

Chapter 9: RUIN

On a cold morning in autumn I woke with a start, as a fire tore through my rooming house.

Then I woke again, sweating in my cold bed. The fire was a dream, a phantom of the night, a child of my fear.

I lay awake for some time, trying to convince myself that the fire was me. I imagined myself as the cleansing flame, chasing away devils and dragons, protecting my Lady's interests in the game.

But in truth, the flames were my pursuers, not myself. They were the threats and fears that trapped me in my situation, the wolves in the forest who kept me on the road.

This was my third day in Feurette, a pearl in the sage-green desert on the edge of the Pentanos, sixty miles east of Jasper along the Callelarga.

The villages of Carricet are sparse and weathered, built of weathered wood and pitted stone, gray tarpaulin and red brick. In the summer they sleep through the heat of the day, and the streets teem by starlight. But in autumn, the city of Feurette was bustling all day and night.

The heart of the city clung to a broad curve in the Callelarga, running for a mile along the southern bank. The homes were sunk deep into the hillside, shielding the lower floors from the heat of the sun. Halfway up that hill, the city blended into a scrub forest, in the neighborgood where my wayhouse stood. And down along the riverfront was an endless wharf, an ancient, wandering maze of pilings, docks, and cranes.

Feurette was the last stop for ocean vessels running up the Callelarga. From there, mule teams ported cargo up Akinercia Falls and into Lake Gracia, and crews at both ends of the portage spent days in the lower city, waiting for their turn at the hook.

At the center of the riverfront stood a magnificent old tavern called The Copper Sow, which hosted a never-ending game of Prima Carta. The tables ran all day, and through the chill of the night, boards turning while the city worked.

The Copper Sow was one of only three djegos I had ever seen that ran more than one table. The gamblers of Fevette played the tavern game, with no side-bets or seconds, each group to their own table. Sometimes they sat for days on end.

I was traveling with a guard, a Tanweyr boy called Curly. He was a tiny, angry man, who seemed at once sworn to protect me, and eager to punish me if I strayed but a little from my duty.

We were tracking three towheads from Hope, a band of cheaters called Los Tímidos. These little thieves had been moving slowly west out of Siero, robbing players in tavern games along the Old Country Road. If they kept to their pattern, they would find The Copper Sow in time.

Curly and I watched the riverfront game in its busiest hours, dusk until midnight. The Sow ran a simple djego in a low, broad room, somewhat like the game at Kerat's Corner. There were six or eight tables of five players each, packed together like salted fish, cheering and betting madly as the sun went down.

I imagine that Prima Carta must have started like this. No artifice, no process. Just a few punters sitting around a table, grasping at fortune on the turn of a card. Hundreds of rules and procedures had formed around this game, but its foundations were simple. Just a traveler's pastime, a way to spin away the lazy days in port.

The regular players in The Sow were tradesmen, dockers, masons, bakers, fellers. I spotted a constable and a clergywoman. A boy of twelve

stood watch at the door, flipping a tailor stick and paying little mind to the traffic in and out.

I knew the operator of this game, a player from the game at the Wendeyer. She was a patient and courteous centrale called Luca. We always had a pleasant exchange when I walked into The Sow. But after my talk with Valentina, I had decided never to mention Merelyn Tanweyr or indeed any of the Baronet families, because I was beginning to doubt my real purpose.

As the sun drifted down over the hills, I found a quiet corner at The Sow and settled in to watch the game. Curly hid himself in the shadows, watching my back as I watched the room.

Los Tímidos were wiry little boys, and I recognized them as soon as they hit the door. Pale skin, short hair, clean faces, clever hands. They were a close-knit and quiet band, slipping into the house one at a time, under various aliases and pretexts. They didn't speak to each other, or to anyone else, while they were on the job. They really could not have been more obvious.

Or so I thought.

I watched the boys find their places, pick their bets, work their game. They moved close to the bigger tables, but not close enough to rob them, and none took a seat at the game. Were they scouting? Blackmarking? Surely they were not just dancing to distract me.

Then a voice in my ear, and a knife at my neck, told me otherwise.

"They call you Red," she whispered.

"They do," I answered, keeping my eyes on the room.

"I'm Herri."

I made a grunt acknowledging that it was a pleasure to make her acquaintance, albeit under awkward circumstances.

"And what are they payin' you for this?" Herri said.

"What 'this' is that?" I asked.

She gently pushed the edge into my skin.

"You have my attention," I said.

"The payment," she said. "What do you get paid?"

I explained that my service to the game was its own reward.

"Idiot," she said, and pressed the knife harder. I assumed that she was bluffing. We were in a back corner, and The Copper Sow was crowded, sunk deep into the hill, with no egress but the front door. Herri could never cut my throat and make a clean escape. And I assumed that Curly was somewhere in the shadows, though if I were him, I just might have leaped to my aid by now.

I played along with her. "Forty scudi," I said. "Per head. I suppose yours will make four."

Herri laughed. "That's more than we take!"

"In a night, perhaps," I said. "But I work for the health of the game." I didn't believe it myself. It also occurred to me that they could do far better than Herri claimed.

"Do you see that fat man there," she asked, pointing with her blade at a random player.

"I don't know him," I said.

"No," she said, and she gently released me. "But you do. He is the game. Do you work for him? For any of them?"

"Indirectly, I suppose."

I turned to face her. She was roughly my height, curly-haired, young and hard, and dressed for a fight in the desert. She motioned to her crew, who joined us in the corner. They had only been performing for me today, not actually working their game.

Curly was nowhere in sight.

“Boys, this is the famous Canyon Red,” Herri explained to her henchmen. They did not recognize my name, which was a relief. “Here to keep the game honest.”

The boys laughed.

“Honest” was a loaded term, to be sure. Most Prima Carta players were lifetime losers; the odds made sure of that. The house didn’t need to cheat or steal to win their money. The cards accomplished all that without any help.

Crews like Los Tímidos believed that djegos were dishonest by nature, and there was nothing wrong with stealing from a thief. After all, this game was illegal. Surely robbing criminals was an honorable trade?

It was an irrational position, yet widely held.

I explained to Herri and her clever boys what the Sisters had taught me, that joining an honest game is the gambler’s choice, regardless of the odds, and if there were no Prima Carta, the players would just find another way to lose their money.

And never mind the Cases, there was a very real danger in robbing the game, one more practical than notions of right and wrong. Tavern keepers and big money players don’t like being robbed, and they were not as kind as I was.

But to be honest, my arguments felt a little flat. I had now worked every deck of this ship, and in every type and version of this game. And through all that, I had come to believe that the cheaters weren’t really the problem. They were just another part of the machine.

“I represent the owners,” I explained. “Honestly, if it were up to me, you could all take your chips and run.”

Herri smiled. “And why is it not up to you?”

RUIN

The ninth card shows a dragon hovering over a burned castle. The monster is not the focus of the scene. She is merely the cause of the destruction spreading beneath her.

Ruin is the chaos after a cataclysm, a storm, or a great war. Whatever the cause, the result is the same. Suffering, sorrow, loss.

Strewn about the broken castle are reminders of the players before it: the Hermit's flute, the Sisters's pot, the Bandits' knives, and so on, each now scattered in the wake of destruction.

The dragon hovers as a ghost, a memory. She is a shadow of Leviathan, floating above a landscape of her works.

Ruin is the last step in the cycle of birth and decay, the story of life and death. The cycle repeats without variation and without end, from the three days of a honeyfly, to the beginning and the end of the World.

After nearly eight years playing this game, with every criminal cohort forcing me to collaborate in their schemes, and with no clear path to freedom, I wanted to bring an end to it all. And after an hour chatting with Herri and her boys, I thought I might finally have a plan.

Her name was Heriet Gonarey, and her three barabas were Conner, Stuey, and Mack. My guard Curly had returned to the room a few minutes after the conversation started. Apparently the team had marked Curly as easily as I had spotted them, and simply waited for him to relieve himself outside.

The fire from my dream now seemed as real as any natural flame. I feared I could not escape until the fire was quenched. Heriet was clever,

and her goblins were useful enough. With their help, and against Curley's inclinations, I thought I might have a path forward.

As the all-night games of The Copper Sow played on behind us, Herri and I hatched a scheme that would land us quickly in a pile of gold. That would have been enough for some, but I only needed the money for the next step of my plan.

I promised Los Tímidos that they would never need to play Prima again, which was fair (or so I thought) because after one month, I'd do my best to burn it down.

The setting I chose for the final act was the Banker's Game. It was a grand event held just twice each year at the Palazzo di Caranette. This was the largest game I had ever heard of, a lure for big-money players from across the six kingdoms.

Unlike the aristocrats' private game at Castilion Verdad, where only invited nobles could pass the gate, the Banker's Game was open to the biggest players from every point, a fisher's rack of wealthy centrales from across the sand.

I had never seen this game before, never had a reason or a way to join it. It was well protected, played on an estate high in the Baronet hills, far outside the reach of any law or common grifter.

The Banker's Game overflowed with the Principality's wealthiest players. Barons and Earls who anchored their weekly games could scarcely catch a glimpse of the center. And the book was ten leagues deep.

In short, it was the richest, most well-respected Prima Carta game in all of Sierin, the perfect stage for my final performance. But I would need more than a penny and a name to get in the door. I hoped perhaps that I could turn one into the other.

Curly, for his part, was surprisingly agreeable to this plan. His loyalty

was easily bought.

For the benefit of my Lady in Baronet, Curly and I made a show of chasing Los Tímidos down the Callelarga into Jasper, and a few points north up the coast. In truth I was not chasing them, but playing along, and we hit the games harder than anyone could imagine. After running up the coast, we sailed to Breva City, and attacked a dozen more games in short succession, even as they still reeled from the wrath of Carander Moro.

Along the Magan Coast, some well-known games had closed, and new ones had opened, most now united under the banner of the Tanweyr house. My name carried me into those games as a trusted ally, and even while I advised the hosts how best to protect themselves from cheaters, my quiet little crew were gutting their games.

Curly watched my back and guarded my crew, much better than he had done in Feurette. Perhaps this was because I paid him four times the fee he was promised by my mistress in Novel Garden.

Merelyn Tanweyr would have been furious at all of this, of course, to learn that I had joined Los Tímidos instead of capturing them. And they were a delight in action. Herri was an expert with her crew, and between her boys and my skills, we filled cottages and keptanks with loot.

We played our scheme through a series of larger and larger djegos across Baronet and Breva, where the Tanweyr name carried the greatest weight. The weeks clicked past as the Banker's game drew near, and my stake grew nearly large enough to get me to the table.

In every house, I found a perch where I could watch the cards, far enough from the center that I could see without being seen. Heriet worked from the ridge, relaying my signals to her crew. One of the boys worked the balconi, the other two in the secondi. Our strategy was to fade into the crowd, winning and losing a few small bets, until the perfect hand came

along.

We needed to choose a suit that would win from two or three cards behind, which is rare. Each of our three ghosts would place a high-value bet on that one suit, at my signal: One from the balcony, one from the secondi against the bank, and the third from the secondi against the centrale of that suit. This final bet would be huge, often ten times the size of the pot. If that centrale took that bet, at any odds, she would regret ever joining the game.

We made these bets all at once, each on different ledgers that wouldn't reconcile until the end of the night. As soon as we collected our win, we dashed out the door. By the time the ledgers balanced, we were halfway to our next game.

This was perhaps the fastest, hardest attack that anyone had ever played against the game. It was not repeatable, and it was barely sustainable. No crew could last long, punching as hard as we did, even under the disguise of my protection. But lasting was never our goal.

We know the gambling houses would share the word and try to stop us. But we assumed it would take them a good while, especially as I was supposed to be chief in charge of finding us. We figured we could last for a month, which was all the time we needed.

We lasted three weeks and three days.

Merelin Tanweyr did not find us. Instead, it was Barón Eric Milemortes DeReche. I had known the Barón since my days at the tea shop, and he recognized me at a palace game in Carpo, on the north corner of Merits Bay. I, sadly, did not spot him first.

The Barón was clean shaven now, and played among the secondi, but he was sponsoring a player at the center table. My crew were planning to

hit the game for roughly a hundred Crowns, which would have brought our stake to more than a thousand. For the big game I had figured I needed at least two hundred Crowns, if only to place a few small bets from the balcony.

When the Barón spotted me, he assumed that something was amiss, and he quietly asked the gamekeeper to be on his guard.

News of our exploits had drifted this way, though at this point we were still nameless and faceless. My history made me a candidate, and the Barón was right to suspect me. He had no idea that I was in the service of Lady Tanweyr, so my typical alibi was worthless.

On the tenth game of the evening, Herri's crew were on their marks, the boards were turning, and I spotted our winner: Forest to win from two, Crowns at five. I sent the signal to Heriet, and she relayed it to the boys. Our bets hit, the runners were paid, and we were making for the exits when I suddenly found myself unable to move.

My last thought before slipping into darkness was that Curly was perhaps not the best bodyguard after all.

I crawled out of the sand some hours later. I lay immobile in a brocade armchair, a heavy cloak draped over my head. The cloth was tied so that I could struggle a little, but could not free myself.

A sharp pain lingered at the back of my head. While I slept, this pain had seemed to prevent me from waking up. Now I imagined the pain as a rock holding a door, and I struggled to push back that door and see the world around me. After several minutes partially awake, I shook away the cloth that covered my head.

The room was dark and musty, with the smells of fresh berries and dust. It was a small library or office, with walls of books and ornate red

wallpaper. A pillar of yellow sunlight cut through the center of the room, but the corners were dark as midnight.

I heard the Barón's voice behind me. "You've come a long way from Basil Street, my dear."

Actually, I thought, we were probably no more than twenty miles from Basil Street, if we were still in Carpo at all. But I assumed that the Barón meant this metaphorically.

"The Sisters send their angels" he said. This meant that they said hello, but I assumed that he was lying. I hadn't spoken with Ella and Van for more than a year, but this was the Barón's most recent touchpoint.

I tried to imagine some kind of story, but my mind was foggy. Shaking off the hood had made me dizzy, as well. I remained silent.

The Barón laughed. "And where were they tonight?"

Interesting. I had assumed that the Barón had captured my crew as well, but this question suggested otherwise. He had been looking for Ella and Van, and might have completely missed Heriet and her barabas. I blinked quietly, working all of this out.

The Barón filled the silence. "Someone has been hot-betting Prima games up and down the coast, little Red. Three long bets, all at once, and then out like a candle flame. No cheats, no holdouts, no confederates. Yet somehow, they always guess right."

"I can assure you,-" I began. He cut me off, which was fine, because I didn't really know what I was about to assure him.

"Two possibilities," said the Barón. "One, you were there to find them. Two, you were there to help them."

"Perhaps, three, I simply enjoy the game?" I suggested.

I was still groggy, and it showed. That remark lent a lot of credence to option two. But then again, the Barón had knocked me out and bundled

me to a chair, so I assumed he already had some faith in that answer.

“Frankly, I don’t much care which side you are on, but I know you’re the key. Somehow you can beat this game.” The Barón walked into the stark light and stood before me. The years had not been careful with him.

He stroked my cheek, the burrs on his knuckles raking my skin. His fat fingers pinched my chin.

“I want in,” he said, and then whispered, “You work for me now.”

If I had the use of my hands, I would have buried my face in them. Instead, my head tipped a little bit forward, as far as it could go, and I laughed with frustration.

“I’ve been following this crew for about three weeks,” I lied. “They call themselves... The Deniers.”

The Baron nodded, not believing me.

I made a face. Not a good name?

“How many are there?”

I tried not to show my delight that my adversary knew almost nothing. But I failed, and the Baron saw it.

“Lie and I will know it,” he threatened. Showing even less self-control, I rolled my eyes at this bluff.

He laughed.

“My Lord Barón, they are doubtless in the wind. Gone, and with my winnings in their poke. But rest assured, they can’t play the game without me.”

“Go on.” The Barón dragged a chair to the center of the room and plopped down in front of me, his fat legs splayed like a cattle race.

I had recovered my faculties by now, or so I thought. And as I regarded this abominable figure before me, I grasped for an idea. Perhaps this old villain could be my sponsor at the Palazzo Caranette.

"I saw you were sweating Green tonight," I said. "Why not sit the big table yourself?" By this I meant that the Baron had a designated player sitting in the Forest space. It was a wild guess; I had not spotted him in the room at all. But the Forest was his suit.

"These old eyes," he said. "Can't read the cards."

That was a poor excuse, and probably a lie. Those old eyes had spotted me well enough. But the Barón confirmed what I wanted to know, which was that he was backing a proxy at the center table.

"Well, my eyes have never been better," I told him. "And if you put me in the game, I can win for you. Win a lot more than you lost tonight."

"Who says I lost tonight?" True, the short winner tonight had been The Crown. Green neither won nor lost very much, at least during the time that I was awake.

"Fair enough," I said. "How much would you like to win?"

This took the Baron by surprise, and he gave an honest laugh. "All of it, child," he said. And then, as if the situation called for it, he leaned uncomfortably close to me and whispered again, "All of it."

I was visibly disgusted.

The Baron laughed. "And how do you propose to accomplish this? Shall we become the newest dreaded culprits of the Magan Coast?"

Aha, this was the definitive admission that my crew had made a clean escape. I figured it would at least be civil to let the Baron tell me this himself, now that I had deduced it on my own.

"My crew?" I asked plainly.

"Gone," he said. "Unless you wish to help me track them?"

"I doubt if I could, not in the time we have."

"And what time is that?"

"Have you ever sat the Palazzo Caranette?"

And so it happened that I was abducted and threatened by exactly the right accomplice to get me into the big game. This was another rare opportunity to accept good fortune without complaint.

As I thought, on witnessing my abduction, Herri and company had fled the game with my stake. I would not say that this was our plan, because we did not really have a plan for this. But she knew where the money was, and she knew how to run from a threat.

My plan had only been to use my share of the book to buy into the balcony at the Banker's Game. Now that stake was out of reach, perhaps gone forever, along with my team. But I had stumbled into something better: the Barón.

My path had led to this last chance, strapped to the deck and one road home. I realized only then that I had never really needed a stake for the Palazzo Caranette. I only needed a seat at the table.