turn at the deal. No runners, no secondi, no counting table, and no bets for the house.

There were only four players in this game, all sailors, with an empty chair for the Watch. Across the room were three more cut from the same cloth, who made occasional bets against each other, and sometimes against one well-moneyed player at the center table.

That man was called Jeret Carver. He was a weathered old sea dog who seemed to be the anchor of the party, and the wealthiest person in the room. His suit was the Bank, appropriately, but he took bets on any order.

The starting bet at this table was one fiorin, and I had only five. I could easily break my book in one hand.

I stood to the side and watched the game for a pass, while the players watched me. This group clearly knew each other, and had doubtless all spilled from the same frigate at first light. I felt like an intruder in a private game. But I had been shown in, and tacitly welcomed, and I figured surely these players would be happy to win a stranger’s money.

“Canyon Red,” I said to everyone at once. Jeret Carver looked me up and down. I extended my hand and added, “Call me Red.”

“Jeret Carver,” he said and shook my hand. “And these here are the boys.” Jeret waved around the room at six crusty sailors who were not all

“boys,” but I took his meaning. They were, as I had guessed, a knit group of friends, and I would be the single stranger among them.

Jeret Carver was a boisterous carpenter’s mate, handy with a hammer and a bottle. He had the ruined hair and fat poke of a man just returning from the sea. He wore dirty black boots, pinstriped tars, and a faded blue overcoat that had surely outlived two previous owners.

Jeret’s “boys” were friendly enough. It seemed I would be welcome, as long as I didn’t win too much of their money. In truth, I would have been happy just to double my stake.

I held out my five silver coins and nodded at the empty chair. Jeret laughed, and the boys followed along. He kicked back the chair and asked my fancy.

I held out the coins in my hand, making it plain that I could not afford a drink. He laughed and called for red wine. Then he asked me again.

“Now then, ‘Red,’ what’s your fancy?” he said, nodding at the game.

I looked at the cards. The game was frozen after first pass, the last discard was on the stack. Jeret Carver was ready to deal and asking me to place a bet.

However, I had been glancing around the room during first pass, and had seen only about half the cards.

I shrugged and gave the honest impression that I was out of my depths. I knew nothing of side-bets or middle-game entries, to say nothing of betting with a short book. I only knew how to predict a single suit to win.

Jeret squinted. Drew breath. Looked down and to the right. Muttered “Eh.”

This meant, in my best estimation, that he was perplexed that I had joined his game with almost no money, and with no idea of what I was doing. But, and this was my understanding of his glance at the floor, the

game should always welcome new players, and therefore its practitioners are obliged from time to time to educate these players, despite the trouble.

This last point was punctuated by his muttering of "Eh."

Jeret explained a few of my options. I could bet any suit to win, against the player who had bought it, if they agreed to cover. This was a common secondi bet, essentially insurance for that suit, where the player who covered my bet would win my money if their suit lost, or would collect enough to pay me off if their suit won.

I could also buy the open suit, The Watch, as a mid-game entry. I could do this only if all the players agreed to let me in. In this bet, I paid both the bet and the cap together. The "cap," or continuing bet, was based on the number of cards now in the stack, which stood at three.

I considered betting the Bank, the blue suit, to win, if Jeret would agree to odds. At the moment, the Bank was tied with the Crown at four cards, but if my recollection was right from what little I saw in the first pass, the Bank was not the favorite to win.

Whatever I chose, this single bet could easily be the end of my night. There were no good options, and truly I should have held back, or walked out of that room and thanked Jeret Carver for the lesson.

But if Prima was to be my game, then I needed to play it. And perhaps this was the only way.

"Buy the Watch?" I offered, and the other players laughed. The watch stood at three cards, while the Crown and the Bank were tied at four. One by one, the players agreed to the bet, and so I placed four of my five silver coins into the pot, and took the empty seat beside the stack of brown cards.

Jeret pounded the table with his fist and swept up the discards, excited to deal the next pass. He shouted the name of each card as they spilled out of the deck, in the same voice I had heard from the alley outside. Sun Dog.

The Old Crow. Lady Alana.

By the middle of the second pass, I could see that my suit would lose. The winner would be either Crowns or Locks. It didn't matter which, because my money was spent. I had placed my wager, and now I could only watch the cards run out.

Crowns won the hand, with The Bank a close second, and the Watch (my suit) finished dead last. My new friends offered many insincere condolences for my loss, and bade me a fond farewell.

And so vanished four of my last five silver coins, and along with them my next week of bed and board.

The Sisters returned to Basil Street two nights later. By then I had moved back into the shop, which I assumed they would not mind, so long as they were not at home.

They were surprised to find me there, as they had given me enough for a fortnight's lodging. I entertained them with the tale of my adventure at the Duck and Trumpet, and they admonished me for tackling a back-room game on my own.

They told me that I would always have a hard time beating the game alone, considering my particular skills. One person cannot treat with both the players and the cards, a dance which had indeed proved a challenge.

Over the past two weeks, Ella and Van had sailed up the Magan Coast, looking for Prima Carta games. They had sailed as far as Gill Corin, trading and bartering supplies for their store, and searching for high-value djegos where we could practice our skills.

In Brevia City, they learned that a group of students and professors ran an open game of Prima at the University in Los Vientos. The Mailand Library wasn't a proper djego, and no betting was allowed, but it had a

peaceful setting, gregarious players, and a discreet balcony for observation. The Professor's Game was played only for research, and so operated comfortably outside the reach of the law.

The next university game was six days away, time enough for us to pack our kits and sail four days up the coast. It sounded like a perfect place for the Sisters and I to try various signals and strategies with no risk. Ella explained all this to me with uncharacteristic delight.

The Sisters had also spotted a few djegos in Alenny and Breva, enough that we could spend the next month chasing the boards, if we found a system that worked. The university game would be aptly ideal for this research.

The next morning we closed the shop again, and set sail for Los Vientos.