

Chapter 8: LEVIATHAN

The King's Justiciar in High Baronet was Valor DuChamp. He came from an old LaForêt wine family, and had served as a judge chaplain under Baron Von Millie in the Sackton Day. He was a grizzled old man with a knobby nose, round belly, and a few white hairs left on his spotted head. And he spent his days at games and husquey.

Valor DuChamp did not come to Sierin for conflict. He viewed Baronet as a wealthy and peaceful city, self-governing and stable. Its traditions were venerable, its ruling families entrenched and unassailable. DuChamp came to Baronet to spend his last years in the sun, with a generous pension and comfortable serallo, pursuing whatever delights his aging body was still capable to enjoy.

Though he was an officer of the Court, and still sworn to uphold Alana's Law, Valor DuChamp was also one of Prima Carta's most prolific players. He sat in Kerat's Corner at least once every week, and sometimes played in the Palazzo Zinsa game in Seven Gardens, as well as the monthly Magna Viero game in Hauser Park.

DuChamp's presence at these tables was a calculated demonstration. It showed the operators that their games could run in peace, safe as long as the highest representative of the law spent his late hours at the table. DuChamp sometimes joked of shuttering these games, most often when the cards turned against him. But for the most part, the patrons (and the proprietors) knew that he was joking.

For the most part.

But allies like DuChamp always served more than one mistress, and in truth, no game was completely safe, even from the hands of its own players.

After my reunion with the Sisters, I carried the details of their situation back to my mistress on Bright Lane.

I met with Merelin Tanweyr at sunset that same night. After the light fell, her cavernous office felt less intimidating, and the firelight seemed cozy. We lounged on sage-colored divans near a broad whitestone hearth. Merelin's caramel dacet, Nuto, sniffed curiously at our tea and biscuits

"I met with the Breakers this afternoon," I told her. "They are a team of card sharps, run by two women from High Hill."

"Did you know these women?"

"Yes," I said. "The Courtlan Sisters. I used to work for them." After a thought, I added, "In their tea shop."

"Of course." Merelin rubbed Nuto's ear and looked away thoughtfully. She knew that I had worked for them in far greater capacity than as a shop hand.

"The Courtlan Sisters have been placing allies and counterfeits in games along the Magan Coast," I said. "Hitting larger games every month."

"We suspected as much," said Merelin.

I wondered who the 'we' might be, and Merelin saw the thought in my eyes.

"I asked Aspen to follow you to Coronet Hill," she said. "Aspen Juranier. You know him as Jura. He tells me that the Palazzo Cofia is in good repair."

She had tracked me. That was a surprise, but useful to know. It revealed the shallowness of her trust, and prevented me from telling too many obvious lies. "I don't believe the Cofia is their permanent home," I said.

“We guessed this as well. I believe the Cofia is still the summer home of Leord Sahan.”

I nodded as though I had any idea who Leord Sahan was, but as I had never heard of them, I assumed they must therefore be in some legitimate branch of trade, miles from the nearest gaming table.

I stared into the firelight. “I must confess to a certain affection for them.”

“The Courtlans,” said Merelin. “Yes, I suppose that’s expected. But then, you have never owed them money.”

“Quite the opposite, I’m afraid.”

“And do you think this... affection would prevent you from acting as my agent in their service?”

I should think it might. There was no way to say this out loud. It seemed pointless to agree with Merelin by repeating what she had just said. So I let her question be its own answer.

“Clear your worries,” she said. “Now that we have marked The Breakers, our options are more clear. You have done well.”

I felt relieved, but also somewhat terrified at what fate might lay in store for the Sisters. But since Merelin seemed willing to track my movements, I decided there was hot pitch to do about it.

“What options?” I asked. “The smell of death?”

“Nothing so coarse,” she smiled. She could see real worry in my eyes. “The Sisters are part of the Family, after all.”

I had no way to know if she was lying, so I did still worry about the Sisters and their crew coming to harm.

My mistress took a biscuit from the table and stared for a moment into her cup. Nuto nibbled at her fingers.

“Are you familiar with Justiciar Valor DuChamp?” she asked.

I said that I had heard the name, but had never met the man.

“DuChamp is an aficionado of Prima Carta, and also a friend of the Family. I have asked his aid in protecting the games from teams like the Breakers.”

“Teams? Are there more?” From what I had seen, there could be no other teams quite like the Breakers.

“More each day,” she sighed. “These clumsy fools smell blood on the wind, weakness in the game.” She clicked, smiling to herself, and added, “I suppose we owe some of that to you.”

I shook my head. “If anyone deserves credit, it’s the Sisters.”

“Perhaps. But I believe their current enterprise is but a faint echo of the game they ran...” She was about to say, with me, but stopped herself. “...previously.”

“Of course,” I said.

“But cheaters, skilled or no, can hurt the business. They erode trust in the integrity of all djegos. Big players abandon the game, take their money elsewhere.”

“There are other games to run,” I suggested, though I was only echoing her point.

“Not like Prima Carta. One cannot build an enterprise around Postes, or Tablero. Prima Carta has become a unique and venerated tradition. A spectacle. A show. A single game can captivate a hundred players, and an operator can support an entire gambling house with a single open table.”

“What will the Justiciar do?”

“He will root out the deadrot. Crack down on the cheaters and bring respect back to the game. DuChamp has called to Iona, and the Queen’s Constable has dispatched a foul creature called Carander Moro. This man will arrive in Baronet within the fortnight. He is an indelicate tool and no

fan of the art. I fear that Moro may kill the weeds with fire.”

I sat quietly, knowing that I would be somehow conscripted into this dance, and searching for any way to avoid it. Merelin could see this in my face.

“You will be my emissary, little spider,” she smiled, and tugged on Nuto’s ear. “You will protect my gardens from the dragon’s breath.”

Merelin was not thrilled by the Queen’s choice of enforcer. Carander Lolar Metelgate Moro was a punishing storm, a pitiless torturer with no love for the game or its players. He was a stranger in Sierin, but he knew the game well. In fact, he was a former sharp himself, having once made his living in Iona by cheating at Postes de Cerca.

News of Moro’s imminent arrival circulated among the djegos of Baronet and Breva, thanks to a whisper campaign initiated by the Tanweyrs. Friends of the Family were urged to close down for a month or more, to hide in the dark, to stay alive. Merelin was sure that Carander Moro, and his company of one hundred red guards, would gut the fish to catch the worm.

And indeed, the Carander wasted no time. He landed first in Gill Corin, closing djegos along the eastern shore, striking harder and deeper than was his instruction. Game masters were jailed, dealers assaulted, players driven out of their games.

The Carander tacked clear of specific games where Valor DuChamp was a player, or where his allies were otherwise involved. But for weeks, Moro closed game after game, down the Eastern Shore from Caprice to Port Sorrow, whether there were any cheaters among them or not.

My mistress had summoned the demon, and the demon was hungry.

LEVIATHAN

The eighth card is Leviathan, a many-armed beast grasping up from the depths, clutching a merchant ship and dragging it beneath the waves.

Leviathan is the sleeping giant, a power unleashed by fate, or time, or hubris. She is a hurricane, a volcano, a flock of flying dragons. She is a force out of control.

Whether awakened by the passing ship, or merely there by coincidence, Leviathan is a thoughtless monster who will bring destruction to masters and servants alike, death to families and thieves. She knows no law and has no allies, and she crushes whatever she finds.

I never learned what the Breakers did next. But it mattered little whether they broke up, disappeared, or dropped right back into the game. By this point, panic had erupted in the underworld of the djegos, and panic was leading to chaos.

Many high-stakes players were banned from their regular games, or those games had closed down to weather the storm. And so they crisscrossed the peninsula looking for new houses to play. If Carander Moro closed a game, another would open within a week. Crews of grifters emerged, sensing weakness and confusion in new operations, and games of all sizes came under attack. Operators became suspicious of any winners, be they honest or not.

My mistress sent me to city after city, game after game, ahead of the law and on the heels of a dozen gangs of cheaters. Game masters all over the peninsula were losing money to brash teams of unscrupulous players, and also to their own incompetence as they struggled to keep ahead of the law.

Once discovered, most dishonest players were easily thwarted. They were green and greedy and foolish. But their sheer numbers were hard to repel, and a second wave of talents was surely not far behind, ones who might be more skilled and harder to detect.

Under the banner of Merelin Tanweyr, I traveled from town to town, game to game, across the peninsula. I hunted grifters and trained new masters. I showed housekeepers what to look for, how to train their spotters, and how to call on the Family when they needed help. I installed Merelin's allies to help run the games, to keep them safe and level.

In my years of playing the game, I had already imagined many of the methods now being employed. Break-betting, after-posting, sharpening, shuffle tracking.

None of these dodges was as brash or sophisticated as dealer substitution. You had to respect the Sisters for that, for its ingenuity and the connections it must have required. Most of the younger breed were merely dancing on the edge of the game, and their steps were easier to see.

This wave of cheaters rose up at exactly the wrong time, under the eyes of every angry Baronet family, and with a vengeful army of game-killers dispatched from Iona to crush the djegos and squeeze out every player.

As the chaos spun up, my mistress sent me farther afield, traveling the ghost roads of the high desert, tugging on roots wherever they grew. Gravestone, Seppo, Petris, Giants Cross. I found a crew in Caroucet who were pulling checks, and another in Tailor who were leaning into runners.

I pursued a trio of ticket markers from Breva to Caprice. They had been seconding scrip from balcony seats, and lighting out before the last game paid.

One team even inserted a player at the center table, running the audacious con of reversing on her secondi bets. She simply collected from

the losers and refused to pay the winners, sneaking out during a break and donning a new disguise for the next town.

These fools didn't last long; the centrales took care of that. The center table were a close-knit group of players whose integrity was sacred, and whose pockets were deep. That team didn't even survive long enough to earn a name.

With the centrales cheating the secondi, the runners cheating the floor, and everyone hiding from the law, the game of Prima Carta seemed in danger of destroying itself.

Justiciar DuChamp's intent had been to return stability to the game, by asking the Queen's guard to ferret out a few cheaters and bring them to justice.

Instead, Carander Moro had exceeded his instruction and DuChamp's intentions, and had struck at the heart of the game, closing djegos from Brevia to Almorran.

The wave of fire burned most keenly in the South, where the game was most popular, but administered by the loosest assortment of local bosses. The Carander's muscle closed nearly all of the djegos on the South Coast, along the Old Country Road from Baronet to Jasper.

And I was flying in the middle of the storm, struggling to keep this illegal game honest, so that the corrupt politicians who played it every week would cease entreating zealous lawmen to close it down. When I wasn't being hounded by the law as a representative of the Family, I was being shunned by the players as a friend of the law.

In truth I had done more for the integrity of this game than ten Caranders Moro. Securing the lines for the Tanweyrs was the hardest work I'd ever done, and also the least rewarding.

At a tavern game in Tailor, I caught up with a pair of punters who had been late-posting in Endiron Bay. It was a fairly simple scheme: one of these fools distracted a runner, while the other slipped forged tickets into her pocket. I watched them do this in a djego in Moorpoint, and again in a palace game in Evette.

But there were no djegos in Tailor, just a quiet tavern game with no runners and no tickets, and so I was surprised to find them playing here. But soon I learned that they were trying a new tactic.

The two little criminals sat in the shadows of this back room, watching the table and laughing with the locals. They bragged of being experts at the game, and the taller one, who called himself Staniel, was quickly invited to sit the center table.

Some time later his partner, Delois, started a fistfight. This was a distraction, letting Staniel drag a mass of coins off the center table, as bold a move as I had ever seen. As he did this, Delois ran past him for the exits, even pretending to stab her partner as she bumped against the center table and lit out, with a half dozen players fast on her heels.

Those few of us left in the room had no idea what had just happened. The cards and coins were scattered, and the game was in ruins. Staniel nursed an imaginary wound, and as two young women helped him to the door, I could hear the stolen coins sloshing in his trousers. I chuckled to myself and asked if anyone else was hurt.

I didn't bother chasing these fools, because I had already marked them on their way into town. They were lodged at an inn by the riverside called the Able Steed. Sure enough, just before dawn they returned for their belongings, where I was waiting for them. I sat quietly on the ramada, watching their approach, my boots resting on the rail.

As the couple mounted the stairs to the inn, Delois recognized me from

the night before. She stopped short, and reached out to stay her companion. I could still hear the coins clinking in his trousers.

“Good morning, Delois,” I said. She blanched and drew her blade. Staniel followed her lead.

“Get gone, stranger,” Staniel cried out. He lumbered up the steps, coins jangling in his pockets.

I had tried my best to appear meek and friendly, but these two rushed me anyway, twin blades drawn against a quiet stranger. I yelped and started, and my bodyguard leapt from cover, charging the steps from the alley behind.

In the tussle that followed, I caught a nasty slice on the back of my hand. But with the aid of my guard, I quickly captured the two grifters, and we divided their spoils between us. That afternoon, Delois and Staniel left town in the custody of my guard, and I never wondered or cared what happened to them after that.

And so it went for almost a year, as families, djegos, and grifters fought a three-front war. Everyone on the field was struggling to protect themselves and the game, and hoping never to be crushed by the boot of the law.

I marched at the center of this, dreading each morning, and struggling to reach the edge of the fight. I might as well have been reaching for the edge of the world.

On a warm summer night in Jasper, 4 Septun 738, I paid a visit to my old mistress at the Wendeyer. Despite her injuries from the night I was taken, Valentina Fulera seemed as strong as ever, and greeted me with a warm smile. We spent hours gaming and talking in the summer light.

Valentina had fought bravely to keep me safe that night, my last night

in her *balcón*, and she earned a bright new scar and a broken leg for her trouble. The scar across her temple made her look even tougher, if that was possible. And despite her injuries, she apologized to me for that night, for the secrecy that led up to my capture, and for how I had been treated afterwards.

“I hear you’ve become the Capriola’s Justiciar,” she joked.

“Something like that,” I said. “The Tanweyrs have me flushing out cheats from here to Brevia City.”

“And what happens to these delinquents after you catch them?”

“I try not to think about it.” Despite my brusque reply, I then thought about it for some time.

We sat under flowering vines in a quiet corner on the Wendeyer terrace, drinking wine and playing *Tablero*. On the hill above us, the Meyer Court game was still running strong, apparently immune to the threat of the law.

“Any trouble in the courtyard?” I asked Valentina, as she ran a six down the center row.

“What do you mean, from the Crown?”

I nodded. “I suppose, or from cheaters.”

“The tides rise and fall,” she said, rolling the dice. “This happens every few years. Do you think Ella and Van were the first team to cheat at *Prima Carta*?”

I supposed not, though perhaps their methods had been more clever. I also wondered how Valentina knew their names.

“They were not the first, and they won’t be the last. The game survives.”

“But how?” I said. I took the dice and rolled.

“*Prima Carta* is everyone’s dirty secret. It thrives because it is

dangerous and forbidden. The game has survived darker days, little spider. And this is good for you, because you will always have work.”

Perhaps, but it was not the kind of work I wanted.

“The idle rich will always play,” said Valentina, “And there will always be djegos to give them what they crave. A comfortable, exciting way to wish away their money, and to show off to one another how little they care.”

“But surely not everyone at the center is idle rich.”

“Surely not,” said Valentina. “The system is a tree. The tavern games are the roots, drawing life into the game. Players learn at small stakes, and they are drawn up the trunk, rising to the top and earning their spots in the bigger games.”

“And this tree is stronger than the winds?”

“No,” she said. “The winds make it stronger.”

“What about Corander Moro and his red guard? Surely they will spell the end of the game.”

“Look around you,” said Valentina. “What do you see?”

La Posada Meyer looked not much different than when I had left it a year ago. Quiet breezes, pink *pequeñas*, joyful shouts echoing from the courtyard above.

“Nothing has changed.” I guessed at her meaning.

“And why is that?”

I struggled. “Too far from the law?”

Valentina laughed. “Is it so much harder for the Queen’s guard to sail to Endiron Bay? So much farther than Old Siero, or Navene?”

“So what keeps you safe?”

Valentina shook her head and handed me the dice. She had bumped, and this would be my last roll. I threw a 4-5, and couldn’t take back the

line. Another game was hers.

I muttered that Tablero was mostly luck. She laughed and took the dice. "Once more then, for luck."

Valentina's son Cander brought us olives and cheese. He was tall and kind, a law student just home from the University at Niland. Valentina sent him for more wine, and resumed her point.

"The Wendeyer is a Tanweyr house. And Carander Moro is a Tanweyr man."

"No," I said. "He enforces the Queen's law."

"Surely he does," said Valentina, rolling a double-three. She thought for a moment and then stacked high. "But only where the Justiciar directs him.

"Justiciar DuChamp might be a friend of the Tanweyrs," I said, "but he has no control of the Carander's business."

"Moro is an enforcer," said Valentina. "He is hitting games that won't pay their honors to the Baronet families. Settling old scores that have been simmering for years."

As she proceeded to beat me for the fifth game in six, Valentina explained that the Carander's bloody campaign was nothing more than a natural shift of powers, a reminder that in Sierin, the law is merely another weapon of the trade.

Valentina spoke closely, with a patient smile. "When you repair a game, run down a squad of cheaters, train a new spotter, what do you tell the operators?"

"That they can always rely on the Tanweyrs for help," I answered, her point sinking in.

"And is there any secret meaning to that?" she asked quietly.

Of course there was, as I only now realized. As I tidied up the games of the South Coast, Merelin Tanweyr was bringing them under her wing.