

Chapter 4: THE FAMILY

We sailed on the schooner *Las Dunas*, three days northeast from Merits Bay to the mouth of the Bright, and then by mule boat upriver for another day to the University at Los Vientos.

I learned in this voyage that I had no love for the sea. Until then, my longest trip on a sailing vessel had been the two-hour ferry across the calm waters of Merits Bay. The open sea was far less accommodating, and the rapids of the Bright River were not much better.

Along the way, when I could concentrate, Van taught me the finer points of *Prima Carta*. I learned the rules of side betting, including the basic terms, odds, and customs. According to Ella, none of this knowledge would be important in the Professor's Game. But Van declared that I would need it soon enough.

A formal *djego*, from *casa de juego*, might contain up to three distinct ranks of players. These were the *centrales*, the *secondi*, and the *vigilantes*.

The *centrales*, also called "gerari" ("the brave") were the five players seated at the center table, each the owner of a single suit. These players were the big money, and their action was the focus of the room. In the most famous games, it was a rare privilege to sit at this table. They played a sedate, almost tedious game, while chaos unfolded around them.

In a tavern game, the distinction of *centrale* was irrelevant, as these players usually constituted the entire game. As they did at the Duck and Trumpet, tavern players usually pass the deck around the table, dealing the cards for themselves. But in a proper *djego*, a contract dealer handled the cards, and the *centrales* merely watched and wagered.

The *secondi* were the second rank of bettors, gathered close around the center table, but not directly involved in the game. These players could

wager against the centrales, or against the house, with a collection of bets which the centrales did not normally make. The *secondi* were usually ambitious, fast-talking types, always making deals and trying to find the sharpest path through the game.

The *vigilantes*, or *espíritu*, were a third rank of low-valued players, often relegated to a balcony, or at least found at greater remove from the center. *Vigilantes* played their own variety of bets against the house, and each other, but they could not engage directly with the centrales. This was the main distinction between the second and third tiers.

In practice, there was not always a clear distinction between the ranks, if indeed those ranks were present at all. But generally speaking, the outermost bettors wagered the least money, interacted least with the center table, and suffered the worst odds in the game.

All of this betting was managed through a combination of ticket runners and agents. The formal *djego* system allowed a room of a hundred people to play together in the same game.

As the wealthiest players in the room, the centrales usually won and lost the dragon's share of the money. The house had no advantage over these players, because they were betting only against each other, or against the *secondi*.

Therefore, each centrale usually paid a small fee to the *djego* for their time at the table, which created some small value for the house. Along with this, there were several customary wagers and gratuities, the details varying from place to place, which the centrales paid directly to the dealer, or to the officials of the house.

Centrales were the true professionals, moving from house to house and gambling for their livelihood. They survived on their wits, or at least they believed that they did.

In truth, most of these players didn't really win, and they didn't really need to. They were rich beyond their books, and they played for the thrill and the challenge. Centrales always spun great tales of their victories at the table, and to hear them speak one would think there were no losers in the game. But whatever the truth, whether winning or losing, it was their gold that kept the game alive.

The centrales could accept certain bets from the *secondi*, always at their discretion. There were customs and traditions that kept those wagers fast and fair, but there was also room for negotiation and craft. When a *seconde* backed a center suit, for example, they were essentially buying a share of that player's win. If that *centrale* should lose, the backing bet cushioned the loss. Negotiating these bets at the right odds could mean a tidy profit for a smart player, on either side of the line.

But when the *secondi* played against the house, they chose from a set of fixed wagers, each weighted so that the house won slightly more over time. For example, before the deal, a *seconde* could place a Palo Bet, taking any suit to win, which usually paid four to one. But there was an exception: the Palo Bet paid only half, two to one, if the first card was the Ace. It was this exception that created a long-term advantage for house.

Some centrales made the bulk of their winnings by wagering against the *secondi*, earning more in those bets than they paid to sit at the table. And so, both directly and indirectly, the *secondi* also financed the operation of the game.

The *vigilantes* were the low-stakes gamblers, the spectators who sat on the ridge or in the balcony. As individuals they didn't win or lose very much. But as a group, they could still be a major source of profit for the house.

Vigilante bets were often worse than the corresponding *secondi* bets,

being smaller wagers at worse odds. For example, their Palo Bet paid only 1:1 if the first card was an Ace. The distinction was that the player could wager far less on this, which explained the weaker return. Obviously any player could choose between either set of bets, floating between the second and third tiers as their book allowed.

The fourth column of the djego's profit was hospitality. A gambling house is in the business of entertainment, after all, so whenever the players are not betting, they can be eating, drinking, and enjoying all the other delights that the place may offer. In some places this value is higher than all the others combined, while other houses offer almost nothing.

This intricate web described the most elaborate scenario. Of course, there were many variations and shades of blue in this theme, from rare events in stately castles, to casual back-room tavern games with a broken deck and three bedraggled punters, carding for stacks of pocket change.

In the tavern games there were no house bets, no dealers, no security, no counting tables. A professional tavern player was only as effective as his wits and his blade.

But in the finest palace games, like the twice-yearly Banker's Game in the hills above Baronet, impossible fortunes flew on the turn of every card, and high-carding centrales from every point of the compass were thrilled just to sit on the ridge.

We arrived in Los Vientas on the evening of 16 Colors, 732. At the capitão, Ella retained a young valet called Martín, and we settled into a cottage owned by one of the Sisters' well-moneyed associates. The Sisters seemed to have wealthy friends everywhere, and were well-connected to this game and its players.

Our plan for the Professor's Game was just to practice. I would find a

perch in the first floor balcony, watching the deal from above, and signal the Sisters when I could see the winners. The Sisters would work the ground floor, catching my signals and tracking my success.

We worked out a new set of signals, a subtler code that no stranger could read. Two fingers at my right temple for the Crown, left hand stroking my chin for the Bank, and so forth. We tried to choose those actions that I would never make unconsciously, but which seemed exactly so.

The University Game was a world away from Kerat's Corner, that chaotic djego under the Blackrock. The Mailand Library at Corin was bright and airy, the players were reserved and courteous, and the "house," such as it was, offered no side bets and few refreshments.

We began in the early afternoon, as streaks of golden light poured into the rotunda, and we played only until the daylight faded to gray. The Sisters and I were here to learn our signals, to watch the cards, and to find the rhythm of the game.

Or so I had been told.

In truth there was a secret game happening beneath this one. As the scholars hung the boards for their own amusement, a stealthy crew of gamblers wagered silently amongst themselves. Somewhere on a secret ledger, all their wins and losses were tallied, and their debts would be settled at midnight, long after the Library had closed.

This was the real game, the one for which Ella and Van had brought me. They were not only there to test me, or to study the finer points of our system, but also to seize their first chance at a profit in the safest possible setting. In hindsight this did make more sense, as it seemed strange that a group of mathematicians would garner such an audience just to capture the results of forty-odd games.

I sat high on a trap stool in the gallery, behind the dealer's right shoulder. My feet swung loose, struggling for purchase on the low stretcher, as I peered down and tracked the game. At times my lips and fingers danced, while I sorted the cards in my head.

Ella had warned me not to seem too focused, and simply to act as any jolly stranger watching the game. But those around me seemed no less transfixed. They scratched in their notebooks and chattered cautiously among themselves, taking little notice of me and my attentions.

On the ground floor, two young students had the dreary task of tracking each card as it was dealt, scribbling them on a large black slate. Elders watched the slate and made their own notes in large black ledgers. This process seemed more careful than Steed Holla's illegible scratches. But it was also quite redundant for me, as from my sterling's perch I could see the cards in fine detail.

I wondered if perhaps this room might secretly harbor my alternate: a quiet watcher like myself, a student or master or traveler who also could see inside the box. Would her lips tremble like mine, as we sang the answers into view? Would her fingers dance like mine as she counted down the deck? Would she see the cards when she closed her eyes, and whisper their names as she walked, as she ate, as she slept?

At times I found myself distracted from the game, watching the room and searching for my equal in the crowd. But as I was doing my best not to be seen, I really had no idea what to look for.

The professors dealt forty-four games that night. I signaled to the sisters thirty-six winners, three shrugs, and five games poorly called. My errors could have been the result of my inexperience, or of my distraction. But I did not share any rationale with my mistresses, only my conclusions: that we could certainly take the advantage in any game where I could watch

the cards undisturbed.

For their part, the Sisters must have done well in the secret game, for even Ella was cheery and bright as we walked back to our cottage by moonlight. More than once she broke into song.

The Professor's Game existed fully within the law, for on its face there was no gambling, no prohibition on the deal, no secrecy, no red guards breaking down the door and hauling the faculty to jail.

But I would also submit that the University players were so well-connected with the Crown, the Church, and every other power in Carrisor, that they could carry on however they pleased. They were untouchable, like Tanweyrs and Fieros, running their games unchecked in the full light of day.

The wealthiest families in the six kingdoms schooled their children at Niland and Los Vientos, and many of these students remained as faculty. This formed an impressive basis of power at these places, strong but rarely used. There was hardly a student at either University who was not connected somehow to nobility, and who could not sidestep any problem with a coin or a tap home.

I even thought briefly of joining this school myself, though I could not afford the fees.

The next afternoon, the Sisters and I boarded a caravel bound for Brevia City, where Ella and Van had already selected our next Prima game. The trip downriver was fast and rocky, and along the way, I asked Van if perhaps there might have been another player like myself in that library, or indeed anywhere, someone who could see into the box as clearly as I.

"I doubt it," she said. "I have met many players who claim to know the

cards, but none so sharp as you.”

Van looked at me sternly, and continued. “But even if this were true, even if you should find your equal, you should never reveal your skills to them. Or to anyone. You are one of a kind, Canyon Red.”

So these were the rules. My gift must be our secret.

Except for the University’s “research,” Prima Carta was forbidden throughout Carrisor. For whatever reason gambling of any kind, and specifically the formal djego system, was banned by the Queen’s law. This rule seemed both absurd and unenforcible, but the game’s prohibition seemed only to add to the lure of the table.

Prima Carta was therefore a game controlled and policed by criminals. Except for the smallest back rooms, every djego and palace game owed its survival to those outside the law. Powerful merchant families, like the Tanweyrs of Baronet City, protected their games from bandits and the red guard, with a network of spies and an army of killers.

Cheating at these games, or even appearing to, could earn us far worse than a visit to jail.

FAMILY

The fourth card is Family. It shows a mother with three small children. Two of them dance at her feet. She cradles the youngest in her arms.

Family is structure, more profound than merely the support of friends. Family is culture, generational strength, the rules and traditions that give society its form.

Families come in many types, from the mother and her children, to cities and nations bound by trust and treaty. The Family guards its members, nurtures its children, and perpetuates its customs. The Family

holds fast against all outsiders, even when those outsiders are simply another Family.

Family presents the notion of broader self, the context for defining the friend and the enemy, and it is the masts and rigging that propel the machines of war.

For the next five months, the Sisters and I sailed the Sierin coast. We played Prima Carta in palaces and djegos from The Alenay to Endiron Bay. I stood on the ridge, or perched in the sky, watching the cards and signaling the winners. We were always on the move, keeping our heads low and steering clear of the light.

The Sisters would never sit at the center table, for that would have exposed them to too much attention. But more importantly, as centrales they would not have had access to their most lucrative bet. Our team's skill was to know the winner after first pass, and to win with this knowledge we played the Color Bet.

The Color was a seconde bet similar to the Palo, but it was made after first pass. Once the first cards were hung, while the centrales were placing their caps, the surrounding players had one more chance to choose the winner.

The Color Bet offered a complicated return, paying different odds based on the height of every stack. So one's reward depended on whether their suit was in the lead, or struggling, or somewhere in the middle.

For example, if your suit was tied with another at four cards strong, while the other three suits stood at two apiece, then your Color bet paid a meager 2:1. But a bet on any of the shorter stacks paid a handsome 8:1. These lame birds rarely flew home, but when they did, they could earn a tidy sum.

These tables had been worked out by University scholars, in hundreds of trials like the Professor's Game. These games had been carefully controlled, and studiously tracked, for thousands upon thousands of hands. But they gave no thought to the order of the pack.

The payout charts were complicated, and varied from place to place. They were sometimes posted in view, and sometimes not, but the runners and the bankers had every pay on call. In practice, a casual player needed only to bet their favorite suit, and trust to whatever winnings the house offered.

And while these charts often had their strong and weak spots, including some bets that a reasonable player should never make, this discrepancy mattered very little to a team who always knew the winner.

The highest odds were paid on suits that started far behind, but somehow rallied and won. This was rare enough, and rewarding enough, that a player who won too much on bets of this type could soon attract scrutiny from the house.

So the Sisters disguised their play, sometimes winning on likely bets, and sometimes losing a little on wild shots, to give the impression of a normal sequence of play that only happened to be a winner for the night.

For my part, I ignored their tactics entirely. My job was simply to watch the cards, to send the signals, and to let the Sisters decide how to bet. I could not always follow exactly what they were doing, and truly did not want to. But they assured me that it was profitable, and quite impossible to detect.

But in truth they were not invisible, because for all their deceptions, they still made a tidy profit. No gamer can bucket that much sand without eventually being seen. If Elikor herself rose up from a dream and flew away with enough of their gold, the Tanweyrs and Fieros would send an

assassin to the sun.

732 was a Wender, a long year with a hot, dry summer. And along with the summer's heat, we began to encounter a heat of a different kind. Despite the Sisters' best efforts at deception, game masters and housekeepers conferred, and began to suspect that someone was beating their games.

This was not just a bad night here and there, but a consistent, nagging loss that was felt in the djegos of the Coast and the counting houses of High Hill. If one watched the numbers closely, they could even see the dragon move.

The Tanweyrs and Fieros dispatched spies into their territories to root out the cause. Before long they had cast a net that could track our movements, sometimes only one or two days behind. After six months the Sisters were complacent, and began to repeat themselves, and the Tanweyr spies got one step ahead of them.

Our troubles started in a castle at the end of the world.

The City of Jasper is a sprawling port town on the southwest tail, at the mouth of the Callelarga, the last major city before the land falls into the sea. With her sisters Moorpoint and Banian, she is the second-largest metropolis in Sierin, and the combined seat of the counties of Hope and Carricet.

The county of Carricet is named for the Nueva conqueror Carrisus Drwyth, as is the city of Caroucet, and indeed the entire continent of Carrisor. Jasper gets its name from *jespero*, which is the Nale word for Hope.

We played in a palace game in Jasper in early summer, 8 Septun 732.

The venue was a small private game at the castillo of Henri de Lombre, a Lord of Hope, along the western road to Moorpoint. The Sisters had already visited this game three times in the past six months, winning a larger purse each time.

Towards the end of the evening, as Van waited her turn at the counting table, she was approached by a curt, white-fingered little man called Dihar, one of de Lombre's retinue. Dihar floated up beside her with an air of dignity and purpose, and bearing a small gift.

"My Lord de Lombre extends his most sincere thanks for your custom," he said, "and he hopes that you will accept this gift as a token of our mutual respect."

The gift was a small folding knife, a *chilo*, embellished with the arms of de Lombre. It was a handsome offering with a coded meaning; the Sisters were being warned never to gamble in this house again.

This was our first hint that we had been spotted, and it panicked the Sisters. Van graciously received the *chilo*, quietly gathered her sister, and signaled that I should find my own way out. Her signal was two fingers across her left arm, meaning that I should disappear quietly, and rejoin them in our lodgings from two nights prior. We met up again at the Ram, a gray tavern behind a corning house in Jasper Low.

Ella and Van were arguing when I arrived, over what this message meant, and exactly what to do next. Ella believed that the warning came from de Lombre himself, and that we would still be safe anywhere else.

But Van was convinced that the trouble ran deeper. By her reckoning, we must have been spotted by someone higher up. Not Henri de Lombre, but spies from the Tanweyrs or Fieros, the families who controlled the *djegos* along the South Coast.

Her logic was sound: the *chilo* was a message from someone in the

know. It was a traditional marker from *Postes de Cerca*, a gambling game far faster and more ruthless than Prima Carta. The chilo passed from player to player, jumping to whoever was in the lead.

And a player was never in the lead for very long.

After their initial panic subsided, the Sisters let greed make the call. They decided to keep playing, for now, but they would change tactics, change venues, and continue until they were frightened off by more than a gift.

I had no voice in this call.

I assumed that the Sisters must have filled saddlebags with gold by this point, but precious little of that money tumbled out to me. They gave me only what I needed, and told me little about their plans or their profits.

They had been brazen up to this point, convinced that they were shadows in the dark. Yet in truth they stood out like candles. Once marked, they had been allowed to go just a little farther, enough to set the hook. But for now we had wriggled free.

The Sisters decided to move north along the Shackun Coast, out of Tanweyr territory, hitting new games in cities outside the reach of Baronet. In Ella's opinion, this setback was isolated and temporary, and just part of the game. The southern families had lashed out at us after a season of hard losses, but they had no allies in the West.

The Fieros and Tanweyrs controlled very little north of Hope. But the games of the west were smaller and rougher, and our usual tactics were not as powerful. We played in djegos when we found them, but often fell to sitting in ordinary tavern games, where the Sisters took turns at the center table, and I did my best to hide on the ridge.

The Sisters were spotted in a small djego in Navene, where we were the

only outsiders in the game. After a night of big wins, the operator of the Old Shepherd Mill took Ella by the hand and walked her straight out of the house, short her tickets and her book.

This pattern repeated in Briarhaven, where the ladies were asked to withdraw from a djego on Caravan Street. The next week in Leo, a runner at the Villa Simora apologetically returned their winning tickets in shreds.

At the Jocelyn Playhouse in Weis, after the Sisters' third Color bet, suspicious eyes began to follow them. By the fifth, they were backed off the game. Two fat brothers in floppy hats told Ella and Van that if they lingered, they would be ushered out with their scrip unpaid.

Yet for several weeks more, the Sisters kept their hands in the game. They wore disguises, albeit with little effect, and even hired confederates to place their bets. But by the Fall of 732 they were known across the sand and long up the coast, and the Sisters couldn't enter a gambling hall in Sierin without attracting the eyes of the house.

I remained safely in the shadows through all of this, at least as far as I knew. The heat seemed to rise only when the Sisters showed their faces. But without them, I couldn't play.

Finding no proper games north of Weis, the Sisters decided to change tactics again, and returned to smaller games in familiar territory. There were still dozens of tavern games who served no masters, and where the Sisters might still pick some fruit.

We sailed from Weis back into the mouth of the dragon, to Old Siero in Chalicet Bay, and down the Burly road to Caroucet.

In the village of Jamir, the local families found us immediately. We left our inn at dusk on the first night, walking down the muddy street towards a wayhouse called El Pacal. At the low point, the Sisters and I were visited

by a rough little fellow called Gurce.

Gurce informed us that Costa Revere Silton owned every Prima game along the Vestry, and points north to Cera, and that we should find our entertainment elsewhere. Gurce cast a long and curious look in my direction, having expected to find only the two ladies.

Out of respect to the Sisters, who still had a good reputation in Baronet, this brush with Gurce had been just a warning. But he brandished a dagger with some enthusiasm, and made it clear that he had marked us. His next visit would not be so polite.

No gift, no apologies, just a threat, straight to the heart of the matter. We stayed clear of the game at El Pacal, but we did not stop playing in the valley.

A week later and miles downriver, I was followed home by another Silton thug in Caroucet. This one was called Relene. She gave us the option of moving along, or paying the Costa half of our winnings from every town in his watershed. That price seemed too high, and again the Sisters moved along.

Relene's visit tipped us off to a new problem. She had followed me to the Sisters' rooms, which meant that the Siltons knew my face. My identity was our most precious secret, even if they didn't know my role.

Having failed to play in a single game within three hundred miles of Merits Bay, we returned again to the West. We ranged even farther north, playing for scraps in tiny tavern games in Almorran and Rider's Gulf.

Northwest Sierin had never heard of a proper djego, but we found a few decent house games in Tululua and Cavalet, Lejano and Seed. These games were far from Baronet and the families' control, but they were small stakes and hard to beat. Even perfect play could barely cover our expenses,

and we usually played imperfectly to disguise our talents.

Disguised or not, these two old women looked quite the ducks in a back-room tavern game. We were clearly drinking at the end of our skin.

By the Spring of 733 the Sisters were playing dirty little games up and down the Shackun Coast and bargaining with the local bosses in Pora for permission to sit in their djegos. These backstreet games were barely organized, and barely profitable.

We played there for months, and over time the Sisters made friends among the western families. The local families let us play in their little games for a modest fraction of the spoils. For as long as we were winning from the players, and not from the house, the local powers let us be.

This arrangement altered our tactics, and reduced our take, but it seemed the only option left. We moved often, traveled light, paid off intermediaries and scouts, and hired local players to run our bets.

The Sisters found themselves back in the lending business, backing centrales who were low in the book. To help these players find the gold to pay them back, the Sisters passed along my signals from the ridge. Ella even bought a few tavern dealers, paying them to flash the discards to parts of the room where one could not normally see.

Through all this, the Sisters collected their winnings and their fees, and paid me nearly nothing. They gave me coin for bed and food, and reasonable habit, but naught besides. After more than a year of chasing the boards, I began to wonder if I might have done better without them, with or without the game, though my mistresses were always quick to remind me how poorly I had fared on my own.

And then one day in Navene, the sun rose bright, and I found the strength to break away.