

CHAPTER ONE

The Plum Blossom Festival marked the very start of spring, and spring is notoriously unpredictable.

Some years, the Festival sagged under curtains of rain, with cold gusts from the harbor flogging vendors' barrows and sending trinkets flying; in others the sun got the upper hand, making revelers wish they'd chosen lighter robes, breezier pantaloons, hats with shady brims. But sometimes, Ye Gods smiled upon the ancient city of Coastwall with its sandstone twistings and turnings: smiled, and nodded, and got it just exactly right.

This morning was golden, and smelled clean. Birds sang. In a public park— for, like many cities in the Brewel Country, Coastwall had lately been graced with public parks— mothers and daughters went about their broadspear practice in a zestful Plum Blossom spirit, striking at straw targets painted pink and white just like the flowers bursting forth on the branches overhead.

One little girl was particularly aggressive, continuing to thrash a target with the handle of her broadspear long after its wooden practice blade had broken loose, and shouting out a list of typical brats' grievances as she did so.

"That's for face washing! That's for hair brushing! That's for no honey-bons till after dinner!"

"For shame," growled her mother. "Learn to control yourself. Your blade is all the way over there in the yellowleaf hedge. Go get it and let's start again on the basic diagonal strike."

"No-o-o, mama! That's *boring!* I want to slay a monster!"

At an outdoor café bordering the park, a gentleman looked up over the news bulletin he was reading. From behind thick spectacles his eyes met those of the dismayed mother; he was just calling out to her when Coastwall's bell, high in the square tower known as the Lantern, began its great, deep, bronze morning peal.

By the time that had faded to a faint shimmering hum, the family was seated together: or, rather, the gentleman and the mother were seated, while their brat walked in circles around the table, devouring an enormous plum cookie.

"Oh, I wouldn't call it *spoiling* her, my dear," said the gentleman. "Let her have her fun. This whole week *is* a holiday, after all. You relax, too— would you like me to read you this bulletin?"

The brat stopped chewing and threw her mother a glare, because of course reading was for *boys*, and listening to it was nearly as bad; she coughed a few crumbs and smacked the newly-replaced blade of her weapon against a lamp post, picturing it as the neck of some frightful beast.

And so the gentleman read aloud, and the birds sang, and the rest of the women in the park went about their ladylike practice, and all around them Coastwall—from the top of the Lantern to the mouth of the broad brown Denna— began to think of spring.

On the Denna's western bank, opposite the great ivory-tiled palace of the de Brewel family, a small knot of the very men who had created the news bulletin stood fidgeting and muttering, in their own way craving adventure as strongly as the brat had.

They wore jackets covered with pockets for wax tablets and styli, the tools with which they scribbled the words and scrawled the pictures that were to become plaster printing

blocks. From these would peel copy after copy, selling till the blocks wore flat— though some stories or images would show such popularity that their blocks would be re-cast, and sold anew labeled *MULTI-EXTRA*. To originate a multi-extra news sheet was the dream. But hunting it was chancy and arduous— as difficult, in its own way, as hunting the firewurm, the meldragore, the wish-granting nullicorn.

One of the news hounds lowered a pair of twin spyglasses from his eyes. “This could be big. I just saw the Nameless Lady, boarding her personal ferry. She’ll be across in a few minutes.”

His neighbor was new to the pack and squinted across the estuary of the Denna as though he could identify anyone at such a distance. “Really, the Lady? Hope the Prince is with her... not the baby Prince, I mean... I’m talking about the other one...”

The oldest of the news hounds turned on the new fellow in exasperation. “Hoy, Popper,” he snapped. “See any nullicorns around here? No? Then quit makin’ wishes.”

As the rest of the men laughed, the new fellow hung his head. He’d been a scribe’s apprentice till just that week. Contracts and receipts and Harbormaster’s paperwork didn’t laugh at you—but then again, no scribe ever experienced the thrill of chasing a story. Literally chasing it.

The oldest news hound took pity. “Aw, Popper, I don’t mean to bust your beans. But anyone who’s seen the Trickster Prince this past month or more has seen the back of the moon. Never you mind— whatever his Lady does, it sells sheets galore. Now get set, fellas! Fling a leg over them hurry-horses.”

The horses he referred to were not animals, but crude vehicles consisting of front and rear wheels with seats slung between them, propelled by the rider’s feet scrambling at the

ground. Hurry-horses were hard to maneuver and often ended up colliding with trees, shop fronts, or other vehicles such as ox carts and sedan chairs, but they let even the clumsiest man move as swiftly as a professional foot messenger— at least on straight stretches, of which Coastwall admittedly had precious few.

So the men straddled their wheels and waited. All were silent except Popper, who continued babbling.

“About the Nameless Lady, though... I’ve looked into what the Prince calls her and it’s entirely fictitious... she hasn’t really got a Doktorate in anything at all... yet they say she’s a fiend for books... though maybe she only carries them for show... these fashionable types get up to so many fads...”

“Rotsy,” groaned the spyglass man to the oldest news hound, “can you tell young Popper to shut it? I’m tryin’ to think up some headlines.”

“Tell him yourself. You know how it is.”

Just then the spyglass man let his lenses drop to the end of their neck loop. He grabbed the handlebars of his hurry-horse, gave the ground beneath him a furious push with both feet and away he rolled. Within seconds the rest were after him, racing for the riverbank— all except the unfortunate Popper, who didn’t know that how it is, is this: friendly chat is well enough, but when the chase is on it’s every hound for himself.

The Nameless Lady was hiding in plain sight.

Her hair was covered by a scarf, folded diagonally and wrapped around her head. Her eyes lay behind a pair of sun goggles— the modern kind, not mere old-fashioned slits in a

whalebone strip but the frames of a scholar's spectacles, fitted with ovals of darkened glass. And her ferry had high, boxy walls which blocked any view of the vehicle she was seated in.

But she was tall; above the boxy walls her torso rose up lean and broad-shouldered, with the breeze ruffling her fine and simple robe. And she was striking: she carried her head with an elegant bearing, as though putting the strong line of her jaw and the proud jut of her nose on display.

A documentary artist skidded to a halt at the ferry landing beside the spyglass man, pulling forth his tablet.

"Damn it deep— be nice if she'd unwind that scarf and pull those lids off her weepers. What rig you think she's drivin'? White ponies, put to a cart? Open top sedan chair?"

The spyglass man didn't have to answer. The ferry touched, its gangplank fell, one wall of the box swung open and out shot the Nameless Lady in a brass-fitted, red-painted blur.

Her vehicle had no team, no bearers. Its four whirling wheels were large, but the wooden body between them, which held only a dashboard and two seats, was tiny. As it sped away, it emitted an intricate ticking sound and left behind a smell of fresh varnish, metal polish, and lubricating oil.

"Aw, blisters!" moaned the artist. "That was too fast! I wasn't ready!"

Off surged the pack. At the rear, Popper paddled his boots wildly against the pavement and suddenly remembered having copied some paperwork earlier in the month— documents that had to do with the import of a new Tekology from the Whellen Country. "I know what that is!" he cried. "It's a power carriage!" And then he clamped his tongue between his rearmost teeth, appalled at himself for nearly giving away his exclusive, his potential multi-extra.

But he wanted an interview, and chasing it took all the energy he possessed. The sluggish, thuggish old heart of Coastwall might have been a dirty nest of alleys, barely wide enough for carts or barrows, but the city had bigger and newer and cleaner streets too, and the Lady was flying up one of them: Coastwall's most fashionable boulevard, a straight broad promenade shaded by plum trees. She twisted the throttle of the power carriage and swung its steering tiller with expert precision, threading through a flow of flashy coaches, gleaming sedan chairs, briskly trotting horses and smoothly ambling mules, crowds of ladies and gentlemen whose social cachet demanded that they ignore everyone and everything around them, only later to learn about it in bulletin sheets.

Higher and higher uphill climbed the boulevard, and Popper's heart felt ready to burst; yet he was young and zealous, and followed bravely, and to his own surprise found himself at the front of the pack, panting and sweating not ten yards behind the Lady, whose way had been cut off by a barrow with plum cookies painted on it.

The wench pushing the barrow was bent down low, putting her back into the job, oblivious. Popper's hurry-horse slipped easily through the crowd. He could almost touch the Lady's power carriage... in a moment she'd be all his to question...

Once, twice, three times, a brassy bray split the air. The Lady was squeezing a rubber bulb attached to a trumpet. Its honking made the barrow wench leap to attention. A gap opened in the traffic and the ticking of the power carriage rose to a whirr, then to a hiss; the Nameless Lady surged away. As she vanished, she turned back to face Popper and one corner of her mouth curved upward into her trademark halfway smile.

Popper was too startled to move. He was sure that smile was meant as a special gift for him alone. While he waited to catch his breath, the rest of the pack overtook him.

“Don’t just stand there, fella!” cried the oldest news hound as he rolled past. “Come on up here— she’s as good as caught!”

At the top of the hill, the boulevard terminated before a magnificent set of gates, which gazed down upon the city in much the same complacent way that Brewel Hall lorded its presence across the broad brown Denna. Trudging toward them, the exhausted Popper wondered what old Rotsy could possibly have meant. As good as caught? More like good as gone: the gates marked the entry to a Royal District, governed not by the laws of the Brewel Country but by the House of Castramars, and once the Nameless Lady passed through them she would be as inaccessible as though she’d sailed across the Midland Sea.

But now he saw it. In front of the gates sprawled an elaborate snarl in traffic— runaway mule, sedan chair crash, coach with a broken spring— all suspiciously theatrical and completely halting the Lady’s flight. The chase was over; the hounds closed in and attacked.

“Tell us about this *thing* you’re driving!”

“Zat a book there, on the seat beside you?”

“Read us a storytale from it!”

“That’s right— from ‘once there was, and now there’s not’ all the way to ‘they lived happily until always!’”

The Lady said nothing. She only smiled— halfway, her special way.

Against the din of questions, the documentary artist crept up close to her. “Hoy, Lady. Take pity on a poor scribbler— strike me a pose. It’s this or draw courtroom diagrams.”

To his astonishment, the Lady turned to face him. She pulled her sun goggles a fraction of an inch down her nose and sent a glance over the top of them, lifting one eyebrow.

The artist whooped in glee. “Sweet gods a-mighty!” he shouted, as his hand leaped into action and curls of wax rained from his tablet. “What a pic! This’ll be a multi-extra for sure!”

“Pocks to dreary diagrams,” said the Lady, hooking her elbow over the door of the power carriage and raising her chin into a sleek profile. “Here. Have another.” Her sleeve draped in a picturesque arc; a red and yellow enameled ring flashed on her pinky; the artist drew ever more furiously and the rest of the news hounds went wild.

“She’s wearing his ring!”

“Nice! But when are we going to see some wedding bracelets?”

“That’s right— where *is* the Trickster Prince?”

“You keeping him busy?”

“Keeping him quiet?”

“Will he be joining you at the theater tonight?”

“What’s going *on* with you two?”

A squad of hard-faced wenches in red and yellow livery emerged from a guardhouse beside the gates. Their jaws were clenched on quids of maidenroot and their fists gripped broadspears with gleaming steel blades; the drivers of the make-believe traffic jam decided they’d earned their pay and fled. The gates swung open. The news hounds howled their final questions.

“What’s back there, Lady?”

“We hear you and the Trickster Prince have a pretty sweet palace.”

“That’s right— a regular pleasure-dome!”

“Does he give you a private show? You been jingling his bells? No, Lady, wait! It was just a joke! A *joke*! Like the kind His Highness used to tell. Back when he was— aw, boilsores.”

The boulevard had been a lovely stretch of road, but what lay behind the gates was immensely more gracious. The trees here were not flowering plums but baslins, blackbuds, and whitewoods— newly planted and yet to leaf out, but already shapely and strong. Yellow hedges glowed and bright red crocuses blanketed slumbering lawns. The paving itself was a work of art: stripes of brick alternating with golden stone, punctuated by lozenges of crystal-white marble.

As she drove past a sculpture of the Castramars magpie, the Lady removed her goggles and stowed them in a compartment. Passing another sculpture— a golden man with his laughing face turned up to the sky— she tugged open the knot of her scarf.

On she rolled, with the sun in her eyes and the wind in her hair, thinking. But eventually, she did have to squeeze the brake: the Lady had reached the end of her driveway.

Two town houses faced one another across an intimate plaza. They were of the most thoroughly comfortable elegance, and neither was taller or grander than the other; neither had better gardens or brighter windows or a more welcoming entry. They were in fact exactly alike, as perfectly matched as reflections in a mirror— except for the words enameled on plain, unpretentious plaques.

HIS, read one.

HERS, read the other.

The Lady stepped from her carriage, slammed its door, picked up the book and carried it with her up a neat brick walkway to the plaza.

There she stopped between the houses, took a deep breath, and chose.