

Chapter 5: THE WANDERER

In mid-Gerin, the long summer of 733, Ella and Van Courtlan returned to Basil Street to settle their accounts, maintain their shop, and otherwise deal with the burdens of wealth and property.

They had hired a young family called the Martins, second-cousins from Tulan, to run the shop in their absence. The family matriarch, Colare, was also charged with overseeing Ella and Van's side-dealings.

By this point I understood that the Sisters' primary enterprise was not retail, but money lending. They made loans of their ever-growing fortune to merchants, gamblers, and feckless aristocrats whom no bank would dare trust, at interest rates that no bank would dare charge.

Our gambling adventures must have grown their coffers even larger, swelling in turn the ranks of those poor souls indebted to them. This explained the name they now carried in Baronet, and perhaps also why they no longer wished to play within a hundred miles of the capital.

These visits home were dreary for me. Watching the Sisters oversee their business reminded me that I still had saved nothing of my own, despite my indispensable work to build their fortunes. I spent my days in the High City shopping for new clothes in Brickledown, or playing the odd game of Tablero or Jardín, with what few coins the Sisters would deign to give me.

After this visit home, the Sisters and I traveled by carrum along the Old Country Road, west through Cercano and Carricet and back to the end of the world, the city of Jasper. The Sisters were determined to find better Prima games along the west coast, outside the reach of Baronet.

We were strangers again in Jasper, but we soon felt the heat of the Tanweyrs again, and no games would suffer our play.

From Jasper we moved north along the coast road. We found no games in Banian and Courtier. Farther north, in Querana, we found small pockets of play. But the local customs treated us poorly.

In the city of Elana, they built the stacks in reverse order, from ten to ace, not ace to ten. This was a simple change, and did not affect the odds, yet for me it was like drinking from the bottom of a glass. It might have taken me a month to adjust to this game, and afterwards just as long to switch back. After so much practice with the common rules, I simply couldn't see the cards any other way.

And so we continued north, searching for the game we knew. On 17 Benes 733, I found myself idle at the scuttle dock in Navene, a small trading port at the mouth of the Testugo.

On the road from Elana, the Sisters had met an old friend from the High City, Lord Carissus Branire. He was now a local duke or baron or some such, and owned a winery in the hills near Aburrida.

Lord Branire offered the Sisters a tour of his estate, as well as introductions to a few wealthy players from Aburrida and Queran. They were gathering for a private Prima Carta game, scheduled for the following week.

I never participated in these scouting errands, having no role to play. So the Sisters left me in Navene and disappeared into the rolling green hills.

I settled into a wayhouse called the Rug and Groom, in a district called Petri near the scuttle docks of Navene. And there I would meet Netalia Levante Bo-Sera, the desert flower who changed my life.

Twice.

The scuttle docks of Navene are great grimy coal dumps. Flatboats from the Testugo pass through every day, unloading their black rock into

gritty heaps at the river mouth. Brokers and haulers load the cat onto freighters bound for all points, with steam-driven cranes burning the same filthy rock. The harbor is a miasma of soot and black smoke.

No one is trusted at the docks without some ash on their cuffs.

For two days I sat by the pier on Carbón and watched the coal freighters roll in. I imagined another life, my path if I had stayed with Los Alondras in Merits Bay. I'd surely have a full retinue of my own young scoundrels by now, and at least a dozen new scars. I would be scrapping for every penny, still trapped on the sand with no call or coin, with no way out save prison or death. If indeed I still lived.

By comparison this was not so bad.

Today I wore a silk shirt and a hooded wool cloak. I carried a whitestone pipe in the shape of a mynabird, a fine pewter flask, and a red leather pouch. That pouch should perhaps have been stuffed with good crowns, plucked from a vault in a mansion on the Cercano. But instead it held only a worn Postas deck and a few silver fiora, enough for three days of food.

Despite my appearance, I had not made much progress since leaving the Docks. I had managed only to keep my head out of the dirt.

As I sat and watched the coal haulers at their work, a young woman in a green cloak wandered past, once and then once more. I could tell that she was lost, not from her wandering, but from the way her white gloves and high black boots stood out against the grime of the street. After only two days here, I was already starting to blend into the gray.

"You stand out," I called, as she passed by a third time.

She jumped as if she had not seen me. "I beg your pardon?" She turned to face me, and for a moment the sun danced off the water, painting her cheeks with brilliant light.

She was barely taller than me, with hard brown eyes, curly black hair, and a wicked smile.

“You stand out,” I said again. “No grime.” I pointed to my own filthy boots.

“I suppose,” she giggled, and she glanced down at herself. She tried to brush a mote of ash from her thigh, but only managed to spread it out. This is how it begins, I thought, and soon she’ll be covered in dust.

Clearly she did not belong here, but was instead on her way to someplace prettier and happier. I must confess that I immediately wanted to go with her, wherever that was.

“May I help?” I asked. In truth, there was little chance that I could do. I had been only two days in Navene, and I was not exactly the exploring type.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “The Founder’s Public House, on Winstone? Do you know it?”

I thought for a moment, and was surprised that I did. “I do,” I answered. Then I smiled and waited for her next question, the one that might elicit directions.

I found my own behavior amusing, but my lady clearly had no patience for fools. After a moment’s pause she turned on her heel and headed back down Carbón, along the wharf in the wrong direction.

“Back this way,” I called. I pointed up the hill and into the city. “Pass two blackstone piles, like twins, then turn left up a wet alley, left again on the salt-and-pepper cobblestones, and right at the cracked rain barrel.”

She walked slowly back towards me and smiled. “Do any of these streets have names?”

“Probably,” I said. I shrugged.

“Aha,” she said. Anyone else might have walked away at this point, but

my lady drew as close as a friend. "So, I should look for the cracked rain barrel... and then I'm there?"

Sadly, she was not - this was just my best path to the Calle Colonas, which was the main road up the hill. There were many more twists and turns along the route to the Founder's House, and none of them had a name.

"Let me show you," I said, and reached for her hand.

I truly had nothing better to do.

My own wayhouse was three streets up Colonas from the Founder's. I had passed the place several times on my way to the water. The Founder's House had a majestic gathering hall and an excellent kitchen, with small, clean rooms to let for less than I was paying at the Rug and Groom.

I had even considered moving into this place, but I feared that if I moved myself even three blocks, the Sisters might have trouble finding me. Or perhaps I could have left word, and was just too lazy to move.

When we arrived at the Founder's House, my new friend Netalia ("call me Nettie") begged me to join her in the hall, and she ordered us a meal. She spoke to the innkeeper as if we were longtime friends, a traveling couple enjoying a meal. I could not imagine why she would do this, save a feeling that we were both alone in a strange place, and that our stories shared some of the same chapters.

We were both born in the county of Brevia, myself in Brevia City, and Netalia fifty miles south, in Baraba. She was three years my senior, and also a child of Baronet City, having spent her youth working for a servants' eole in Chancery. She seemed to know a better class of people than my mates from the Downstone Dock.

Nettie was brilliant and exciting, and in a short time she became the

answer to questions I had never asked. To a youth of 17 years, she was far more interesting than two old ladies from Basil Street. Nettie was a desert flower, sweet and strong, delicate and cruel. She was morning sun breaking the edge of a hard night.

I told her tales of my early days in Low Harbor, but I invented a story about my situation in Navene. I said that I had been visiting cousins in Queran. Nettie asked many questions and chipped the daub from that lie, until I told her something closer to the truth, that I was here with my aunts, two inveterate gamblers, who were looking for a game of Prima Carta.

Nettie showed great interest in this story. Apparently, she was something of a card player herself.

THE WANDERER

Card five is the Wanderer. He is a man alone, but this character is no hermit. He is the wayward child, a reckless youth searching for identity in a civilized world.

The Wanderer carries a full pack of gear, taller than himself, bristling with the baggage of his comfortable youth. He defines himself by rejecting traditions, yet he cannot define himself without them.

The Wanderer is a fool, obsessed with a dream of independence in a world where all folk are connected. He walks a lonely road, but he gazes at the sky, at the perfect, impossible, unreachable notion of the self.

I did not move my kit to the Founder's House that night, but I did spend that night in the hall with Nettie, talking and laughing until daybreak.

By morning, she knew my life story, and I knew hers, or at least the one she told me. She helped me see that I should break away from the Sisters and live free from their control. I decided to confront them on their return, to demand my liberty and my fair share of the spoils.

Nettie agreed that without my help, the Sisters would never have been winners. They might still be back at their empty shop lending pages from their meager book, still struggling to subdue their daily accounts.

I resolved to take what I was owed, and to strike out on my own. I might play Prima, I might not, I might work or steal, thrive or founder. But at least I would be my own person, a servant to no one.

It seemed a good plan, at least until I explained it to the Sisters. They returned to Navene the following night, ready to spirit me off to this new game in Aburrida. By then I'd had a full day alone at the Rug and Groom, thinking about my evening with Nettie and my plans for the future.

As I spoke to the Sisters that night, Nettie's words tumbled from my lips.

"We need to talk about my situation," I said.

Van was amused. She had long expected this moment to come. Ella raised an eyebrow, surprised that her pet rat could speak.

"What situation is that?" asked Ella.

"I need to know how much I've earned for you. How much you owe me. And I need you to pay it to me."

Van smiled. "You don't 'need' any of that, dear. You merely want it."

This was true, but it was not persuasive. Van tilted her head and continued. "You already have everything you need, sweet child. Food, shelter, good work, and protection from the law."

"I wouldn't need protection from the law if I weren't breaking it," I

said. "And safe or not, I'm still owed my fair share of our profits."

Ella clenched her hands. "Fair share? We finance this enterprise, child. We carry you. We scout the games, we make the bets. We are exposed to the sun while you hide in the shade. What greater share do you believe you deserve?"

"Your winnings are safe," added Van, working to soften her sister's edge. "Safe home on Basil Street."

"But how much is that?" I asked. "I can't even guess. Can I afford to retire? Buy a tavern? An estate?"

Ella shook her head. "I think not," she said. "But we would have to balance the ledger to be sure."

Van added, "And you know what a run of hard luck we have had these last months."

They were dodging my question. I imagined Nettie's voice cheering me on. "Times have sure been hard," I said, "but we have not done so poorly, else you both would have quit me by now. So I will ask again: how much is in my ledger?"

The Sisters eyed each other suspiciously, surprised by how much my attitude had changed in my short time in Navene. Who had I been talking to?

Van steered away, describing what they had found on their expedition.

Carissus Branire did indeed own a winery and vineyard near Aburrida, a short cruise up the Testugo. He had invited the Sisters to sit at his table, if they liked, in a private game that started in three days' time.

The Branire game served a close-knit group of local centrales, wealthy landowners from Querana and Rios Secos, who played for many days at high stakes. The game was self-contained, all but unknown to the powers from Baronet or anywhere else.

It seemed a fair opportunity for the Sisters to make some money, even if they had to sit the center table. A centrale's game was a slow road with high risk, with huge bets on each hand, and not much room for error. And under the watchful gaze of every player in the room.

If this was truly a private game, as promised, Ella and Van had several options. They could decide to win big and get out fast, or they could win smaller but for a longer time, giving and taking for days, always working towards a bigger goal.

Their greatest puzzle was how to include me. This game suffered few spectators, if any, and so I'd have to pose as some kind of servant or adviser, without appearing to give any actual service or advice.

This was a tractable concern, but it was secondary. I still wanted an answer to my demands.

"If we sit the Branire game," I said, "You will pay me a full share. On site."

"That's not reasonable, Red" said Van. "You know this. We can't pay you in that place. There are eyes and ears everywhere. It's much safer for us to hold your silver, and let you have what you need, when you need it."

Ella added, "You don't know this, Red, but in this regard we often lose money. That is our risk to take, and it is figured into our costs and our share. You risk almost nothing here."

They did not lie. My life had been comfortable on the road. The Sisters paid for everything I needed, but little more. Perhaps they were losing money, as they claimed, but I found that hard to believe. If they ever had done, we would have folded the tent.

In the end, I found no way around their excuses, and even if they had agreed to my demands, most of my share was locked up in Basil Street, or otherwise tied up in their accounts.

“If I am unsatisfied, I must strike out on my own.”

The Sisters laughed. Perhaps not because this was funny, but because cruelty was their last tool. If they could not persuade me with support, then perhaps they might still make me feel worthless, unable to continue on my own.

“You can’t play the game by yourself,” said Ella. “Remember the last time you tried.”

“Yes,” I said. “But I was green in those days. You’ve taught me so much.”

Van took my hand and smiled. “We haven’t taught you everything, child.” And she was right. I could never have talked my way into the Branire game, for example, or even found it without their knowledge and connections.

But I stood firm, and the Sisters relented. They agreed that the Branire game would be our last together, for now. We would play three days, and after we left the winery and returned to Navene, they would pay me and release me.

I think the Sisters decided to watch me fail on my own, and to come crawling back to them, like a lost child on the Downstone Dock. But I was determined to be free, and secretly, I was not alone.

After three nights at the Vinicola de Branire, where Ella and Van took turns the center table, they released me with good wishes and roughly a tenth of what I was owed. By my estimate, they won 12 Kroner and 4 on the first night, lost 23 and 5 on the second, and won 75 exactly in their final night. This was a near-perfect three-day streak with a net gain of almost 64 Kroner, or more than five hundred silver fiora.

We sailed downriver to Navene, where the Sisters set me free with a pouch of 28 fiora. This was hardly a full share, and barely twice what they

paid me after our very first game at Kerat's Corner.

They told me that I could receive the balance, and the rest of my due, if I visited them in High Harbor. But I did not quibble, for freedom was the true gift.

That was 24 Benes, 733. I was seventeen years old.

Netalia Levante Bo-Sera was the perfect traveling partner, faster and smarter than me in almost every way. She handled people like a charmer, a skill I had never acquired despite years of desperate need.

She was experienced, travel-worn, creative, and fearless. We danced from game to game, unknown and untroubled by the powers or the law. Without the Courtlan Sisters, whose faces the whole world seemed to know, we two could be as quiet as desert mice.

Nettie sat center table in tavern games, and played in the secondi when we found something bigger. I kept to the ridge, far from the center, sending her the secrets that only I could see. Nettie played the consummate gambler: a bawdy, reckless storm of energy. She knew the part so well that she sometimes fooled me.

Nettie had surely seen hard times, harder even than she had told. Sometimes she would spin more yarn about her youth in Baronet High. But after hearing the same stories over and over again, I learned that the details were never quite the same. Nettie was hiding some dark secret, but I could not guess what or even why.

I was a young fool, and Nettie's mystery was simply a part of her charm. I accepted it as part of the cost, and for a time we made an excellent pair.

We played up and down the Shackun Coast, far away from Baronet. We traveled north from Navene to Lejano, and as far east as Del Sal, flying

wherever the wind blew.

The largest games were in the port cities: Weis, Lejano, El Dias. We played in dark and dangerous games that the Sisters would never have touched. Sometimes we worked inland, up the hill and into the forest, on the trail of some wealthy centrale or on the advice of a friendly dealer.

In all those travels, we rarely found a proper djego, only tavern games and the occasional flat room. For gamblers in Almorran, Prima Carta was just one of many simple tavern games, with Postes and Tenebre and Lio.

Once in a while we fell into honest work, when the games dried up or the weather turned cold. We worked for a month as farm hands in Barnow, as stevedores for two weeks in Tululua.

Our accommodations in Tululua were cramped quarters above the Blue Diamond Saloon, where our bed and board cost almost as much as we earned at the docks. We lost money every day, but it was a welcome break from the struggles of the road, and we treated our time there like a holiday.

Most evenings at the Diamond, Nettie and I played Postes for pennies. We sat at the end of a magnificent table by the front door. It was made of oak and iron, probably older than the building, and pitted with the delicate ruin of age. Sometimes our coins would disappear into the cracks.

Nettie was a talented Postes player. She was bold but not reckless, clever enough to fool me with her bluffs, and to see through all of mine. Though we merely pushed our coins back and forth, not playing for keeps, my pennies and cubos finished almost every night on Nettie's side of the table.

Nettie also showed me how to cheat at Prima Carta. She was fond of saying that cheating was just a part of life, like flies and bad weather.

We agreed that all gamblers should know the dangers when they joined

the table. Threats from the house, from other players, and from thieves in the night. Nettie felt that if you can cheat and get away with it, you might as well do so. She believed that the djegos cheated in their way, with bets that favored the house, so players had every right to cheat them back.

I didn't agree. Nettie accused me of hypocrisy, considering my skill for breaking the game. I didn't see my talent as cheating, because I was only using information that everyone could see. But the results were quite the same, so I forgave her confusion.

I did believe that there was a difference, and one need not cheat to survive. No gambler should expect any more advantage than fate provides, no more knowledge than any other player holds, though many surely want it.

Nettie called me a fool, and kissed me sweetly on my knuckles. Then she showed me her magic.

Her hands were light and quick, and she worked the cards with joy. She showed me how to mix a pack without moving a single card, how to substitute one deck for another out of view, how to deal the second card, or the bottom card of the pack, as easily as the one on top.

She also showed me what gamblers call "chalking," burying a card so that that the suit cannot win.

"Do you know what it means to chalk a person?" Nettie asked, as she gathered the cards for a shuffle.

I admitted that I did not.

"It means to kill them, or more specifically to arrange to kill them. Carpenters use chalk to mark up planks and measure coffins. So when you chalk a man, you're measuring his coffin."

I nodded, imagining undertakers and murder plots.

She mixed the cards. I watched her fingers as closely as I could. But

from time to time I glanced at her eyes.

“Some people think ‘chalking’ means ‘cheating,’ but it’s more specific than that.” She began to deal. The top card was the red seven. “It means skipping over a single card, to force the suit to fall behind.”

“But surely, a buried card would be missed?” I said.

“You don’t remove it entirely,” she said. “You’re just moving the card up or down in the pack, sometimes by just a few spots. You’re killing the suit, not the card.”

The Crown gained three more cards in first pass, and by the end it was tied for the lead with the Watch.

“See here,” Nettie said. “On the red ten, I need the red Ace. Where does it lie in the pack?”

“Twelve cards from the top,” I said. Then I added “Between the blue nine and the green five.”

She purred with admiration when I did this, which I could not help but enjoy.

Nettie dealt second pass, and somehow the red Ace jumped down a few spaces. Not far, but well past the deuce. Because of this, the Crown gained only one card in this pass, and it fell behind two other suits.

“It doesn’t take much,” she explained. “A one-card pass can be the death of a suit.”

“But surely the Crown player would notice this? Isn’t she following her cards through the pack?”

“Not if she is drunk,” said Nettie. “Or distracted. The key to this change is knowing not just how to make it, but when.”

I agreed that it would take a careful eye to catch the Ace slipping a few positions down - a player could easily second-guess her own recollection, rather than suspecting the dealer, especially if she saw no hint of foul play.

Nettie had mastered the sleight perfectly. She showed me exactly how it was done, but still I could not see it. Then she showed me again, moving as slowly as she could.

When she dealt the Ace and Deuce on first pass, she laid them just a little askew in the discard pile. Enough that she could pinch them out of the pack as she picked it up. With a flip in her left hand, the two cards switched places. I could see it happen when she moved slowly. But at normal speed, she could make the exchange in an instant, when my eyes were somewhere else.

She dealt five more games, made five switches in five different suits, and I never saw it happen. Nettie watched my eyes as I watched her hands, and if I glanced away even for a moment, she made her switch. She always knew exactly the moment when I would see nothing.

In the spring of 734, Nettie and I traveled farther up the Bisian coast, as far north as the Free City of Meere. Prima Carta wasn't known outside of Sierin, though we did encounter other games where Nettie's talents could be effective. These were northern games where the players dealt for themselves, and wagered on the order of the cards or the strength of their starting hands.

I could not see into those games, could not be as valuable to Nettie, and usually spent my time keeping quiet and out of sight. I kept a close watch on the room, watching for players who might be cheating us, while she worked the middle and made enough noise for us both.

Meere was dreary and cold, and we didn't find much money there. Despite the rains and long nights, there seemed to be few players looking for a game, few taverns offering more than a drink and a song. Meere's shipwrights and trunk wizards were a merry, drunken lot, but with little

taste for games of chance.

After a few weeks in the cold, we traveled back to Sierin, nipping on the tavern games down the Shackun Coast like honeyflies in saguaro.

By Summer we had overstayed our welcome in nearly every western city, and as our book drew thin, we became hungry for the bigger games. We crept closer to the djegos of the south, playing house games in Jasper, Old Siero, and Caroucet.

If we played wisely in those houses, we could win without being seen. The secondi bets worked faster and hit deeper than we could do in any tavern game.

We made our share of missteps, and never seemed to hold on to money for very long. Nettie was something of a gambler herself, favoring those games of chance that one can never beat. I would sometimes find her at a penny drop or wheel game, or betting her stake on the turn of a single card.

At the end of winter, 20 Wendus 734, Nettie and I joined a game at the Fox in Cavern, a second-floor ale house in Jamir. This was the same city on the Vestry where a brute from the Siltons had threatened Ella and Van two years prior. But in our time there, Nettie and I never ran in with the Siltons. The smaller games took care of themselves.

The Fox in Cavern seemed a perfect venue for Nettie to practice, both as a dealer and as a hustler. The players at the Fox welcomed her with ease, and quickly trusted her with the cards.

I was always there, watching from the ridge, throwing signals to my lady about the lay of the game. She decided which of my signs to read, and which to ignore, winning and losing like a willow in the wind.

To work for many days in such a game, one needs to lose often and

loudly, to avoid drawing attention to the wins. Nettie had a favorite pattern of winning for two nights, and then losing once, over and again, always keeping our balance on the rise.

After nine days at the Fox, her pattern must have caught someone's eye. A player called Newt suffered a big loss that night, most of which was not Nettie's doing. Still, Newt followed us back to our rooming house, and confronted us on the ramada.

Newt told Nettie that another player, whom she would not name, had been caught cheating, and that the game at the Fox would have to go quiet for a while. She described in detail what the innkeeper would do to that cheater if ever she were caught.

We took her meaning clearly. Nettie paid Newt a hundred fiora for her trouble, enough to cover her losses for the night.

We were bundled and bound by morning.

Nettie was a delight, with a caring soul and a soft heart. She spent her money on clothes and wine, cards and dice, once losing half our stake in an all-night Tablero game. But we always kept just enough coin to survive, to move from town to town, and to stay one step ahead of the sun.

Every few months she would make a journey home, to see her aunt in High Harbor. I usually let her make that trip alone, for I was not fond of sea voyages, and had no business of my own in Baronet.

Each time Nettie left me, I wondered if I had seen the last of her. I felt that someday she would come to her senses and abandon me forever. And yet, for nearly two years' time, Nettie always returned. Chipper, joyous, and excited at the challenge of our adventures.

And through all this, I had been a fool.

I finally unbuckled the truth on a summer night in Lejano, as I waited

for Nettie to return from another long voyage to Baronet. I sat in my room practicing the sleights she had taught me, and considering the foundations of misdirection.

To truly fool a mark, it was not enough to conceal the method. One needed to gain confidence, to establish trust. The best way to chalk a card is to convince the player never to watch for it. Only the finest tailor may drop a stitch. And so it had been for Nettie and me.

Like the flash of a falling star, I cracked the puzzle, glimpsed shapes in the darkness, and deduced what Nettie was really about. She had lied to me, deceived me as deftly as she handled the cards, and I had been too eager or too blind to see it.

I wanted see Nettie as a better version of myself, rather than merely my old keepers in a new form.

I have trouble now recollecting our time together untainted by this ugly truth. I think that I was truly happy then, but when I reflect on it now, I see myself as a ghost. A spirit walking dead from place to place, only thinking myself alive. For nothing that Nettie told me was true, and nothing I believed was real.

Nettie was a delegate of the Tanweyrs, a spy for the family, and she had served them in some way since her youth. Her "aunt" in High Harbor was doubtless some member of the Tanweyr family. She had been dispatched by the powers in Baronet to separate me from the Courtlan Sisters, the only way that the families could conjure to break our hold on the game.

Alone in the dark, I pieced this history together as I dealt the cards to myself, watching the clues fall into place like flatboards flying home.

Back in the spring of '33, Nettie had tracked the Sisters for weeks. She marked them, kept to the shadows, and tipped off the owners of every

game we played. And through careful observation, she learned that I was the key to their success.

The Tanweyr had given up on their hopes of barring Ella and Van from every game, and they would not stoop to darker measures. So instead, on hearing Nettie's report, they asked her to pry me away from them.

Nettie had enlisted Lord Branire to draw the Sisters away from me in Navene, ensnared me at the scuttle docks, and convinced me to break away with her. Any affection she showed to me had been a lie, or a twisted version of the truth. She certainly liked the money I could earn for her.

Nettie and I had always steered clear of Tanweyr games, not because she was afraid of them, but because that was what the family wanted. Instead, we floated up and down the coast, playing in slight games with short profits, and always under the Tanweyr's gaze.

I had always thought that if we could build a decent book, we might have moved up to bigger games, maybe even the high-stakes Prima games of the Baronet nobility. But moving up was never an option, for we were always two pennies from the sand, gambling away our profit, or spending it on useless things.

In truth, Nettie was whisking the desert's share of our winnings back to her masters in Novel Garden, and building a little book of her own. Nettie was neither a poor gambler nor a profligate spender. All her vices were a ruse, a pantomime to explain how, despite a two-year streak of winning, we never managed to save any money.

Several times in our travels, I had asked Nettie about walking away from the game, but she always convinced me to play on, often by "losing" what little stake we had, and forcing us back to the table. I was a puppet in her thrall, a strong earner too valuable to set free.

Without her oversight, I would be a threat to the families' profits, even as a wandering spirit. So Nettie always found a way to stay in my life and keep me in the game.

That night, with great remorse, I wriggled free of my life like Carala shedding her skin. I left no word for Nettie and struck out alone into the darkness. I knew that she could find me if she wanted. But she would never be my partner again.

At some great loss of innocence, I bade a silent farewell to Netalia Levante Bo-Sera on 6 Jelaris 735.

I was nineteen years old.