

# POWER'S PLAY

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HUSZAR BOOKS

**AS THEY ARE GENERALLY** *the larger, stronger and more quarrelsome sex, one is not surprised to find the ranks of miscreants populated more with wenches than with wights.*

*However, another reason for the discrepancy may be that, despite the low station of a habitual miscreant's son, he has an option denied to miscreants' daughters: society still recognizes his prerogative to acquire learning, just as though he were a gentleman. Thus he may improve his lot. Studies show that for each 100 words such an individual learns to read, his chance of being detained by a peacekeeping officer in any given year is reduced by a half per cent [see appendix L].*

*This author himself must admit to exactly such origins. The written word (and to a lesser extent, the use of the abacus) were keys that allowed the rowdy brat of a common cut-bundle moll to unlock the grim jail of his boyhood.*

—**The Foundations of Metropolitan Peacekeeping.**  
*Edited by Gino V. Doak, Grand Constable of Law and Order in the City of Coastwall.*

**AIM HIGHER** *than money, further than glory, well past the face in the mirror.*

—*Theophyllis de Heihome [known as Parafu],*  
**Exhortations.**

CHAPTER 1

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**I**T WAS THE MONTH OF THE Peaches, and the end of a long, hot day.

Corvinalias Elsternom e Rokonoma the Fourth, Count of Upper Cloudyblue, wished he could cover his ears, for after a week of travel he was thoroughly tired of listening to his Great-Uncle Jey. But the old Duke would not be silenced; Corvinalias could only sag against the gunwale of the rowing barge as it carved its way up the grayish-green, bluish-brown River Whellen and hear Uncle Jey repeat his story about a long-ago trip to blah blah blah. The young Count huffed out a sigh, smoothed the edges of his neat black cape and yawned. He scratched his beak with the edge of his wing.

Uncle Jey was clearly under the impression that no one else in the world had ever had adventures. Or at least any worth talking about. Sure, his tales about being one of the first people to ride a Uman ship across the Midland Sea had been fascinating— when Corvinalias heard them as a hatchling. But since then, he'd had adventures of his own, ones he was fairly certain would hush Uncle Jey's mouth, if only it could take a break and give his ears a turn.

First of all, Corvinalias had chosen a Uman pet (that part was no adventure; Umans were very popular pets) and followed it from the Isle of Gold to the mainland, sticking with it through a series of mishaps which would have made a fine tale all by themselves. But it was after he shed the pet that the real adventures began: Corvinalias had befriended a pair of wild Umans, male and female, and had journeyed with them out of the Midland Sea altogether. He'd spent months with them on a strange and beautiful boat, seeing things that no civilized being had ever yet seen. Although the stupid albatross hired to bring back the notes he'd scratched lost them all, Corvinalias had been confident that upon his return to the royal Isle, he could refine his memoirs in the telling.

It had begun well: his Elsternom relatives had thrown him a round of soirées and the Rokonomas had made him a member of the Scientific Institute. But somehow no one seemed all that interested in the wonders of Cloud Whales, or the destructive majesty of rotatory cyclones, or the shortsighted economic models that plagued Umans in the Herb Islands. Instead they continued to cling to old bores like Uncle Jey or Cousin Chack, pretending to be fascinated, because powerful old relatives— however tiresome— doled out desirable favors.

Corvinalias wanted no favors. He only wanted what was coming to him: branches E23 and NE1, Whorl Nine, of Lower Cloudyblue. By popular custom those were part of his county; surely Uncle Jey would re-scratch his will to make it official.

The old Duke was in the middle of a sentence when Corvinalias nudged him. “Hoy,” he said. “Sorry to interrupt, but do you see *that*? Up the river, there?”

Uncle Jey blinked dismissively at a minute speck on the horizon, washed ruddy by the sunset. Old he might be, but he was a magpie, and magpies could see all kinds of things other people couldn’t. “What, Vinny? A clump of Uman-beings. A town. What about it?”

“This one’s special. Try and guess why.”

Uncle Jey couldn’t resist a challenge. He puffed out his white vest and fluttered from the barge’s gunwale to the roof of its cabin, catching one fingernail in some decorative trim and nearly falling to the deck, down where pair after pair of Uman oarmaids swayed. He scrambled back up, strode to the inlay of a nautilus in the center of the roof, and squinted at the town.

Corvinalias joined him. He could hear the Uman family bustling about inside the cabin: their servants preparing the evening meal, their baby crowing about something. It hadn’t been easy, staying out of reach of that baby. True, he could have chosen to ride in the other barge, the one

rowing behind them that was full of knights, not grabby babies. But the cooking was better on this one, and nobles preferred to travel in style.

“That town has a ferry across the river,” said Uncle Jey, “but the boats haven’t got any oarmaids— is that it? Winch-boats do seem rare here on the mainland. Now when I was young and the Umans put in the Isle of Gold’s very first winch-boat...”

“Not that. Keep looking.”

Uncle Jey droned on about the installation of some ferry or other, rambling off on tangents, bathing the cabin roof and the barge and indeed the whole river in a haze of recycled reminiscences. His blather merged with the shrilling of cicadas from the trees on the riverbanks; the town loomed ever larger and closer; finally, when the oarmaids began calling signals to one another in their mainland Uman dialect, to help them navigate past the automated ferry serving the town— Corvinalias had borne quite enough. He stood up and stretched his wings with what he hoped was a decisive air.

“I’ll show you the special thing. Come with me.”

Good Market wasn’t big, but it was busy. It was a border town, lying as it did right along the River Whellen, and at Good Market the people— for Corvinalias definitely considered Umans a *people*, however the Scientific Institute might categorize them— had become used to a stream of traffic from outside the Whellen Country.

And then there was the machinery. Say what anyone will about Umans, they were clever things and had invented many variations on those ingenious toys the lever, the screw, and the wheel— and in the Whellen Country as nowhere else, such inventions had been brought to a pitch of perfection.

The magpies’ shadows flashed over streets paved with neat limestone, crisscrossed with grooves in which dark-gray ropes continually hissed.

Umans sat side by side in boxes with wheels, that rolled along following these grooves.

“Hmm. They seem to have winch-boats by land as well,” admitted the old Duke, and in his tone Corvinalias recognized a grudging touch of admiration.

“They’re called cable cars.”

“And they’ve pitched tents on the street corners.”

“Amusement pavilions, full of shows and games.”

“Oh yes, Umans and their busy meaty ape fingers, what? Hum. It seems the streets are lined with some sort of glass bubbles on poles. Do you know, I once saw a Uman blowing glass and she—”

“Those are wyrmight lamps. *Artificial* wyrmight.”

Uncle Jey actually stopped beating his wings for a moment.

Smiling inwardly, Corvinalias dipped one wing and began spiraling into the main square of Good Market, toward a big inn with a courtyard for stagecoaches. *Ha ha. That impressed you, old boy.*

“All right, Uncle Jey. Here’s what’s special in this town. Let’s perch in this blackbud tree. Now look at that inn. Do you see the male Uman there on the veranda, the one with the silk shirt and the doeskin breeches and the boots with embroidered tops?”

“He looks like a fool.”

“That’s right, he *was* a Fool. Malfred Murd, the one who belonged to the family that brought us here. He lived in their hive on our Isle for twenty years. Hocka, Bocka, Dominaka—Ta daa.”

“Why, of course I see it *now*, Vinny. So this was your pet? The one you used to show off to us? But he had a hat then. A hat with...” and here Uncle Jey shivered in delight. “...thirteen jingly silver shinies.”

“The hat’s gone. Now he’s got a badge. See it? Hanging from his neck on a chain?”

“Oh! It’s so wonderfully shiny! Come, Vinnie. I wish to steal it.”

Instinctively, without considering respect for age or title, Corvinalias snatched at Uncle Jey’s wrist to prevent him from leaping out of the tree and down into the square. But his fingers closed on nothing; the old Duke had moved surprisingly fast and was falling toward the inn like a black-and-white leaf, wings flaring, ready to reach out and grab the badge of office that extolled Malfred Murd as His Honor, the Esquire of Good Market.

SAMPLE

CHAPTER 2

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FRED STOOD ON THE VERANDA BETWEEN its pots of red crushflowers, greeting passers-by from under a signboard which, instead of a picture of a strapping wench leaning against a wheel, now featured lettering: SEAT OF MALFRED MURD, ESQUIRE. He knew perfectly well that few of the gentlemen and none of the ladies in his town could read it, but the sign wasn't for them. It was for him, and he admired it passionately.

Strictly speaking, the Coachmaid's Rest was no longer an inn. True, it had a taproom from which it served refreshment to the public, but it did so at the pleasure of its master, holder of the smallest fief in the Whellen Country; technically the barmaid was not a hireling but did fealty to Fred, as did the two cooks, the three porters, the blacksmith, and the groom who tended the stable's single mule.

None of these women were in particular in awe of him. Their fealty consisted mostly in doing what they'd always done— keeping the furniture polished and the sideboard full and the mule clean and fit— and with the exception of their calling this new gentleman “Mesir” and “Your Honor” the place might just as well have still been a coach stop, run by one of the typically prosperous commoners under the rule of Dame Elsebet de Whellen. Those few citizens who bothered to think about their relationship to Malfred Murd had heard that Dame Elsebet appointed him their new Esquire as a mark of favor, but no one cared about the exact nature of this favor, because Dame Elsebet was beloved and could do as she pleased.

She'd ruled the Whellen Country for fifty-one years and in just two more days, the King would finally come and see its wonders.

Fred pushed his hands casually into the pockets tailored in the side seams of his shirt after the very newest fashion. He leaned back onto



the heels of his soft, expensive new boots and forward onto the toes. With each motion, he savored the lovely weight of his chain of office, a ceremonious series of links wrought from marbled steel just like the steel of Dame Elsebet's crown. It glittered, it gleamed. Bestowing a smile upon passers-by, Fred withdrew one manicured hand from its pocket and buffed the chain with his sleeve.

Its foremost links were a pair of hooks holding the corners of a colorfully enameled, highly polished badge representing the Great Seal of the Municipality of Good Market and engraved with the enchanting words TO MALFRED - BY ORDER OF E. de W. - ETERNAL GRATITUDE.

Fred was looking right down at the badge when a big magpie with knobby, scaly-looking talons swooped down and snatched it.

"Hoy!"

The magpie paid him no mind at all, but only muttered something in the musty dialect no longer used on the Isle of Gold. Before Fred could bring out his other hand and grab the bird, it was gone— and so was the badge. The empty chain slithered off his neck and clattered to the boards of the veranda.

"Seeping crusty pus buckets!" roared Fred. "Get back here, you boilsore! Scab over it, give me my deep-damned badge!"

In the limestone square before the Coachmaid's Rest, a woman whirled to face him, covering her son's ears. She seemed ten feet tall. Fred raised a few shy fingers in greeting.

"I— ah— evening to you. Just a bit agitated, here..."

"My son is a good boy! He doesn't need to hear that kind of language! I should complain to the Esquire!"

Fred bowed, with what he thought was commendable humility. “I *am* your Esquire.”

“Well then, you’re an embarrassment,” snapped the woman, using her big hands to redirect her son’s gaping face. She bent down to the boy’s ear. “Come along, Wilmot. I’ll buy you an extra picturebox show if you forget about this.”

“What’s pus?” peeped the child.

Fred didn’t see the mother turn back and give him a final glare: he was already on the move. The magpie had crossed the street and flown over a fence; Fred rushed to after it and hurdled the boards. He saw the glint of his badge disappear over the copper gutter of a building; Fred threw a handspring on the approach before scaling the wall, just because there was room for it— no one can shed a lifetime of acrobatic training in only a year. From one rooftop to the next he leaped, gaining on the bird, now almost certain that this had something to do with the magpie *Corvinalias*, who’d followed him to this very country when all the... the events had happened.

The bird ahead of him looked like an older, fatter, slower *Corvinalias*. Dropping down from the rooftops onto a pallet of empty flour sacks with a graceful flip that he wished someone could have seen, Fred gave a final sprint and vaulted over a hedge with one arm raised high. His fingertips just brushed the shiny badge— the magpie gave a grunt of alarm— but on the other side of the hedge Fred’s momentum was abruptly arrested. He landed in a pile of gravel, knocking away the canvas with which three workmaids were trying to cover it for the evening. Chips of stone showered down the tops of his boots and covered the seat of his breeches with dust.

“Aw blisters,” one of the workers groaned.

The second one stabbed her shovel into the pile, far too close to Fred’s breeches, and said over her shoulder to the third: “Lookit. Them gods

brung ya someone after all. Some beefy clod fopped up in fancy duds, whataya think?”

The third one considered him as she stowed her sledgehammer in a cart. “All right, but I’m not spittin out my chaw for him. Any brat *I* sprout hasta be on account of a learned gentleman.” Then all of them laughed and laughed, though Fred salved his ego by noticing that the third one actually did spit away her quid of maidenroot.

With a last despairing glance at the sky overhead, he bid his badge goodbye. He stood up and winced at the gravel in his boots. The side of the pile collapsed and took him with it for a few inches; he stepped painfully away and dusted his behind, putting as much decisiveness into these actions as he could. The cardinal rule of improvisational theater is: whatever happens, go with it.

“I see you’ve been working hard, goodwives. Only a few more hours and you can enjoy the Copperday-night entertainments.”

Their blank looks— and the Trade Road Company emblem embroidered on their tunics— told him they were unaware of the Whellen Country’s twice-weekly holidays. With exaggerated suavity Fred pulled off one boot, shook it out, replaced it and repeated with the other; his training as an entertainer finally began to pay off as the wenches, despite themselves, tuned into his motions.

“No idea what I mean? What if I told you that in Good Market, by order of His Honor Malfred Murd and that of his liege Dame Elsebet de Whellen, every citizen and imported laborer— imported, that’s you, goodwives— is entitled to two full days of restful entertainment, each and every week? That’s right, come along and follow me. Your gravel and rails will be fine just where they are. No thieves here—” Fred bit his tongue, thinking of what he’d say to that magpie when he caught it— “no indeed, no crime or uncouth activity of any kind here in my town. Yes, goodwives, I do say *my* town because you’re in the presence of none other than the Esquire himself. I am in fact he. And now we’ve

reached my town's main square, where I'd like to show you around the coinpuppets and the pictureboxes and the music barrels and the—”

Fred froze. If he had been a hound or a highcat, a strip of fur along his back would have stood on end.

There, just across the square, prancing back and forth in front of a showman's booth, he spied the ugly mug and heard the braying voice of someone he knew and loathed.

“Hoy, hoy, goodwives an' fellows! Get 'em here, get 'em now! First time in Good Market— Magic poems, that's right, I said magic poems an' they're fresh right off my pen for just a cheap little, thin little, lone little brass penny! *Can*-trippis, goodwives and fellows, is what these are— powerful, magical poetry spells called *can*-trippis what each could make a dream come true. One benny penny, to buy one tonight! Listen while I tell ya what they do!”

The second wench, the gravel-shoveler, turned to the others. “Wouldja lookit that? Ever seen anyone move so fast? I think the ess-squire's about to drill a fresh hole in that bumpy-faced wight selling the poems. This oughta be good. It's always a laugh watching men try ta fight.”

CHAPTER 3

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FRED'S LOATHING FOR THE BUMPY FELLOW was a long time in the making. Before he became an Esquire, Fred had been a forgotten brat, a novice monk, the royal Fool, and eventually a vagabond—stripped of his Guild license and his position at court, bundled into a boat and shunted off to the mainland. Months of misery had followed. He'd been run out of town after town by low-rent streetcorner Fools whose only claim to superiority lay in the papers pinned to their shoulders, until finally he'd found himself in the Whellen Country, and there he'd spent his very last penny on a drink: a specific kind, chosen as his final taste of the posh life he'd been banished from.

But Fred couldn't even enjoy that simple deep-damned wallow in misery, because the Bumpy Fellow had latched onto him.

On and on that greasy oik with the bumpy face, the rancid breath, the dirty wig and the highly inflated opinion of himself had pestered him, hounding Fred to buy him a drink, insisting that anyone who'd been in the employ of the King must be rich indeed. It was no good telling him otherwise, no good barking at him to be off, no good trying to walk away; what had followed was perhaps inevitable, but still Fred seethed with resentment toward the Bumpy Fellow and now, in the square of Good Market, he wanted nothing more from life than to step straight up to that greasy, bumpy, rancid, dirty, self-inflated raw boil of a wight peddling his lousy poems from a ramshackle booth— and Fred had no doubt whatever that the poems were bad, quite apart from not magic—step straight up to him and, brandishing his badge of office, bid the crowd to keep their money and instead watch a terrific, completely free show entitled “His Honor Malfred Murd, Annoyed, Boots This Blister Out of Town”. But without his badge... it pained Fred to admit this to himself, but without it, people might not know who he was.

It also pained him to admit that, while The Bumpy Fellow was no Fools' Guild-level entertainer, he did have a certain vulgar flair. The crowd, probably bored with the high-quality entertainments of the Whellen Country, was captivated by this interloper brandishing a comically oversized quill pen and inkhorn.

"Watch me, wights an' w— good citizens! Watch as I int-scribe a *can-tripp* right spang here on crisp linen paper, in good black, dark black, per-ma-nit ink! There it is! And now I fold it magical like— I bind the spell right in, good citizens! Lookit that fold, it's a mag-pie bird, a lucky mag-pie that swald that poem right into its wil tum-tum!"

The crowd cooed as if the fingerprint-smear'd paper bird were the cutest thing they'd ever seen. The whole town was fascinated: cable car operators slowed down to stare. Proprietors of music barrels stopped cranking. Even brats who had been pressing their eyes to the peekholes of a picturebox show left it and ran to watch the Bumpy Fellow, who waved the magic poem over his head, exhorting the crowd to line up and buy, because these lil be-yoo-tees is guaranteed to make at least one of your dreams come true.

"What if it's a bad dream?" piped some wag. Everyone laughed, and the Bumpy Fellow laughed along too because of course that was a joke. But when the woman who'd covered her son's ears against Fred's cursing boomed "I only purchase reputable goods! How can I be sure this poem is working?" the fellow turned to answer her so fast his wig nearly fell off.

"An exident question, ma-dammie, a fine one indeed. The prog-er-ess of your dream is visible in the *can-tripp*, good citizens, which word by magical word gets underlined, and outerlined, and ee-loomined, and ee-laberated, as your dream makes headway. But no peeking! No unfolding, good citizens! Or else the *can-tripp* just ups and disappears." The Bumpy Fellow suddenly looked so sad he might die. "In fact, I am willing to give up a dream of mine just to prove it." And with a great show of sorrowful duty, he took the clean, angular pale cream magpie

he'd been showing off and opened it up. No poem. The people around him moaned in consternation, others began babbling to one another about how cheap a penny really was for the hope of a dream, and in a moment they were lined up and the Bumpy Fellow plying his pen.

Watching this, Fred had one of his feelings. The ones where something was fake and he just... *knew*.

The ink. It was disappearing ink.

How did he know? Well, obviously because magic— conjurers' magic— was fake; Fred had put on a few shows himself. Real magic— the seemingly unexplainable working of spellbound things such as firewyrms spit— was being studied by Professors to learn what made it go, and if this wight had ever so much as sniffed the air of a University, Fred would eat his tailored silk shirt. No, something had tipped him off. In a moment he realized it was the bird itself.

The Bumpy Fellow had definitely blotted inky fingerprints all over it, but by the time he unfolded it they had faded clean away— just like the poem inside, which Fred's feeling told him was also fake; there was no way this dolt could have learned how to write in a year. Suddenly Fred recalled him bragging about his friendship with a crooked scribe. Aha, so the fellow's license was fake, too! That was serious; as a vagabond Fred had taken his chances busking with no papers at all, rather than risk angering a Guild with something so dire. Oh, if only an inspector from the Poets were here...

One could be. Fakes a problem? Fake a solution.

Fred jogged across the square and forced himself to the front of the line.

"Hoy. Let me in, could you? I'm in a rush. Oh? Well, same to you." Then, to the Bumpy Fellow: "Can you customize the poem?"

"Aye, good citiz— what are you looking at?"

“Nothing.” Fred made it just obvious enough that he was trying to read the Bumpy Fellow’s license.

It worked. The fellow was visibly unsettled: an ugly sight, as it made him bare his teeth in an ingratiating simper. “And what would Mesir like added to his poem?”

“Well, it’s for my brother. Who’s a Poets’ Guild inspector.” That jab connected, so Fred went harder. “A Level One inspector, not a Level Two like me. Can you make it out to him? His name is Xaviez Quatsfedignel Jort. That’s spelled—”

“Sorry, Mesir. Can’t add names.”

“Huh. Then maybe you could just throw together a few lines off the cuff. You know, ‘roses are pink, lilies are white’ kind of thing?” Fred pressed two fingers against his pulse. “No rush, but you can start... now.”

The Bumpy Fellow broke into a sweat, which was most unpleasant to smell, and pushed Fred to one side, loudly proclaiming: “Line for custom orders— that’s a different line, all right?— forms *here*. I’ll get to you after the standard ones.”

Almost every customer stepped over into the new line. Now the Bumpy Fellow was frantic. When Fred reached into the booth, took a sheet of paper and examined it, murmuring “Is this PG-101 compliant?” the wight lost his composure altogether.

“Know what? Show’s over!”

He slammed the awning of the booth shut, scattering quills in every direction. His outsized horn of ink spilled onto the paving stones and he trod in it. In moments he was gone, leaving only some poetical detritus and a line of inky footprints running in great strides



toward the automated ferry that ran across the river and out of the Whellen Country.

The customers were unhappy to have lost him. They turned their rage upon Fred, thoroughly unaware that he was of the nobility, one of their betters. He was down on the limestone square, about to get acquainted with the new fashion in boots, when one of the brats in the crowd squealed with amazement. The puddle of ink, and the footprints, were disappearing!

In a moment the tenor of the crowd changed dramatically. Baying like hounds— because suddenly a penny was damned good money to be cheated out of— they took off chasing their new quarry. Soon the square was quite peaceful indeed; even the three imported workmaids had gone.

Fred let his head out from under his arms. He untucked his knees from against his chest. He sat up, watched the inkblots fade from his clothes, and considered the state of his fiefdom.

True, there had been a bit of unseemliness. Yes, he would need to ask Dame Elsebet for a new badge.

But he'd triumphed. He'd enforced the law, ridding Good Market of a noisome criminal— and none too soon. Enrick, Margadet and baby Nedward would be here the day after tomorrow.

For a moment the square was full of deep, purple summer twilight. Then with a barely audible hiss, the wyrmflight lamps up on their posts flared to life and bathed everything in a buttery glow.

*After that bravura performance*, thought Fred, I deserve a drink. No, not just a drink. I deserve a public celebration.

If you enjoyed this sample chapter of  
Book #2 in the Heart of Stone  
Adventures... hang tight!

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