

## Chapter 7: THE MASTER

After our parting in Navene, the Courtlan Sisters must have been hungry to return to the game. They lacked the skill to see into the box, so after four years on the ridge, they decided to meddle with it instead.

In a game controlled by criminals, cheating is a perilous risk. The monsters who control these games extract penalties far worse than any jail. And yet my old mistresses were back in the game, slipping quietly from place to place, and nipping at djegos and palace games up and down the Magan Coast.

For months they had hidden their steps, but caution surrendered to greed, and their plays grew so bold that the masters took notice.

The Sisters had learned new tricks since our days together. Their camouflage was more sophisticated, their tactics more brazen. I had never imagined a gambit so fearless as to substitute a confederate for a trusted dealer.

Merelin Tanweyr called them the Breakers. This was not their own moniker. I would guess that they had no name for their team, since a phantom needs no call. But by any name, they were my new enemy, siphoning gold away from the Tanweyrs' largest and most profitable games.

I wrestled with this knowledge for days, trying to decide what to tell the Capriola. My team did not pursue the Breakers after spotting them at the Castilion Verdad, as I thought it wiser to return to Baronet and report what we had learned. But first, I needed to decide how much to report.

When I returned to Merelin's office, I told her only a fraction of the truth: I had seen the old woman's face. I said that I would know her if I spotted her again, and I was sure she hadn't spotted me. The same was

true for her confederate, the mysterious prince. As for their dealer, I could not even guess how she had slipped in and out of the game.

I wanted to protect the Sisters, at least for the moment. Ella and Van had been like family. Coarse as Ella seemed, she had plucked me from the streets and delivered me into a better life. I felt I owed her some debt, having known her far longer than the tyrannical Merelin Tanweyr.

I planned to bargain with the Sisters first, rather than immediately handing them over to the Tanweyrs. That was a rod that could not be unbent, and it seemed wise to learn more about their plans before condemning them to ruin.

But how would I find them? I had spotted Ella briefly at the Castilion Verdad, but I did not follow her company into the night. At this point I didn't know if Van was with them. And who was the chameleon shuffling the cards? What other accomplices did they have? Where would they strike next?

Back on Basil Street, I found that the Sisters' tea shop was gone, having become a book store. The new proprietor was called Ursun Davies, and the Sisters' names were not known to him.

I could call on no one in the High City, nor in the docks below, save those who would have relayed my inquiries to Merelin Tanweyr. To find the Breakers again, I would likely have to call on Merelin and her spies, for her best guess at where they would next appear.

The Sisters had taken quite a risk showing their faces at the Château Verdad. This suggested that the Breakers might be nearing the end of their campaign, or close to changing tactics. But I had never known the Sisters to quit while they were ahead.

Merelin's best guess was that the Breakers would move farther north,

perhaps as far as Los Vientos, where the Professor's Game was opening again in six days. A journey to the University would take four days, which gave me two days to haunt Merits Bay and see if I might pick up their trail in the capital.

The Downstone Docks had changed little in six years. Some houses had fallen to ruin, others had been burned and rebuilt. Walls seemed lower, alleys seemed narrower, and faces seemed more callous and cruel. The memories of my childhood hung like dark shadows in the air.

I was changed too. Taller, stronger, and more confident. I ventured into the Duck and Trumpet, the tavern where I played my first back-room game. That game was long gone, but I recognized one of the sailors from that night, sitting alone near the door. She was called Gile Novis, one of the "boys" in the circle of Jaret Carver. She did not remember me.

We spoke like friends about the docks and the game. She was lately removed from Carver's employ, over a matter of romance or pride or greed, I could not tell which. Like me, she had searched the docks and the city for work or a way out. So far, heavy lifting was the only job that paid. I commiserated.

Gile suggested I might look into the Ghost Tavern on Flank Street, where the owner sometimes dealt a midnight game. She made a joke about having only five coins to play, and I almost replied, with a nod to the night we met. But identifying myself would have been a mistake. I chuckled softly and finished my drink, then walked down the slippery cobblestones to the end of Flank Street.

Be told, this game was on.

I knew better this time than to drop a sack of coins on the bar. I simply nodded towards the back room door, and raised my eyebrows. The barkeep gave me a puzzled look.

“Glory to the Crown?” I asked.

She laughed. “Glory be,” she said, and pointed to the balcony above.

It was a small room on the first floor, with a potbelly stove at the south end, and shuttered windows along the east wall. The hour was near midnight, and three players sat near the table, sharing stories of games and adventures as they waited for the boards to turn.

Card players love to brag about the impossible losses they have suffered. Five cards long at second pass, and sunk by a six-card run. Down to a single coin and locked in the short, then back to well and better by dawn.

All of these stories sounded the same to me. “An unusual thing happened, and I was there.” After years in the game, a player should be more surprised *not* to have seen something unusual. But it’s all fascinating, truly, please tell me more.

Three players sat ready, and three others waited on the ridge. I introduced myself and asked if I might join. As I was the stranger, they offered me the Crown.

I expected someone to produce a deck and start the shuffle, but these players seemed in no hurry to begin. Were they waiting for another player? I saw no point in asking, so I made myself comfortable and laughed at their stories, even inventing a few of my own.

And then the mysterious prince of the Château Verdad walked into the room, a half dozen fresh decks in his hand.

## THE MASTER

The seventh card is the Master, a dark puppeteer. They are a black

silhouette, hovering without legs, and their puppets are a courtly lord and lady, each reminiscent of the knight from The Faith. Stripped of their lances and shields, these puppets now dance on strings.

The Master is the consolidation of power, the evil that rises when wicked souls abuse the faith, when the governors violate their oaths to the governed.

This card stands for the corruption of civilization, the evil that manifests as tyrants betray their trust. The Master hoards the profits of society, eventually undermining their own support, and precipitating the ruin of all.

“General rules, ladies and gents,” said the prince as he settled into the dealer’s chair. One more player joined us from the ridge, filling out the table of five. I made my formal introductions alone, as all the other players seemed well acquainted. I called myself Cantere.

The prince was called Nikah Fero, and as he shuffled the first game, he reviewed the rules for my benefit. I listened carefully, and watched his fast fingers for any of Nettie’s tricks. For the moment I saw none.

In Merits Bay they play a version of opener’s bet, called the *facto*. This is a side pot into which any player may add a coin, and which goes to the tallest stack among them after first pass. This bet eventually became the cornerstone of the game of Primo.

If stacks are tied for the *facto* bet, they split the pot, with any odd coins going to the dealer.

The *facto* was an absurd bet. Stacks are so often tied on first pass that the dealer makes a king’s dot in rounded-off coins. But the company at the Ghost Tavern were fond of it, and so I played along rather than spoil their fun.

Merits Bay rules also include the *moneda*, a one-penny tax levied on the very first card of the game. This coin goes directly into the dealer's pocket. Rules like the *facto* and *moneda* were how tavern dealers earned their wages, along with the occasional gratuity. With added costs like this, many groups preferred to deal for themselves, despite the risks of being cheated by a stranger.

But Fero was adept and courteous, a fine dealer worth every penny of his wages. For the first hour, he made no false moves, and had no apparent confederate in the room. This game seemed not to be his opportunity to steal, but only to relax and practice his skills.

For a dealer, cheating at Prima requires very little technique. To change the winner, he needs to chalk only a card or two. But an observant player will always find him out eventually, so it seemed hardly worth the risk.

Once or twice in the second hour, I found myself cross-guessing the winner. Had two cards reversed on the second pass?

I watched Fero's hands as closely as I could, while still laughing and joking with the other players. By pure luck, my seat was winning, which helped ease my mind against the possibility of being hoodwinked by a dark house.

Once and again, I noticed the occasional chalked card. Sometimes this turned the result in my favor, sometimes against me. Twice I made the mistake of folding at the cap, only to have Fero deal me the winning stack. He got a big tip from the second-place finisher both times, but I was fairly certain that Fero wasn't corrupting the game just to earn those tips.

Indeed, on deeper examination, Nikah Fero was cheating in his own game. But this seemed purely for his own amusement, or perhaps for practice, and not for anyone's particular benefit.

His timing was always impeccable. Cards jumped out of order when

drinks arrived, as spectators came and went, at the high points of bawdy stories, and probably several more times I did not notice.

By quattretemps our game had crumbled. We had played three-handed for about an hour, and when another soul made his exit, the last two decided to end the game. I finished the night a few scudi to the good, and the other players were up or down by like amounts.

Nikah Fero was the biggest earner of the night, and indeed deserved to be. Despite his cheating (against no one in particular), he had given us a delightful evening.

Fero had broken only three of his six decks. Postas decks were not cheap, even these plain cards from de Buenas.

The first ruined deck was an honest mistake, as two of the cards were fouled by a spilled lager. The player who upended his tankard tipped Fero handsomely to compensate, more than enough to pay for the deck.

The second foul was more deliberate, made by a tipsy gunner named Ferret. She lost one too many games to long discard runs, and in a fit of rage she tore several of her opponent's cards in half while cursing her rotten luck. Ferret did not pay to replace that deck, as she seemed to believe that her outburst was warranted, having lost so many times and against such long odds.

Ferret was also the first player to leave the game, down several fiora from her own poor choices. As far as I could tell, Prince Fero had never cheated against her, and might even have helped her once or twice, for the good of the game. But this deference had not been enough to keep her fat or happy.

After the game broke, I stayed behind and chatted with Fero. We talked about the rowdy night and the flow of the game, about his role at the tavern and his history with the cards. I am sure he lied a little, as did I.

At the Duck and Trumpet, Gile Novis had told me that “the owner” ran this game, and I asked if Fero was that man. He admitted to being only a small stakeholder in the tavern, enough to claim that he was an owner, but mostly so that he could run his game. He invited me to return in a fortnight, as he was about to spend ten days on the road, on business he was proud to keep a secret.

I decided to pry.

“Saw you chalking a few,” I said.

“Glory to the Crown,” he replied. Meaning, in this case, that he had cheated in my favor, and more than once.

“Glory be,” I said, and jostled the coins in my purse.

“And I see that you’ve played before,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Here and there,” I said.

“Mostly there,” he replied. For he had never seen me before, certainly not at a table in Baronet.

“And yourself?” I asked.

Fero shook his head. “Not me, I can’t afford this game.”

“You deal it well enough. That must fill the purse.”

“Some of it,” he said, with a half-smile.

“And the rest?” By his coy smile, I assumed that he was eager to involve me in whatever scheme was earning his real money.

Fero gave a furtive glance around the empty room. “I am sworn to secrecy,” he whispered, and then he chuckled and proceeded to tell me all of his secrets.

Fero explained that he was one of three expert dealers in the employ of two benefactors (the Sisters, I assumed), playing Prima Carta as a traveling crew of sharps. Their job was to deal when they could, chalking the



occasional card, or to play in the secondi and to keep their heads low and their mouths closed.

Fero was failing on that last part, as his mouth was quite open at the moment. I gave myself all the credit for this, having kept him amused until dawn.

The team had been chosen for their body types as well as their skills. Their technique was to infiltrate high-value games, substituting one of their crew for a trusted dealer or ticket runner. They had various strategies and gambits depending on the vulnerabilities of the house.

They would play long enough to win, but never long enough to be noticed. If a member wasn't dealing, or running scrip, they were betting among the secondi, reading the signals, watching the doors, and winning just two or three big bets in a night.

Fero was dead sure that they were getting away with all of this, and that none of the operators were aware of his team. "We never win enough to be noticed," he said with pride.

I was quietly sorry that he thought so. When you steal from the Family, you will always be noticed.

I sensed that Fero was sizing me up for recruitment, possibly to fill a physical type that his crew didn't yet possess. This would be an easy inroad to a meeting with the Sisters, where I could give them the bad news: they had very much been noticed.

Light grew in the east, and we found ourselves burning the wick to the bob. Fero rubbed his eyes and threw open the shutters, taking in the morning light and watching the docks creak to life.

He stared for a moment at the sunrise and declared, "There is someone you should meet."

There certainly was.

It took two days for Ella to gather her team. They had scattered about High Hill doing various personal errands. Her team were not, in fact, headed to the Professor's game, and so I was glad not to have chased a shadow to the University and back.

By the appointed day, Ella and Van had determined who I was, and I was not permitted the dramatic surprise that one enjoys in reunions of this type.

However, I do not think they suspected my intentions. They might have guessed that I had come to argue for my stolen wages, or even to rejoin the fold, but not to drop the name of Merelyn Tanweyr into their party.

I had indeed considered joining them, since the Tanweyr family seemed somehow powerless to foil the Breakers without me, but I wasn't yet sure which road was safest.

The Sisters still thought themselves beyond the sight of any powers. Had they considered the timing of my visit, they might have realized something was amiss. If Ella had known my employer was Merelin Tanweyr, she might not have agreed to meet, and she might even have taken the cue that she should shrink from this trade. But whatever they knew or did not know that day, the Sisters were happy to receive me.

I met the Breakers at midday at the Palazzo Cofia, a glistening moonstone on Coronet Hill. The Hill was a neighborhood of stately homes just north of Novel Garden, a maze of golden palaces, high walls, and broad canals.

Clearly the Sisters were doing well.

Along with Ella and Van, I met their three young dealers: card players and hustlers whom the sisters had trained as sharps and shadows.

Prince Fero was among them, dressed in his Brickledown finery. Beside him was Calys, the desert flower who had dealt the game at the Château Verdad. The third player was called Seven, a squat, burly boy who could have been Steed Holla's nephew. Perhaps he was.

Ella seemed frail in the daylight, showing her age in voice and bearing. She kept mostly to the shadows these days, leaving the hard work to her team and her elder sister.

Their streetside lending operation was long gone. Now we sat in a well-appointed mansion on Pritchard Park, in a whiterock courtyard filled with dwarf apples and date palms. The sunlight danced up a wide canal that cut through the yard, and through a portico overlooking For Cater.

I should have arrived by gondola. We never think of these things until it's too late.

Fero was excited for this meeting, perhaps thinking that he would get some honor for recruiting a new player. He also expected that I was to be given some sort of initiation test, and he remarked to the Sisters on the absence of a game table. Indeed there was only a small side table with a platter of fruit and cheese, tankards of ale and clearwater, and a comfortable arrangement of divans.

"How the years have treated you," said Ella as I approached. Her voice crackled and I smiled. My heart would have responded in kind, but my head was wiser.

"You look well," I said, being sure to encompass all with a glance, though with deference to the Sisters.

"And you," Van chuckled. "How long have you been trying to find us?"

Over the years I might have thought of a dozen better ways to track down these women, had I cared to, but I truly had no mind for detective

work, nor much desire to be with them again.

“A long time, Venera,” I replied. It seemed appropriate to let them speak the first actual truth.

The Sisters spent some time regaling their crew with stories of our exploits, omitting the details of my specific talent. To hear them tell it, we had worked in much the same manner as the new crew, although with a level of unmitigated success that seemed fictional to hear.

They told their crew that the Tanweyr family had conspired to separate us, leaving me the duty of explaining exactly how. Instead, I turned the conversation back to the day.

“The Tanweyrs plan to burn you again,” I explained. “And this time, they won’t just break up your team. You have taken too much and for too long.”

The Sisters believed that their powerful connections would insulate them from any dire consequences at the hands of the Baronet families. But in my estimation, the Fieros and Tanweyrs had grown weary of borrowing back their own money.

“We never win enough to be noticed,” Van protested.

“Merelin Tanweyr believes differently,” I replied, clearly declaring who had sent me.

“And what news of our sweet Capriola?” asked Van. “Still afraid to walk in the sun?”

She spoke of Merelin’s long history with the law, the likely source of her foreboding tales of Kingsgate prison. The red guard were a hammer that could fall without mercy, and Merelin was not without her scars.

“No more afraid than some,” I said, to the Sisters who had been hiding in the shadows for years.

“Oh, I love a walk in the sun,” said Ella, gesturing at her opulent

surroundings.

These two were not afraid of the law or the family, or so they claimed. They had always enjoyed some secret protections that I could barely understand. And it was fair to say that the swords of the red guard cut in all directions. Invoking their aid could harm every game. Unless they were firmly in your pocket, calling for the constables was a gambit of last resort.

"The hand is played," I said. "This line is set. I've uncovered your little gang, at Merelin's instruction, and it won't take long before her thugs are knocking on your door."

"That door?" asked Ella, nodding towards the gate of the Palazzo Cofia.

Of course not. This place was not their home, any more than it was mine. The ladies had played it well, but I noticed their crew acting unfamiliar in this place. This location had been merely a misdirection to put me at ease.

"Very well," I said. "You may disappear again tomorrow. But if you keep breaking the Baronet games, the family will find you, and they will put an end to you."

"Perhaps," said Van. "And this would... please you?"

I didn't have much of an answer for that. "It would please the Family," I said.

"I suppose you're just a loyal servant?"

My eyes rolled in thought. Could Van really hope to dispel my fear of Merelin Tanweyr, and her terrifying smells of the dead?

Van approached me and took my hand. "Be honest, Red," she said. "You're no happier with Merelin now, than you were on the road with us."

I shook my head. "There's no joy in the Trials, under any roof. For the moment, I'm simply trying to save your lives."

I looked around at the three children who were caught up in this dance. "And your lives, too." I don't think they had weighed the risks of this enterprise so starkly. And yes, I would indeed have liked to save us all, if I could.

"Our lives are not in danger," said Ella, fiercely protective of her crew, as if the strength in her voice alone could build a shield around them.

Fero made a snort that meant I was wasting everyone's time. But the others heard me. They might already have been leaning for the door. I wondered what leverage the Sisters held over them.

"You're safe for now," I said to the group, "Merelin doesn't know I'm here. But by cave and cavern, you're surely not so invisible as you think. Some day the Berona's daughter won't be so happy that little Calys is dealing in her place, and some fat noble will catch you and feed you to her dogs."

"Hard words," said Fero.

"Look, mate. I found you in two days, in a tavern game on Flank Street. You weren't exactly hiding."

I turned to the group. "And these parlor tricks of yours, they are a line in the fog. I'm not the only spotter who can see a chalked card. You're flashy and clumsy and it's a surprise that you're not already dead."

Van leaned back and smiled.

"Not like the old days, eh?" she asked.

Fero made another noise. This one meant that the old days could not have been so incredible as the Sisters described them.

For the first time, Calys spoke. Her head tilted to the side, and her eyes gazed into mine. "Who are you?"

I didn't have a quick answer. She turned to the Sisters and asked again. "Who is this?"

I could see that Ella hoped to lure me back into her orbit, somehow to use me as a wedge against Merelin Tanweyr, as if we had not already been down every conceivable road. I could read these thoughts behind her eyes, even as I begged her to go forever off the game.

“Show her,” Ella told me with a smile, and pointed at the serving table. “Show her who you are.”

Alas, this encounter was to become a test after all.

I shrugged and cleared off some space on the table, just enough to deal, and dragged over a wooden stool from under a nearby tree.

“Yes, show us,” Fero echoed. The crew gathered close around the table. Fero produced a Postas deck and offered it to me, to shuffle and deal, and to show him my magic.

But I quietly refused the cards, and motioned that he should hand them to Calys instead.

The crew were confused by this, but Fero passed his deck to Calys. The Sisters nodded and smiled. Calys took the deck and sat down at the table.

“Glory to the Crown,” I exclaimed as we all watched the shuffle. To Calys, I said quietly, “Deal it straight, love.”

Calys looked to Van for permission, and Van gave it. She did a fair shuffle and began dealing first pass.

The eyes of these experts were fixed on me. As I watched the cards, I cast about for something small, like a coin or a pebble, to mark the winning suit. Any object would do. I looked over the serving table while watching the cards, and Ella must have read my intent because she quietly pressed something into my hand.

It was the same ivory lapin that I had used in the tea shop, many years ago. Ella had saved it for me, and at that moment I felt a connection with her that I had not felt before.

Calys finished first pass. "Glory to the Crown?" she asked, though the Crown were only two cards to the mark. The Faith and the Forest stood at three cards each, The Bank at four, and the Watch at five.

The crew nattered, each naming a suit and giving their reasons. The Watch was in the lead, true, but someone thought they had seen a run of Crowns that might bring glory after all. I quietly placed my lapin on the Faith and the discussion fell silent.

To my surprise, the demonstration halted there. No one in the company harbored any doubt that I was right about the winner. Instead, they immediately turned to quizzing me and arguing with each other, not about whether I was correct, but about how I possibly could be.

It was as if I had shown them a cat in a box, then closed the box, and set them off on a tirade of speculation about how I could possibly know that the box contained a cat.

To be fair, I do accept that seeing this cat is not as easy as, say, counting to ten, or remembering a name, or any other ordinary task that vexes the simple mind. Yet there I sat, quietly tapping my fingers, and listening to a storm of conjecture about what animal might be inside the box, or how indeed anyone could know.

After this brief demonstration, and more conversation about the cards and the game and the glorious old days, the Sisters tried once more to lure me back into the game. They promised to treat me with dignity, to cut me an equal share of the take. They would let me work easy hours, play when and where I wanted, take holidays at my leisure.

But this appeal was hollow. It was nothing more than a recital of the reasons I had left. The Sisters made it clearer with each word that they understood how poorly they had treated me. If anything, this only strengthened my resolve not to rejoin their enterprise.



And by the end of the discussion, I could sense some doubt growing among the new team as well. For the Sisters' offers to me were surely more generous than any deal they had made with the Breakers.

We left things unsettled. The Sisters could not convince me to join their enterprise, and I could not convince them to retire. Ella and Van were determined to run their game until they were caught or killed, for it seemed that no amount of winning would satisfy them. And they wished that I would abandon reason and become one of their ghosts.

The three young rogues remained confused at whatever special talent I might have. They could not guess what had allowed me to know the winner without even touching the cards.

I did not chase the Breakers to their next target, wherever it was. I did not have the time, for the small world of Prima Carta was about to change for the worse, as a dozen new crews got word of the Breakers' success, and tried for a taste of their own.

For the next nine months I would be a seeker for the Tanweyrs, keeping watch over a hundred djegos, and guarding my Lady's enterprise from the schemes of petty thieves.

And from the long arm of the Lion.