

Chapter 6: THE FAITH

For the next few months I traveled alone, searching for a life outside the game. But before long, short of call or coin and lacking any ordinary talents, I found myself drawn back in.

I wandered south from Lejano, through familiar roads and villages. Desperdi, Cavalet, Pitch, Tululua. I kept to the smaller towns and looked for honest work, bouncing between tavern games and heavy labor. From time to time I also played at djegos in the big cities whenever I needed to rebuild my clutch.

In the djegos, I was no good alone. I dared not sit the center table, fearing that I would become known. So I danced among the spirits, playing for small stakes and slow wins, sometimes approaching the counting table for a few well-timed bets. Tracking the cards consumed my attention, and I often failed to place my bets in time, or even to see the winner as I should.

Games of all kinds were sparse in the north, and I drifted southward along the Shackun Coast. But I could not stay in the shadows while playing alone.

In an after-hours market game in Briarhaven, the local magistrate called me by my traveling name, Alaraña. My style, if not my face, had been circulated among the operators of Querana and Pora. There were few public places where I could safely play, and I could not make the connections to find a private game.

After exhausting my options along the coast, I returned to familiar ground. I sailed from Weis on 2 Darus, in the early Spring of 736, spending the last of my silver coins on a journey to Jasper City.

High on a hill over Endiron Bay, in a wealthy quarter called Kettle

Horn, I walked to a wayhouse called the Wendeyer. On a crackled brick terrace overlooking the bay, I found the last empty table and emptied my red leather pouch onto the whitestone slab. Thirty-two copper scudi and a well-worn deck of cards; all I could show for my years in the game.

“Do you know how to use that?” Her voice was behind me. I turned to see a tall, southern innkeeper with tender eyes, broad shoulders, and close-cropped hair.

I was lost and hungry and tired of the world. I was not sure how to answer her.

She nodded at the table and asked again. “Do you know what to do with those?” Her accent was thick, and pure Jasper City.

“The coins?” I said. “Indeed I do. In fact I mean to spend them on my last meal.”

“No,” she laughed. “The cards.”

My Postas deck was in terrible shape: fifty battered boards bound tight in a deerskin trace. The corners were bent and the edges ragged. The five of Locks had a crease across the middle, the six of Fruit had lost a corner. The backs were stained with every color of filth, and the ink on the faces had rubbed almost clean away.

“I know a little,” I said, and began to untie the deck.

“Best leave it fast,” my hostess said. “Those boards unbound might just fall apart.” She disappeared into the inn, and returned shortly with olives and fresh bread, clearwater and cider, and an unbroken deck of cards.

She was Valentina Asmina Fulera, the mistress of the Wendeyer. She also owned the ring of apartments just behind it and up the hill, called La Posada Meyer.

I welcomed her company, and for three hours we discussed the finer points of the game. Her Postas deck was a cousin of my own, a beautiful

hand-tinted deck from Aburrida.

“It’s yours for a favor, little spider,” she said. Of course, she knew of me. I was not even surprised.

“Thank you, my lady. How may I help?”

“When night falls, we play Prima in the courtyard above. We’ve had some complaints from the players, these last few weeks, of irregular results in the game.”

“Is someone cheating you?” I asked.

“Perhaps, but I can’t see it. They say the short suits have been winning more often than they should. And if so, it has surely been a bane for the counting table.”

By short suits, she meant those that ended first pass with fewer cards. These suits were less likely to win, but sometimes they did. A dealer with skills like Nettie’s might ease that along.

“Someone of your talents could root out the cause,” she said, “be it the dealers, the players, or just random chance.”

“Do you have records?”

She smiled. “The lion’s arm is long.” Of course she had no records. Even here at the end of the world, her game was still technically against the law.

I told Valentina that without any track of the results, it would be hard to establish a cause, or even a pattern. Odd streaks did happen, from time to time, but one would have to watch the game for some time to be sure.

She agreed, and offered me lodging at the Wendeyer. She led me to a cozy corner room on the second floor, with a clear view of Mote’s Harbor and sunset over the bay.

“Our game begins at dusk,” she said. “Don’t be late.”

“I cannot afford this place,” I confided. “These coppers are my last in

the world.”

“Keep my game honest, little spider, and the room is yours.”

This gift seemed good fortune beyond explanation. I searched my memories from Weis to Kettle Horn, and could not recall anyone who might have guided my path or steered me to this place. If my engagement at the Wendeyer was by anyone’s design, their work was softer than silk.

I was content to believe, and still do, that sometimes a tired soul is due some measure of good luck, like a short stack coming home. And even if it be through clever misdirection, the gift can still be accepted with grace.

The three strongest families in Jasper were the Carisols, the Gants, and the Flat Nose Gang. The Carisols were a merchant group that controlled trade and book in the north side of the city, along with their allies in Hope and Carricet. The Flat Noses were a cadre of street toughs and dockhands who overlooked traffic in Mote’s Harbor and controlled the road west to Moorpoint.

The Gants were the strongest of the three, a society of bankers and aristocrats allied with the Tanweyrs in Baronet. The Gants had the fewest people, yet they controlled the highest points: the rich neighborhoods and businesses in the southeast, including Kettle Horn and the Wendeyer.

The Gants frequently reminded the other factions that theirs was the strongest hand. Led by Capriolo Overton Case, they operated several games in the city, including the Prima Carta game at La Posada Meyer.

Case and his lieutenants ran a clean casket. They cooled off any tavern game that would not report them a fee, and many smaller games could not suffer that burden. The resulting lack of options drove the players to La Posada Meyer, where they found good food, good wine, and the finest accommodations, alongside the best game in town.

Valentina Fulera was entwined with the Gants, but she hired me on her own initiative, without the family's knowledge or consent. She handled all monies from the Meyer game, giving the Gants their share once per week. And at the end of every long month, Overton Case shipped a gold-stuffed valise back to Baronet.

Valentina recruited all of her own runners and dealers, managed the rooms and the compañías, and kept her game safe and honest. She also ran a small Postes game, a private affair that played nearly every night at the Wendeyer.

Valentina's private game was not for the rowdy, high-stakes crowd who played in the courtyard up the hill. It was just a small table of players who loved the challenge of the bluff.

Nettie would have enjoyed it.

The djego at La Posada Meyer was at the center of a broad flagstone courtyard. It was open to the sky and surrounded by three cascading balconies of suites, apartments, and compañías. The longwood timbers and whitestone walls were adorned with pequeñas doncellas, climbing vines with tiny pink and white flowers. In the spring they laid a thick carpet of petals around the edges of the courtyard.

The gaming table sat on a round marble platform at the center of the courtyard. This had once been a fountain, now made into a grand stage for Prima Carta.

The game at Meyer Court ran every evening, except on the coldest nights, or in the rain, when the players sometimes moved indoors, or simply waited for the weather to pass. The boards turned when the sun fell, and continued until she rose again.

The djego at Meyer Court reminded me in some ways of the Professor's

Game at Los Vientos. It was public, sedate, and despite my lady's concerns, it ran without any interference from the law. Jasper stood as far as any stone from the reach of Iona, and the Meyer Court game thrived entirely in the open.

My lady's challenges came not from the red guard, but from within her own ranks, a sleeping conflict in which I had already taken a role.

That first night, I washed and dressed in my new chambers as the sun retreated over Endiron Bay. At dusk I made my way to the yard, where Valentina welcomed me with a smile and led me to my perch. I was to spot this game from a discreet overlook, a balcony at the west edge, peering over the dealer's left shoulder. I hid behind a curtain of *pequeñas*, my own private *balcón* at the edge of Meyer Court.

I asked Valentina whether, if this were my place of work, I might just as well sleep in the room behind, but my mistress smiled and shook her head. "These rooms are for my girls."

And true enough, the door behind me opened and closed through the night, new strangers passing at the tumble of every hour. I agreed, my lodgings at the Wendeyer would serve better.

At my insistence, Valentina let me keep a record of the games, provided that I would do it in a coded form. She was concerned about the red guard, though it seemed there was ample evidence already for them to antagonize this *djego*, with or without a record of play.

Valentina watched me for an hour, then left me alone with my *lorgnette* and my ledger, and a final whisper of warning.

"No one must know you are here."

I found a life of comfort in Jasper. I slept in a fine bed, ate rich food, and

had steady work. I was blessed with the protection of powerful friends, keeping a safe distance from the tormentors of my younger days.

I tracked the game at Meyer Court for weeks, looking for any unusual variation in the results. But all I found were honest games and honest winners. No chalked cards, no favored suits, no columns balanced outside the range of expectations.

As a lark, I encoded my game records as inventory purchases in a tea shop. The Courtlan Sisters would have laughed.

From time to time, I caught low-grade hustlers working the game from the second rank, selling bad tickets or posting late bets. I pointed them out, and Valentina's men scared them away. I also helped Valentina eliminate a few dealers who, though not strictly dishonest, were sloppy enough to be bad for the game. Dropping cards on the shuffle, flashing faces on the deal.

I felt I was doing good work in Jasper, and it was refreshing to be settled and part of an honest game. Valentina reminded me to keep quiet and hidden, so each night I climbed into my perch before the game began, and left only after it broke.

The red guard would sometimes harass the smaller games in Jasper, or at least make a show of it. But they never crossed Overton Case, never showed their colors in Meyer Court.

Slowly I came to understand that the red guard in Jasper were just another tool of the Tanweyrs. They were Overton Case's pawns in a never-ending game of Jardín, smashing his enemies wherever they arose. Capriolo Case bribed the guards, while the game operators paid Case not to harass them, and the seasons kept spinning in the sky.

For my part, I was well removed from the politics and bribes. I was Valentina's little red secret, not even known to her masters. Or so we both believed.

My time in the *balcón* gave me a new respect for the game's central players. I had never closely watched the *centrales* before, being more concerned with the cards and my safety. From my nest at Meyer Court I could watch the same gamblers, night after night, and learn their personalities and their practices.

The best players did indeed have a certain talent for the game. Never a true vision, but perhaps more like a sense of smell, for what was in the box. Sometimes I would suspect a player of deeper sight, after a night of clever calls and decisive wins. But without fail, the following night, that same player would lose it all back and more, revealing that their prior success had been at best an educated guess. Most *centrales* could see into the box no better than I could see into the heart of Natalia Bo-Sera.

And I did see her. Nettie passed through Jasper from time to time, doing errands for her superiors in Baronet. On one visit she spotted me on the terrace at the Wendeyer. After that she always made a show of checking on me, claiming concern for my health, but I always assumed that she was trying to steal me away again. She wanted to take another circuit on the road, crushing the small town games of the Shackun Coast and lining her pockets with my gold.

To this I always said no.

She never admitted to the dark deeds I had ascribed to her, but she never denied them either. I think we both knew that our game had ended, that we both had moved ahead with our own lives. She was bright and cordial as always, but I could never view her in the same light.

Nettie visited Meyer Court at least five times during my year in the *balcón*. She would spot me resting in the shade on the Wendeyer terrace, and we would spend an afternoon eating figs and cheese. She spoke of our

time together as some of the happiest of her life, as if I would briefly forget that she had been robbing me the whole time. I was polite but not a fool, and never did she budge me from my place.

She sometimes tried to convince me that Valentina was taking advantage of me, not treating me fairly, or some other such rot. Right or wrong, I distinctly recalled the same treatment from her, so that tactic was hardly strong enough to pull me away.

On her sixth visit, Nettie took another approach. I did not see her that time, but I recognized her hand in the terror that visited La Posada Meyer.

THE FAITH

The sixth card shows a knight on horseback, a proud servant of a noble cause. The knight's head is lowered in reverence, and her steed's somber attitude mirrors her own, as if they both bow to the same truth.

The Faith is the noble aspects of servitude; the strength that derives from swearing allegiance to a higher purpose. Those who serve any master, whether a person or a creed, bring value and resilience to a society.

The Faith represents the end of the Wanderer's journey. A lost soul, seeking identity, has found her value in service.

The knight holds a lance, the strength of her faith. She also holds a shield, marked with the heraldry of the Master, representing her oath to him, and also his duty to her.

It was Elan, the beginning of fall, 13 Benes 737. Jasper did not know true seasons, but our days grew shorter in autumn. The swallowtails passed north across the Pantanos, and the south wind blew the sick-sweet smell of swamp rot across the end of the world.

The colors in the harbor changed from red to blue, as dock runners and packet boats gathered the last of the summer harvest from Hope and Carricet, and carried them north across the Bisia.

The doncellas disappeared from my balcón, clearing my view to the ground. That evening as the gamers assembled, I noticed two heavysset fellows in leather jerkins milling about in the crowd, whispering to each other and casting glances my way.

At first I thought this as unremarkable as a falling leaf or a passing cloud. I did not fear for my safety in that place, as I was comfortably anonymous. My mistress had only ever called me "Little Spider," and neither of us had shared my secret with the world.

But in retrospect, Nettie surely had.

I heard a crash of broken glass and shattered boards from down the hill, behind the Wendeyer. I later learned that my mistress Valentina had been thrown from a window. After this clamor, I heard a distant command, barked in a language I did not know. And then like pigeons startled from rest, the two men in the courtyard bounded up the stairs and snatched me from my seat.

A young lady called Ceranna emerged from the door behind me to see what was the matter, then just as quickly she retreated inside.

I was smart enough not to resist.

I spent the night in fetters, and the next morning I was sack-handled into a four-seater by Messrs Sadje and Corby, the brutes who had seized me the night before. This abuse was beyond unnecessary, as I tried several times to explain. But they seemed deaf to my pleas, eager to make my journey as uncomfortable as possible.

I deduced that I was being punished for the crimes of my employer, Valentina Fulera. The brutes didn't know much, but I managed to

assemble a story from their open-ended and vacuous remarks. Valentina had wisely kept me out of sight, but when the families in Baronet learned where I was hiding, they sent Nettie to check on me. Or perhaps Nettie told them about finding me there; I had no way to guess which came first.

In any case, Baronet had known for some time that I was safely in a pocket. And when Lady Merelin Tanweyr, Capriola of Merrit's Bay, finally needed my help, this was how she asked for it.

The Old Country Road was long and hard. The brutes Sadje and Corby talked very little, and when they did, they spoke mainly of their own petty discomforts. I sat in leg irons and listened to Corby complain of sore knuckles. Knuckles that he had bruised by wasting valuable punches on me.

The irony of this was lost on them both. Or perhaps their feckless banter was actually a performance of elevated wit and subtle cruelty, designed to infuriate me or to help them pass the time.

Perhaps, but not likely.

All accounted, we spent twelve days on the road, winding through pitted black rock and bleak sandy badlands, through tiny towns with sick horses and dirty water. Civilized travelers would have made their way to Baronet by sea. But these brutes had business along the way, and their side trips added days to our journey.

By the third day, passing Tailor, we three had developed the rapport of seasoned travelers, two of whom have almost nothing interesting to say, while the third must manage without the use of their arms and legs.

In Old Siero, day seven, we were joined by a fierce little woman named Galvanere Pecho. She rode with us to Cera. Galvanere carried a heavy satchel that she never surrendered. And she had plenty of advice and

admonition for a criminal like me, without really knowing what kind of criminal I might be.

After two and a half days in a wagon with Galvanere Pecho, I was relieved to play out the rest of the journey in silence.

As the sun rose over Port Sorrow on 26 Benes, 737, I stood shackled and filthy in the stately third-floor office of Lady Merelin Tanweyr, Capriola of Merit's Bay.

The room was broad and high, with an ornate wooden desk at the center, wide floors with colorful carpets all around, and high glass windows overlooking Bright Lane. The palace stood at the center of Novel Garden, a village of palaces at the edge of Baronet High.

Merelin was a small and slender creature, wearing a smart emerald brocade jacket and breeches, spilling with slashes and darts. She was fierce and strong, with piercing black eyes, and dark hair in a long braid. She held a white lace handkerchief like a knight holds a shield, protecting herself from my stench.

With a twist of her head and a wave of her kerchief, she scolded Sadge and Corby for keeping me in irons. As her brutes unbound me, she shared a sympathetic glance.

This was entirely false. Every inconvenience of the ride from Jasper, from my violent apprehension to this intimidating moment in Merelin's impossibly large office, had been by her exact design. But I accepted the gesture and so let my new mistress pretend, for the moment, to be my friend.

"Glory to the Crown," she began, as her brutes left the room. I was glad she got directly to the point, speaking in the easiest of riddles. She meant that I was here to help her with Prima Carta, a game to which she was no

stranger, and that we were both alike in our desire to avoid harassment from Iona and the red guard.

“Glory true,” I replied. This was the response in Jasper. In Baronet it would have been “Glory be,” but I needed to let her know where my heart slept.

She walked slowly around me, appraising me like a cherish breeder. “Canyon Red,” she said. “Alaraña. The little spider. Mysterious adept, invisible spirit, wandering soul.”

I imagined her next remark might be that she had imagined I was taller, or shorter, or something equally petty, but that remark did not come.

She stopped behind her desk and smiled, watching these thoughts in my eyes. “You have something I need,” she said.

I wore the solemn face of a prisoner unsurprised.

She understood, and her smile went thin. “Or, to be quite clear, you are someone I need.”

I nodded. She asked me to sit, and I did. She remained on her feet, and drew a long breath through her white handkerchief. It gave off the faint smell of peaches.

I had been on the road for nearly a fortnight, and I was all sweat and grime. She did not hide her disgust at my appearance, but she seemed to understand that today was not my best day. Fine, I thought. This would be a short meeting.

Merelin rang a tiny glass bell, and a stout attendant entered from the back of the room, beside a large stone fireplace. The valet stopped a few feet behind her mistress, mostly in deference to my awfulness.

“Tea,” said Merelin quietly, while still staring directly at me. Almost as an afterthought, she arched one eyebrow, as if to ask if I needed anything.

“The same?” I said, my voice crackling for no reason. I had no idea

what other options there might be.

As the valet withdrew, Merelin sat behind her desk and explained her situation.

“A team of players called the Breakers have been stealing from my games in Brevia and Baronet,” she began. “I have no idea who they are, or how they are achieving it.”

By “stealing” she simply meant “winning.” This is always the perspective of the operator. If the players beat the house, even if by skill, they must be breaking some rule. If only that unwritten rule that the house must always win.

“Leave it to the centrales?” I said. Normally the biggest losses in such circumstances were suffered by the big-money players. The centrales usually bore the desert’s share of any ordinary cheating scheme. As they were the victims, and wealthy as flames, they could usually be trusted to clean up on their own.

“No,” said Merelin. “This is not their problem. The Breakers are hitting my houses directly, not cheating the centrales. Most likely with seconde bets.”

“Review the dealers, then? Or train up your spotters?”

Merelin pursed her lips in an altogether impatient grimace. Obviously I was suggesting everything she had already tried. It made me wonder how this conversation might have gone years before, when I had still been part of the problem.

Tea entered from the rear. Merelin kept her gaze fixed on me. Obviously she had not kidnapped me away from Jasper, at some inconvenience to her loyal pair of brutes, for a problem that these suggestions could have solved.

“No, Red,” she said, taking her teacup. “I need to put you in those

games. I don't know what the Breakers are doing, but they are costing me dear, and I think you have the magic to see it."

I sighed and looked out the window. This was purely involuntary. It was the anticipation of a long conversation that would begin with "What's in this for me," and after many wasted words would end with, "Nothing."

Merelin saw this in my face. "You will do this for the Family," she said. Honestly? I would not. If I had ever owed anything at all to the Tanweyrs, I should think my obligation had been paid by Nettie's light fingers many times over, with any interest made up somewhere along the Old Country Road. But perhaps I was wrong.

My eyes spoke for me.

Merelin leaned back, cup and saucer in hand. "I see, and you'd like to know what the Family will do for you?"

I had agreed to no obligation or exchange, but Merelin Tanweyr was bargaining with me anyway. She leaned forward and continued.

"Canyon Red, do you know the stench of dead men?"

I said I was no stranger to it.

"Not newly dead, like corpses on a battlefield, or unlucky pilgrims stabbed in dark alleys. Those fresh dead smell of sweat and excrement, blood and straw."

Her description did seem familiar.

"These dead are like wildflowers compared to what I describe. I speak of the fetid stench of rotting flesh, of men left to fester in the dungeons of Kingsgate. The smell of souls expiring, even as they still draw breath."

She was correct that I did not know this smell.

"It lingers in your nose. In your eyes. In your mind. Years later, it is still with you, still terrifying, conjured back into your imagination by the slightest rot on a morning breeze."

I gave the tired smile of someone who gets the point.

“For years, child, this fate has licked at your heels. This sure punishment which the guiding hand of my house has stayed. As you fluttered up and down the Shackun Coast with your bonita musa, as you slept in your fine white sheets above a tavern in the Pantanos. You were always a shepherd’s bark from the clutches of the Law.”

This was not a promise. It was a threat. In Merelin’s opinion, during all those years when I tried to free myself from the Family and stand clear of the game, my captors and confederates had somehow protected me from harm.

Whether or not this were true, I seemed compelled to serve the Family now, lest the oubliettes of Kingsgate swallow me alive.

“I am your servant,” I replied with a nod. And then with a gesture at my filthy raiment, suggested I might do with a room and a bath.

Merelin graciously agreed.

The agents of my mistress had searched up and down the eastern shore. They predicted that the Breakers would strike again the following week, at a palace game in Fullex. This was at the Castilion Verdad, the largest game in Breva, held the seventh and twenty-first of every long month. The game seemed to match the Breakers’ latest targets, as they grew more brazen and more talented, striking at larger and larger games each month.

The Château Verdad was an opulent private setting. The wealthiest merchants and nobles from Baronet and Breva gathered once each fortnight for an evening of games and sports, Prima being only one of many. Fourex, Mercanto, Slates and Dyes, Tablero.

The Fullex game did not attract professional gamblers, for it spread too many games and welcomed no experts. Instead, this palace held an

affluent game of pretenders, a succulent target for any crafty spiders who could find their way through the door.

The gaming space was small, but it was ornate and magnificent. Silver fixtures, lace curtains, and cool air drawn up from a dozen deep wells. Whether they knew it or not, every player in the world wished they could play here.

That is, every player except myself. I had no idea who or what I was looking for, or what I stood to gain, save my continued freedom from the unpleasant odors of a Kingsgate prison cell. I wasn't even sure the Breakers would be in the house.

For this endeavor, my mistress lent me three assistants from her house of butterflies. The first was Erlan, a fastidious creature from Baronet High, who seemed part frigate and part shepherd. Erlan perched in the balcony and watched the edges of the room for any signs of our villains, of whom we yet had no description.

My second ally was a bright little spark called Connar Grey. She was a Capristine Cousin, newly placed as a drudge in the Château. She was also an informant working for the Tanweyrs, and had aided them in many prior adventures. Connar Grey was our watchbook of the local nobility, and she knew every fat face in the house. She would be the first to pick out anyone who did not belong.

Our third partner was Jura, a carpenter's ward from Breva. Tonight he worked as a ticket runner, and could send me signs of any large bets or unusual activity from the floor.

And while my team covered the room, I covered the cards. I took a seat on first balcony, to the left of the game, in a broad wicker chair between two potted palms. My perch gave me an unblocked view of the cards and the players, the counting table and the door, and the thick crowd of bettors

milling on the palace floor.

One by one I watched the games proceed. There were some big bettors in this house, some grand turns of fate, but nothing defied expectations until the fifth game, when I predicted the wrong winner.

The Watch were due, or so I thought, but victory went to the Crown. This was not altogether strange, as the Crown had an early lead. But I was sure that when I looked into the box, I saw another suit take the hand.

I forgave myself this error and thought little of it. But on the ninth game, the same thing happened again. This time I was sure: this game had been stolen from the Faith, and handed once again to the Crown.

The player sitting the Crown seemed beyond suspicion. She was the mistress of the house, Berona Alcatia Mornay. From what I knew, the Berona had neither the motive nor the temperament to cheat at her own game. So I could excuse the Crown's second undeserved win as mere coincidence on her part.

And then I grasped my head in disbelief. The simplest answers are always the best. I waved to Connar Grey, and she joined me shortly in the balcony.

"Name that dealer," I said, and nodded at the table below.

Connar spoke without looking. "That is my lady's niece, Cornice Faudajen." Then she glanced down at the dealer to confirm this fact, and her head tilted slowly to the side.

I stared along with her.

"Or?" I said.

"Or indeed," Connar said quietly, "for that is not my lady's niece."

Despite being at the center of the storm, a Prima Carta dealer can be nearly invisible. In palace games, she is a fixture of the house: a trusted, impartial figure. She earns a healthy wage to turn the boards, and she faces

all manners of punishment for any betrayal of the game. She is an utterly innocuous aspect in any polite society game.

This isn't true in a tavern game or djego. In those worlds, all players are suspect, dealers doubly so. So the deck is splayed clearly on first pass, cards are dealt from the table flat, dealers roll their sleeves (or wear none), and players keep a weather eye on the game.

But here in this celestial place, no one gave the dealer a second glance. These players were not here to see, but to be seen. They had risen so far above the ranks of ordinary play, and they so closely trusted the house and the table, that they had lost all perspective and concern.

They also believed that the machine would clean itself. The penalties for cheating were so dire, and the rewards so poor, that there was no reason for concern. Dealers in palace games had been vetted by the house, were trusted beyond doubt, and were the most reliable element of the game.

Except when they were not.

Such was the story at Castilion Verdad, as a quiet figure with Elisha Faudajen's hair and chemise sat dealing the center table, and quietly chalking one game in five.

And now that we knew the method, my partners and I had a better chance of finding the culprits.

I gathered with my team on the ground floor as the eleventh game began. Somehow this dealer, whoever she was, had signaled a confederate when she was about to produce a winner.

We first guessed that she would play up only leaders, meaning that she would select a suit that was already ahead and likely to win, and then force that win to come true. The suit would be an easy pickup for any

seconde who was complicit in the scheme.

But betting a long suit on second pass was not very lucrative. The odds were short, and a player would surely stand out if they made any bet large enough to matter.

So we guessed that our mysterious dealer might have been fixing these games from the start, selecting and signaling the winning suit before first pass. A seconde could play that suit and win five to one every time, betting either against the house or against an innocent centrale.

We returned to our posts and watched for any signal that might be coming from the center table.

On game seventeen, I caught the signal. Seemingly at random, when the stranger washed the cards, a single card flipped face-up. She grabbed it by the corner, tapped it gently on the table, and used it to scoop up the rest, before slipping the wayward card back into the pack and resuming her shuffle. It was an innocuous action, and a common mistake in any house, except that it repeated perfectly before game twenty-four.

This card must have been the sign. In game twenty-four, I signaled to my confederates that the Forest was on track to win. But I was wrong. After first pass, the Faith was long and the Crown were true. So I had no idea what to expect. But one part of our prediction was correct: our villain chalked the Crown, and dealt the Faith to win.

So her signals were in code. It seemed the Forest card led to the Faith. I thought of a few possible ciphers, but the simplest was that the true suit was two positions to the right of the flashed card. This had been true on the previous game as well, though I could not remember farther back than that.

Assuming this was the code, I watched our dealer for another flash. On game twenty-nine she flashed a Lock on the shuffle, which (if I was

correct) meant that she was signaling the Watch.

I motioned to Jura on the floor, asking him to point up anyone with a strong bet on Swords. He showed me three large secondi bets: one from Prince Elery Highcastle, who had backed the Watch all evening; one from Berona Helia of Lucetia, and one from a gaunt, princely figure in a diamond cloak, whom Connar Grey could not name.

Of those three big winners in game twenty-nine, only the stranger did not seem surprised.

Our villain was a tall man with a whisper-thin goatee, a handsome and elegant player who seemed to belong in this crowd, yet whom no one could identify. This was quite ordinary in a Water Street card house, but there were no strangers at the Château Verdad.

I sent Jura to the counting table, to ask how this player had fared this evening. The stranger had won two big bets on prior hands, and had lost tiny amounts on various other wagers. The banker identified the mysterious prince's accomplice as an older woman in a black cloak. She had won large bets on two of the other chalked deals, but had already departed. The prince made for the exit shortly after collecting his third big win.

I am no adventurer, and knew it was foolish to chase these thieves into the night. But I had to satisfy my curiosity about the old woman in black. I had not seen her anywhere in the crowd, and Erlan did not remember anything about her, but her very description gave me a flutter of the heart.

I followed the prince through the palace courtyard and into the dark, down the dirt road to the stables. The porte-cochère was teeming with grooms who would gladly have fetched his mount, yet the prince covered this ground alone and in the dark.

The villain met his counterpart in a copse beside the stables. I drew as near as I could, keeping to the shadows and well out of sight. I could not hear their voices, nor see into the darkness where they stood. But the woman lit a pipe as they spoke, and for a moment the flame showed her face.

Ella.