

CHAPTER 1

The Ve Hamilia is a road. An arrow-straight road, left by ancient people who believed in building right, paved with long, strong stones turned small end up and lodged deep in the flesh of the Brewel Country.

The Ve Hamilia extends from the eastern cities to Coastwall. At night it is busy but slow, its right lane clogged with commercial transports drawn by teams of eight, ten, twelve deliberate oxen. But the left is mostly empty, reserved by law for the passage of smaller, faster teams. And one such rig was now racing up the Ve Hamilia at a league-burning trot: six black mules, drawing a black coach with its driver swathed in a face-hiding cloak, every one of its quilted curtains rolled down tight, and inside it a guard, two keepers, and a squirming, cursing burlap bag.

The guard was a man. But he was fully as big and strong as a wench: nature now and then does turn up such variations, just as now and then a meldragore has more or fewer than sixteen legs. This wight— who for all anyone knew could have grown up to become a scribe or an engineer had Ye Gods not seen fit to house him in such a tower of meat and bone— was like the typical

guard in another way, too: he knew his place was in the background.

The bag, however, was very much at home in the spotlight. Under the single, gently glowing wyrm light globe suspended from the upholstered ceiling of the coach, it continued the writhing and ranting it had been up to for the past three turns of the hourglass.

“Hell’s holes!” roared the bag. “Dirty blistered scab flaps! What the triple-whipping pus just happened? What the seven-sided pock is going on? Tell me, damn it deep! Just tell me if I’m dead or what!”

One of the keepers stood up from the black velvet seat on his side of the coach and, swaying like a sailor on angry seas, reached for the knot at the foot of the bag. His every grab was thwarted; untying such cargo was hardly the job for a dapper, fiftyish gentleman with a geometrically perfect black wig, a short, sharply pointed nose and round spectacles held in rims of marbled steel.

But it was exactly the sort of job for an adventurous magpie, which the second keeper was.

The black-and-white bird hopped up onto the gentleman’s shoulder and ducked its head under one eave of the wig. In a clipped, official voice it whispered “Agent Moktabelli. Permission to release the subject.”

“Granted. Try not to let him kick you.”

With the decisive motion of one whose senses are finely attuned to grabbing things, the magpie swooped to seize the knot which secured the bag. He jerked it loose and the wight inside fought himself free.

He was dressed in a prisoner’s uniform and bore the traces of a condemned criminal’s rudimentary final grooming: washed hair, scrubbed fingernails, a face that had been shaved clean save for one or two missed spots. But otherwise, to all eyes— magpie and Uman— he was completely nondescript, a typical peasant who, from the looks of his broad back and stoutly muscled limbs, had been forced like the guard into a life of manual labor. And yet the dapper gentleman with the wig addressed him as a smallholding noble.

“Greetings, Your Honor.”

The wight rubbed his eyes as though he could massage some sense into them. When this failed to work he simply stared across at the gentleman and uttered his name. “*Nicolo?*”

The dapper gentleman in the wig nodded; the magpie, not to be overlooked, cleared its throat in a very Uman way. It spoke up:

“Greetings, Malfred No Middle Name Murd.”

“What? *You?*”

“You’re going to have some questions—”

“You bet your feather head I’ve got questions!” cried the fellow, grabbing at the magpie, who eluded his every move with a skill born of long familiarity. “Like: why hang me without a rope? And what have *you* got to do with it? And Nicolo? And— and—”

Here, the fellow’s wild energy vanished. He seemed to collapse, leaving behind a ruined shell.

The magpie was most alarmed. He had never before seen this Uman— his former pet, a very interesting creature— in the throes of such genuine despair.

“Fred. What is it?”

Malfred Murd sagged into the corner of the coach, lost in the shadows.

“I can deal with all this. I can figure it out. If I’ve gone as mad as Dame Elsebet used to be, I can figure that out, too. But please. Just please don’t tell me Dok is really dead. Don’t.”

Corvinalias flicked his tail in bafflement. “Dok? Who are you talking about, Fred?”

“If you don’t know, then I give up. They say I killed her. They walked me up the gallows. They—”

At this point, the dapper gentleman leaned across the aisle of the coach and laid his hand upon Malfred Murd’s knee. This action, though small, leaped out in Fred’s mind as an enormous landmark: Nicolo Moktabelli, the major-domo of his liege and patron Dame Elsebet de Whellen, was not the sort who would ever dare to lay hands upon a superior. But neither would he ever deign to comfort an underling. What, then, was Fred to him now? Some kind of equal? Despite his churning unnameable emotions Fred fell silent and listened.

“*They*, Your Honor, are us. And you, also, are us. Welcome.”

Like that explained anything.

As Fred sat up, his former personality came back into focus. Dull in appearance though he might have been, there was some undeniable flair about him: the attention-holding quality of a professional entertainer.

“All right, Nicolo. Let’s go through this slowly. I’m alive, right? Good. Got it. Won’t ask why, that’s for later, now I

have just one question. Do you know who Dok is? Is she alive, too?”

“Those were two questions, Mesir Murd.”

“Don’t be such a pedantic blister! Just tell me—”

“Give him a drink,” chirped the magpie. “You brought it, right?”

Nicolo opened a compartment and withdrew a handsome Stewen crystal bottle. He handed Fred the matching glass and gestured toward the magpie, who was pecking at the jittering rays thrown out by the crystal.

“Agent Corvinalias recommended I offer you Sherry Lorosso to settle your nerves...”

“Hoy, Nicolo, make this a double. No, triple.”

“...but I am not so sure it’s working...”

“Gods, that’s good. Better than the King’s, even. Now tell me, please tell me, that Dok is all right. Because— *ow!*” Fred flinched as the glass grazed a tender half-healed split on his lip: the split from when Dok had screamed and fallen against him. With a poisoned knife in her back.

He thrust the empty glass at Nicolo, who peeled it carefully from his fingers.

“You have just completed a phase, Mesir, that we at The Bureau call a ‘complicated acquisition’...”

“You bet your mumping breeches it’s complicated!”

“...the complication, of course, being that you were part of an undercover crime investigation when The Bureau wished to acquire you...”

“Wait till the Grand Constable finds out you had me bumped off!”

“... he will simply have to cope. The Bureau has a far more important role in mind for you...”

“Role? I can play roles in my sleep. But I want to see Dok! I want to know—”

Nicolo and Corvinalias both leaned toward Fred and repeated: “The Bureau.”

Fred rubbed his split lip and narrowed his eyes at them. “All right, tell me about The Bureau. Am I supposed to be impressed? It sounds like something from a half-penny pamphlet. Secret society. Nest of spies.”

Nicolo sighed. “We’re not *spies*. Spies skulk about trying to peddle stolen secrets— like the Whellen Country alchemists’ formula for those.” He pointed at the wyrmright globe. “The Bureau is an *intelligence service*. And we...”

Fred folded his arms. “Protect the world from evil, right. Can’t you be more creative? I’ve read every one of those, well, you know the ones.”

Though Fred had a very clear memory of the stories he used to read to the man who was now King, he was drawing a blank on the name of their hero. Him, the spy. The one with the dashing wardrobe, the hidden mechanical devices, the song lyrics that opened each half-penny pamphlet. What was his name again?

Nicolo pulled down his spectacles and smiled. “Ah, you must mean *Operative XQZ*.”

Operative XQZ! Of course!

Hearing it made nearly two decades collapse like the sections of a spyglass. Suddenly Fred was sixteen again, forced to look after the also-sixteen Prince Enrick, trying his deep-damnedest to amuse that blank-faced kid and continuing to get nowhere.

The Fool who could coax a smile from Enrick of Castramars hadn't been born. Jokes didn't do it, stunts didn't do it, bawdy songs really didn't do it. After only three years with the Prince, Fred's attempts had reached a sort of hells-with-it ennui, in which it hardly mattered whether His Highness was amused or not; reading the adventures of Operative XQZ aloud to him was simply an excuse for Fred to practice his acrobatic skills. Every time he cracked open a pamphlet and began his narration, the royal furniture, knickknacks and curtains would take a beating. They stood in for crumbling cliffs, dastardly dungeons, and towers with only one impossible exit; but there were also pages where beautiful, brawny wenches flung their robes aside and did various incompletely described things to Operative XQZ, and those were read in a wavering husky whisper meant not for the oblivious Enrick, but for Fred's own burning-hot ears.

At last one day, during the climactic scene in *Touch of Gold* when the evil Enzo Bhargelt ties Operative XQZ to a slowly grinding mill wheel, a young gardener named Itsy had heard Fred through the Prince's window and convinced him to abscond with her to a gazebo, where she re-enacted the scene with him— at least as far as the grinding was concerned. Fred had panicked, shouted that she'd never make him talk, and fled in such

haste that two bells and a tassel had been torn off his hat. That had been the last of XQZ— till now.

“Forget the stupid pamphlets!” he growled. “I want to know what this Bureau of yours did with Dok!”

Corvinalias stopped chasing twinkles around the interior of the coach. He turned one glittering black eye up toward Nicolo. “Hoy, Agent Moktabelli. You’re going to have to fill me in about this Dok.”

“He means Number Nine. It’s one of her code names.”

Hearing this, Fred realized how little he knew about Dok. He had suspected her of being more than a simple pickpocket; he’d even entertained the notion that she was the right hand of some gruesome crime lord. But... Number Nine?

Well, whoever she was, she was alive. Alive. And more: *if she’s alive*, said something within Fred, then maybe I’ll see her again. Maybe we have a future... after all, she did say... well, it hadn’t really been a declaration, but it had contained the magic word. The short one. The one in so many poems.

He let himself sidle up to the idea, herding it into a corner of his mind, finally preparing to think the

thought he hadn't allowed himself through the weeks of his imprisonment, his trial, his execution. She. Me. Us...

The stagecoach gave a bump. The pattern of paving stones clacking under its wheels changed completely. The Ve Hamilia had ended; they were in Coastwall. Turn began following turn; from under the edges of the curtains crept the glare of street lamps and the shouts of drunken sailors; finally the coach slowed, brakes hissing, mules snorting. Agent Nicolo Moktabelli reached into his sleeve and brought forth a mirror-backed cigar case.

“This, Agent Murd, is where we will put you to a test. We will leave you to your own devices— devices like this one.”

He handed over the cigar case. Before Fred could ask about it, the coach had stopped, its door had been thrown open, and the guard— for the first time, Fred noticed the guard— had pushed him out into the chilly wind of an empty, only partly paved street.