

CHAPTER ONE

The Exile

“My name’s Dagath.” The robber grinned.

Rowen blinked away the blood washing down half his face and met the robber’s gaze. The wound was still too fresh to hurt but his senses reeled. The robber towered over him, a big man with rotten teeth. He wore mismatched leather armor that he’d probably taken off previous victims, most of which looked too small for him and cracked from poor upkeep, the buckles rusted through. Most striking of all, though, was the fact that the robber was missing an eye but had not even bothered to cover the scarred socket with a patch.

Dagath paused, clearly amused by the look on Rowen’s face. “Men ought to know the name of the man who’s going to kill them. I’d ask yours, but I don’t really give a damn.” He gave his cudgel a few menacing practice swings. “You ready to go to the gods, boy?”

Rowen had struggled back onto his feet but he could do little more. The blow to the head had caught him completely by surprise, stunning him long enough for a second, smaller robber to bind Rowen’s hands behind his back. Rowen might have fought with his feet—on the Lotus Isles, he’d been taught to kick as well as punch—but it took all his willpower just to keep conscious.

Breaking Dagath’s gaze, Rowen looked around and spotted his shortsword lying nearby: a plain but elegant weapon with a waisted, Ivairian-style blade. All Rowen had left from his old life. Dagath scooped it up and whistled.

“Not bad. Probably sell for a nice price in one of the cities. Me, I prefer a good club.” Dagath stabbed the shortsword into the earth and stepped so close that Rowen could smell the

stink of the man's breath, like rotten meat bathed in sour milk. Rowen's eyes fell on his attacker's cudgel again.

But the robber did not strike, clearly content to enjoy the moment. He jabbed the tip of his cudgel into Rowen's chin and pushed his head to eye level. "What, no clever last words? No bribes?" He looked past Rowen at the second robber, still standing behind him. "This is a first!"

"Whatever coins I've got, I imagine you'll get soon enough," Rowen seethed. "You've already got my sword. Besides that, all I've got left is in my pack. Go have a look."

Rowen nodded towards his satchel, which he'd dropped the moment he saw Small Man lying on the road, feigning hurt. Rowen had seen that trick before: a robber called for help, waited until some hapless traveler got close, then stuck a knife in his throat and took what he wanted. Rowen had been ready for that. But in his overconfidence, he had not seen Dagath sneaking up behind him.

Dagath turned, reflexively eyeing the pack. Gathering what strength he had left, Rowen pitched forward and drove his knee toward the robber's groin. With a look of only mild surprise, Dagath twisted and took the blow on his hip instead. Then he swung his cudgel into Rowen's knee.

Rowen bit his lip to keep from screaming and fell back down.

He wondered if he would lose consciousness after all. *Might be better that way*, he thought dumbly, then cursed and fought back the darkness nipping at his vision. Dagath up-ended his satchel onto the ground. Small Man, confident that Rowen was going nowhere, hurried forward to inspect the goods. Both looked disappointed.

Aside from a few articles of clothing, the satchel contained little more than a whetstone, sword-oil, a nearly empty waterskin, a rolled up scrap of parchment, his coin pouch, and two

books. Dagath snatched up the coin pouch, yanked it open, and shook out its contents. He gave Rowen a withering look when only three copper coins tumbled out.

“This it, boy?” He threw them on the ground and used his cudgel to poke through the rest of Rowen’s possessions. Small Man retrieved the coins and inspected them.

“I think these are Isle coins,” he said quietly, holding up one to the afternoon light and inspecting the seal. “Looks like some kind of bird balancing on one foot.”

A crane, Rowen thought but kept silent.

He had managed to roll onto his side to keep the weight off his knee. Rowen’s instincts had saved him, allowing him to pivot at the last second. He did not think Dagath’s blow had smashed his kneecap, though the pain made his eyes water.

Dagath frowned and snatched the coin from Small Man’s grasp, inspecting it for himself. “You don’t have to be an Isle-man to have Isle coins, you dunce! They use ‘em all over these days.” He started to discard the copper coin again then changed his mind and pocketed it instead.

“Or maybe he’s an Isle Knight,” Small Man offered. “Might be one hell of a ransom if he is!”

Dagath gave his accomplice so cold a look that for a moment, Rowen wondered if Small Man’s suggestion would be answered by Dagath’s cudgel. Dagath pointed. “Does *that* look like an Isle Knight to you?” Before Small Man could answer, Dagath returned to where Rowen was still lying in pain. He prodded him with his cudgel. “Well, speak up, boy. You a Knight?”

Rowen’s face turned almost the same color as the blood drying around his gashed forehead. “I’m no Knight. Never been even to the Isles.” Shame surged through him, but he masked it with anger. “Get on with it. Either kill me or leave me, you bastard.”

But Dagath's good eye sparkled. "You're lying." He went back to Rowen's goods and retrieved one of the books. He opened one then laughed coldly. "I can't read but I know Lotus Isle scribbles when I see them." He threw the book to his accomplice. "You're too grubby to be a Knight and you're too pale to be a native Isle-man." He paused, sneering. "Know what I think?"

Rowen started to close his eyes then stopped himself, trying to meet Dagath's gaze without emotion. He offered no reply. Nevertheless, Dagath laughed. He turned to his accomplice.

"Know what we have here, Sneed? Another exile." He flashed Rowen another toothy, rotten grin. Sneed nodded but Dagath explained anyway.

Just to taunt me... and gods know I deserve it!

"You see, once in a while, some dumb bastard gets it in his head to sail off to the Lotus Isles and be a Knight. Only they don't take kindly to mainlanders—so if you want to train, you have to pay. A lot." Dagath pretended to be lost in thought. "I bet this one was a sell-sword... probably spent *years* saving up the coin!" He laughed again. "They took his money. Then, once they were tired of him, they kicked him out." He grabbed a handful of Rowen's unruly red hair, jerking up so that Rowen was looking at him. "Am I right?"

Rowen said nothing. Dagath chuckled and returned to Sneed. The latter had retrieved the second book as well and was busy leafing through both of them.

"What are they?" Dagath asked him.

"Can't read more than a few words but this one looks like a whole big list of rules." Sneed handed the thicker volume back to Dagath, who merely glanced at it then tossed it aside. "This *other* one"—Sneed half-smiled—"looks like poetry." He opened a page and held it up.

“Pretty pictures, too. Colored ink. There’s a handsome one of a dragon in here somewhere…” He started leafing through the pages again.

“They worth anything?”

Sneed shrugged. “Probably some priest in Lyos would buy them—or some rich ambassador from the Isles, if we can find one.” He paused to think it over. “I bet each one’s worth at least as much as that sword of his!”

Rowen remembered how, on the Isles, illustrated copies of the Codex Lotius could be bought from almost any street vendor for a few copper coins. As for the Codex Viticus, that arduous tome had been forced on him almost as soon as he arrived at Saikaido Temple. Rowen would be glad to be rid of it. *If I survive, that is.*

At the mention of Rowen’s shortsword, Dagath had gone and retrieved it with his free hand. By now, the failed squire had sat up, straining vainly against his bonds.

“Don’t bother. Sneed’s not worth much but at least he can tie a decent knot.” His smile looked almost genuine. “Almost feel like I should thank you, boy. Any last words? Maybe a plea to the Dragongod?”

Rowen had already tried to stand up and failed but he knew he had to try again. His mind scrambled for some kind of diversion. Then an idea formed. Though ludicrous, he had no choice.

“My father’s a blacksmith in Harso, not far from here,” he lied. “He’s not rich, mind you, but he’s got a few coins to rub together. *He* was the one who paid for my training. Gods know what he’ll say when he finds out I got kicked out!” Rowen forced a smile. “Anyway, if it’s ransom you’re after, take me there.”

Dagath scowled, clearly trying to decide if his captive was telling the truth. Thanks to years of training on the Isles, Rowen had the arms of a blacksmith, though everything else about

him—unkempt hair, plain clothes, the fact that he was traveling alone—made him look more like a sell-sword. Dagath glanced down, studying Rowen’s shortsword again. Though unadorned, the crossguard was brass, the blade high quality.

Kayden gave me that... The thought of his dead brother made Rowen wince but he hoped Dagath mistook his grief for fear.

“He could be telling the truth,” Sneed offered.

“Or he could be stalling, hoping he can get away—or wait us out until somebody comes along and rescues him.” Dagath lifted the hand holding Rowen’s shortsword and used one dirty thumbnail to scratch at his scarred eye socket. “That it, boy? You think some armored Knight’s gonna thunder in and save you?”

“No,” Rowen said, and meant it. He knew as well as his captors that they were too far from the coast, where they might be chanced upon by a patrol of Isle Knights. Lyos was still the closest of the Free Cities but wanting to be left alone, Rowen had chosen to travel there via the most deserted road—a decision he now deeply regretted.

Dagath looked down at Rowen’s shortsword again, then glanced back at the books, visibly weighing the odds, trying to decide if he should be content with his already-impressive haul or push his luck and hope that Rowen himself could be ransomed.

This one’s cruel, not stupid, Rowen realized. He knows if he takes a ransom note to a town—whether I’m lying or not—he might wind up dead. Better he stick with what he already has.

But greed won out.

“Fine, we’ll try it your way. If you’re telling it true, maybe you’ll even have to keep the gods waiting a while.” Dagath lowered his weapons. “Sneed can write some but it’s best the note’s in your scribbles. You know letters?”

Rowen nodded. “I can write.”

Dagath smirked. “Figures.” He gestured with his cudgel at Rowen’s meager pile of possessions. “I don’t want to tear up them books. Sneed, I saw parchment there. Bring it.”

Rowen restrained a curse when he realized the scrap of parchment that Dagath was referring to. He wanted to argue but thought better of it. Sneed brought the scrap. He gave Rowen a faint, nearly reassuring smile as he handed the ancient-looking parchment to Dagath. *This one’s different. He’s a robber, sure, but not quite a cutthroat.*

Dagath kicked his injured knee to catch his attention. Rowen swore. Dagath said, “Scribble your father, tell him he pays twenty silvers or else he’ll have to bury you in pieces.”

Rowen knew better than to accept too quickly. “Twenty silvers is a lot. I told you, he’s poor—”

“And I’m pretty. What of it? Every town needs a blacksmith. The villagers can pass around a gods’-damned collection bowl if they need to.”

“How will you get the letter to him?”

Dagath shrugged. “Sneed can take it,”

Rowen saw his opportunity. “Then Sneed will bring the coin back himself?”

Dagath’s expression changed. Rowen swallowed a smile. *You didn’t think of that, you bastard!*

Sneed faced Dagath. “You can trust me ...”

“Like hells,” Dagath interrupted. He fell silent. Rowen could imagine what he was thinking. If Sneed did not deliver the letter, then Dagath would have to do it. That would mean leaving Rowen in Sneed’s care.

Of course, as far as Dagath knows, it won’t matter if I get away. He’ll still have a pouch full of silver coins—and if I’m alive, he won’t have to worry about some vengeful father hiring mercenaries for revenge.

He guessed that Dagath had reached the same conclusion. “I’ll take the scribble myself. Harso’s not far.” He turned to Sneed. “Gods hear me, if he’s not here when I get back, I’ll cut out your spine *and* keep your share.”

Sneed’s face paled. He tried to respond but stammered.

Dagath threw the parchment at Rowen’s feet. He waved to Sneed again. “Untie his hands so he can write. But bind up his feet.” He prodded Rowen with his own shortsword. “Guess I don’t have to tell you what happens if you try anything cute.”

Rowen shook his head.

Sneed bound Rowen’s feet with a length of rope that Rowen had been using as a belt. Sneed’s trembling hands fussed with the bonds securing his wrists. When the bonds went slack, Rowen resisted the impulse to throw an elbow at Sneed’s jaw. He wouldn’t get far with his legs still tied. He massaged his sore wrists, then gingerly touched the gash left on his forehead from Dagath’s cudgel. Sneed withdrew meekly.

Dagath pointed at the parchment. “Write.”

Rowen hesitated, eyeing the poor but familiar handwriting already covering one whole side of the parchment. “No ink.”

Dagath frowned.

“If you start a fire, I can use the ash.”

“You think I’m stupid, boy? Ash doesn’t last.” Dagath sneered. “Best we use blood.”

Neither robber offered to bandage Rowen’s slashed palm once the letter had been written. Instead, Dagath ordered Sneed to lash Rowen’s wrists together again. By now, the sun was setting, bloodying the rolling hills to the west. The robbers dragged Rowen far off the road, untying his feet so they wouldn’t have to carry him. They soon reached a copse of trees.

A paltry campsite indicated that the robbers must have been here before. Sneed bound his feet again. Rowen had regained some of his strength, but the sword-tip pressed to his throat dissuaded him from attempting escape. This time, they tied him with his back to a tree. Then, Sneed built a fire and fixed a simple meal of porridge that smelled of burnt, mashed asparagus, none of which they shared with their captive.

Rowen tested his bonds and tried to ignore the growling in his stomach. It had been only three days since he left the Lotus Isles but already, he’d been robbed, beaten, and his stomach rumbled so ominously that he feared he was starving. He’d been well-fed at Saikaido Temple but once dismissed, he’d been forced to leave with only the few possessions he’d had when he arrived years before. It cost half his remaining coins to board the ship that ferried him across the Burnished Way, back to the mainland. He’d managed to buy some rations and a little lotus wine at a seaside village, but those had not lasted long. In fact, the only thing he had that remotely resembled foodstuffs was a pouch of sweetbitter leaves, chewed to keep teeth from rotting.

I should offer those to Dagath, Rowen thought spitefully.

When the highwaymen were done eating, Dagath forced Rowen to provide a detailed description of his father. *Just follow the sound of a ringing hammer,* Rowen wanted to say. He had already described the imaginary blacksmith twice but he took care to keep the details the

same. It would have been easier to substitute a description of his true father but, like the rest of his family, Rowen barely remembered him. Still, Dagath appeared satisfied. With a final slew of threats, the burly killer set off into the night.

Despite the pain throbbing from his cut palm, Rowen had to stop himself from grinning. Since Dagath could not read, Rowen had considered detailing his subterfuge in the letter so that whoever saw it would know what kind of man Dagath was. However, he'd not wanted to risk Sneed making out enough of the letter to catch the deception, so instead, Rowen kept up the act, penning a pleading letter to a man who did not exist.

The act itself brought a pang of shame when Rowen remembered the knightly prohibition against lying for any reason. Then he reminded himself that he was not a Knight. Besides, so far, lying had served him far better than his fighting prowess.

Now I just have to find a way to get out of here! The people of Harso would not come to his aid. He meant nothing to them and had only visited the town once, working as a merchant's bodyguard with his brother, though he doubted anyone would remember. *Still, I'm better off than I was before.*

He thought again of Saikaido Temple with its beautiful gardens overflowing with the sweet perfume of dogblossoms, its stores of cool lotus wine, and its extravagant tilting yard overseen by perhaps the greatest weapons-trainers in the world. *Maybe I'm not doing so good after all.*

Rowen tested his bonds again. He might saw the rope against the tree bark until he freed his hands, then easily free his legs, but he could do neither while Sneed was watching.

The small, balding man regarded him without expression, separated by the dwindling campfire. He sipped from a jug of wine. Rowen's fears had subsided enough to be replaced by

pain. His forehead, knee, and palm filled him with dull pain, punctuated by jolts of agony when he moved, though he was certain that if he closed his eyes, he would fall asleep.

He resisted. Dagath would not return until midday, if he returned at all. Sooner or later, no matter how nervous he was, Sneed was bound to fall asleep. Rowen wondered what he would do once he was free.

He was tempted to cut down Sneed, then rearm himself and make for Harso—not just to reclaim his prized shortsword but to kill Dagath, if the bastard was still alive. The loss of the heirloom stung but worse still was realization that so soon after leaving the Lotus Isles, Rowen had lost a fight to a common thug with little or no training.

Sneed's voice interrupted his grim ruminations. "That letter. Was it a trick?"

Rowen feigned surprise and shook his head.

Sneed laughed. "I'm not as dumb as I look. Maybe I don't know all my letters, but I can read faces well enough. If Dagath makes it back in one piece, you know he won't just kill you. He'll slice you into ribbons, make sure you die slow. I've seen it before."

Rowen thought he saw the man shudder. "You don't seem to like him much."

Sneed shrugged. "Man doesn't have to like what he does to stay alive." He took a long drink.

"How did you fall in with him?" Rowen did not especially care to hear the robber's life story but he knew it would only help his chances of escape if he put the man at ease.

Sneed lowered the jar. "He's my half-brother." He sounded almost apologetic. "Different fathers, same whore of a mother. We're from Lyos, I guess you could say."

"The Dark Quarter?" Rowen doubted either man had been a true citizen of the wealthy city. More likely, they had grown up in the slums at the bottom of the hill. He searched his

memory but he did not recognize the man before him. *Then again, the Dark Quarter has more orphans and beggars than a graveyard has worms!*

Still, Sneed raised one eyebrow. “You, too?” Rowen almost said yes before he remembered his lie about being from Harso. Luckily, Sneed did not seem to expect an answer. “Bad place to be a kid.”

Rowen was inclined to agree. He had no interest in reliving such memories, though. “How many travelers have you robbed like this?”

Sneed winced. Rowen thought he would refuse to answer. Instead, Sneed said, “Maybe a dozen a year. Maybe more. If there’s guards, we leave ‘em alone. Dagath knows how to scrap but he’s not much for a fair fight.” He took a longer drink of wine. “Folks from the north come down here, too. Ivairians, hair red as yours. Half-starved, unarmed. They’re not much worth the trouble but once in a while, they have some clothes or a trinket worth taking.” He looked away and pretended to tend the fire. “Women and kids, too. Some of them, Dagath doesn’t kill. Not right away...”

Memories of Rowen’s own childhood in the slums flooded him, unbidden. He remembered hiding from the gangs with his brother, stealing to stay alive, doing whatever he could to stay out of sight of those who had no qualms about forcing certain vile acts upon boys and girls alike.

An old, raw terror sprang up inside him. It took all of his willpower to keep from trying to break free of his bonds right then and there. Dimly, he remembered a passage from the Codex Lotius. *Singchai ushó fey*—no courage without fear—but the words brought no comfort.

A faint, sad smile played on Sneed’s face. “It’s a wretched world, ain’t it?” He stabbed the fire with a knife. “So what was written on that letter? I mean, before.”

Rowen started to lie then changed his mind. “It was a letter from my brother, telling me to come join him soon as I could.”

Something in Rowen’s tone made Sneed nod. “He dead?”

Rowen started to answer but his throat constricted. He nodded instead. *I’m sorry, Kayden. I took too long.*

Sneed stabbed the fire again, as though he meant to smother the embers, then changed his mind and added another scrap of wood. “Was he a Knight, too?”

Rowen tensed. “I’m not even a squire any more so I’m sure as hells not a Knight!” He added, “But Kayden was. A good one.”

Sneed stared off into the trees. “I wanted to be a Knight when I was a kid. Would have been happy being a sell-sword, too, I guess, but I never was much good in a fight.” His expression turned eager. “If you want to teach me, maybe we can be sell-swords together! I’ll loosen your hands and we can turn it on Dagath when he gets back.”

Rowen tensed. He knew he only had to nod. Instead, he shook his head. “I’m done being a sell-sword.”

Sneed frowned and Rowen immediately regretted it. He blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “Being a Knight’s not all about fighting. There’s reading and writing and laws, too. You have to learn them all.”

Sneed took another pull of the wine jug. “Anything in those laws about playing hurt then stabbing whoever walks up to help you?” When Rowen did not answer, Sneed added his last scrap of wood to the campfire. “How’d you know it was a trick?”

Rowen was dangerously close to revealing that his story about being a blacksmith's son was a lie, though he suspected that Sneed already knew. "Kayden always said if you see a corpse, you should smell the air. If it doesn't reek, you're in trouble."

Sneed laughed. "I didn't know I smelled that fresh!" His expression sobered and he stared out at the shadow-wrapped trees. "Here's what's bothering me, Squire. When you saw me laying there all groaning and wretched, you called out, said you weren't buying it, told me to get up and go."

Rowen nodded carefully, though he felt silly when he realized that Sneed was not looking.

"When I didn't move, you walked up and kicked me—though not half as hard as you could have, I bet. I heard you draw your sword. You missed Dagath hiding in that tree, a ways back with a green cloak over him. Still, you knew it was a trap. You could have stabbed me in the back and been done with it—only you didn't. Why?"

Rowen realized he had no answer.

Sneed nodded. "Would've made sense. Not one of the gods would have burned you for it. I'd have done it in your place. And here for all I know, we came out of those damn slums together."

He stood up—knife in one hand, wine in the other—and circled around the fire. He moved so purposefully that Rowen wondered for a moment if the robber meant to stab him.

"I figure you get this as well as anybody, Squire. Most times, you just do what you gotta to keep your blood in the right place." Sneed looked down. "Sometimes, though, you get to do what you want." He gave Rowen a final, dull look then simply walked away, vanishing into the night.

Is this a trick? Rowen wondered, too, if Sneed had only gone to fetch more firewood. But minutes passed, and the balding thief did not return.

Rowen wasted no more time. He worked his bonds against the tree, wincing when the motion sent jolts of pain through his slashed palm. At last, he broke free. His shoulders ached but he hurried to free his legs as well. He rose shakily to his feet.

Sneed had left his satchel by the fire, but Dagath had scattered his meager possessions all over the camp. Rowen gathered them with his good hand. Without his shortsword, he had no weapons save his razor. *A pitiful weapon.*

He ripped two strips of cloth from his shirt. Since he had to do so with one hand, the cloth tore unevenly and too far, further souring his already-bedraggled appearance. But that, too, was a concern for another time. Rowen tied one strip of cloth around his palm as a bandage. Then he chose a suitable branch from the fire, wrapped the second strip of cloth at one end, and fashioned a makeshift torch. Though better than nothing, it still smoldered more than it burned.

He finished gathering his belongings, snatching up the Codex Lotius and sliding it into his satchel. He glanced at the other volume—the one full of laws to which he was no longer bound—but left it where it lay. Then, heading away from both Dagath and Sneed, he hurried off through the trees into the night.