

Exile's Return

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• CHAPTER ONE •

Captive

*T*HE RIDERS CAME AT HIM.

Kaspar, who had until the day before held the title of Duke of Olasko, waited, holding his chains ready. Moments before he had been deposited on this dusty plain by a tall white-haired magician who, with only a few words of farewell, had vanished, leaving the exiled nobleman to face an approaching band of nomads.

Kaspar had never felt this alive and vitalized. He grinned, took a deep breath and flexed his knees. The riders were fanning out, and Kaspar knew they judged him a risk even though he stood alone, barefoot and without any weapon save for heavy chains with manacles and leggings attached to each end.

The riders slowed. Kaspar counted six of them. They wore alien garments, loose-fitting outer robes of indigo over white

blouses belted at the waist with whipcord; ballooning trousers were tucked into black leather boots. Their heads were covered by wrapped turbans, with a length of cloth left hanging on the right. Kaspar judged that this could be quickly raised to cover mouth and nose against a sudden dust storm or to hide identity. The clothing looked less like a uniform than tribal garb, he decided. And they carried a variety of lethal-looking weapons.

The leader spoke in a language Kaspar didn't understand, though there was something oddly familiar about it. Kaspar replied, 'I don't suppose there's the remotest chance you speak Olaskon?'

The man Kaspar had identified as the leader said something to his companions, made a gesture, then sat back to watch. Two men dismounted and approached Kaspar, drawing weapons. A third behind them unwound a leather cord, with which he obviously intended to bind their new captive.

Kaspar let his chains drop slightly, and slumped his shoulders, as if acknowledging the inevitability of his circumstances. From the manner in which they approached, Kaspar knew two things: these were experienced fighting men – tough, sunburned plainsmen who probably lived in tents – and they were not trained soldiers. One glance gave Kaspar the one fact he needed to make his decision on how to act. None of the three men still on horseback had drawn a bow.

Kaspar allowed the man with the leather bindings to approach, and then at the last instant he kicked out, taking the man in the chest. That man was the least dangerous of the three at hand. Kaspar then swung his chains, releasing an end at the same instant, and the swordsman on his right who had judged himself out of Kaspar's reach was slammed across the face with the

makeshift weapon. Kaspar heard bone crack. The man went down silently.

The other swordsman was quick to react, raising his sword and shouting something – an insult, battle cry, or prayer to a god, Kaspar didn't know which. All the former duke knew was that he had perhaps three or four seconds to live. Instead of moving away from the attacker, Kaspar threw himself at the man, coming up hard against him as the sword fell through empty air.

He got his shoulder under the man's armpit and the momentum of the missed blow carried the nomad over Kaspar's shoulder. Kaspar's powerful arms pushed up hard and the man spun through the air, landing hard upon the ground. The breath seemed to explode out of his body and Kaspar suspected he might have cracked his spine.

Kaspar sensed more than saw that two archers were unlimbering their bows, so he sprang forward, and with a diving shoulder roll, came to his feet holding the closest man's sword. The nomad who had held the binding leather was trying to come to his feet and draw his own sword at the same time as Kaspar stepped by him, smashing the man's head with the flat of the blade. The man fell over without a sound.

Kaspar might not be the swordsman Tal Hawkins had been, but he had trained as a soldier most of his life, and now he was in his element, in-close brawling. He ran at the three riders, two with bows and one with a slender lance, that man levelling his weapon as he put his heels to his horse's barrel. The animal might not be a seasoned warhorse but it was well trained. It leapt forward as if sprinting from the starting line in a race and Kaspar barely avoided being trampled. He almost took the point

of the man's lance in the chest, but with a quick move to the left evaded it. Had the horse started only a yard or two farther back, he would have been moving too fast for Kaspar's next move, which was to continue twisting and reaching up with his left hand, grab the rider by the back of his robe and yank him from the saddle.

Kaspar didn't wait to see the man hit the ground, but used his momentum to keep turning until he was facing the closest rider, who was trying to draw his bow. Kaspar reached out with his left hand and grabbed the man's ankle. He yanked it back and then up and the bowman fell from the saddle.

Kaspar spun, looking for the last opponent, or to see if one of those he had unhorsed had regained his footing. He turned twice before accepting his situation. Slowly he stood up and let the sword fall from his fingers.

The last bowman had calmly moved his horse away a few yards, and now sat quietly in the saddle, drawing a bead on Kaspar. It was hopeless. Unless he was a terrible shot, Kaspar would never avoid the arrow pointing at his chest.

The man smiled and nodded, and said something that Kaspar took as 'good', then flicked his gaze to someone behind Kaspar.

Suddenly one of the riders he had embarrassed smashed his forearm into the back of Kaspar's neck, driving him to his knees. Kaspar tried to turn as he heard metal clanking, and he realized someone was approaching with his discarded manacles. Before he could get his head around, cold iron slammed into the point of his jaw. Bright lights exploded behind his eyes for an instant before he lapsed into unconsciousness.

* * *

Kaspar's jaw throbbed. His neck hurt and he felt sore all over his body. He was disoriented for a moment, then remembered the confrontation with the nomads. He blinked, trying to clear his vision, then realized it was night. From the variety of aches he experienced when he tried to move, he assumed the riders had spent a fair amount of time kicking him after he had been knocked unconscious, displaying their displeasure at the manner in which he had received their request for him to surrender.

He judged it a good thing he hadn't killed any of them, for that would have probably earned him a cut throat. He realized his chance of escaping that encounter had been slim. He struggled upright, no mean feat with his hands bound behind him with leather cords. But he also knew that a trained fighting man might stand a better chance of survival amongst people like these compared to a common field-hand or house-servant.

Looking around, he discovered he was secured behind a tent. His bindings were tight around his wrists, and those in turn were tied by a tough rope to a tent stake. He could move around a few feet, but there wasn't enough slack in the rope to enable him to stand. A quick inspection of the stake revealed he could probably pull it out, but if he did, he would bring down the tent, clearly informing his hosts of his attempted departure.

He was dressed as he had been when taken. He did a quick physical inventory and judged that nothing was broken or sprained too badly.

He sat quietly and considered things. His instincts about these people seemed correct so far. From what little he could see beyond the tent, this was a small camp, perhaps just the six riders and their families, maybe a few more. But he could see

a picket line for horses, and by rough estimation there were at least two or three mounts for every person here.

On the other side of the tent he heard voices, speaking softly. He strained to listen to the alien language. He sat back. A word here or there was tantalizing to him.

Kaspar had a quick grasp of languages. As heir to his father's throne, it had been judged necessary for him to learn the educated speech of the surrounding nations, so he spoke fluent, unaccented King's Tongue – the language of the Kingdom of the Isles – as well as those languages related to his native Olaskon, all descended from Roldemish. He also spoke flawless court Keshian and had taken the time to learn a little Quegan, a variant on Keshian that had evolved on its own after the Quegan Kingdom had successfully revolted from the Empire of Great Kesh nearly two centuries earlier.

In his travels he had picked up patois and cants from half a dozen regions of those foreign nations, and something about what he was now hearing sounded very familiar. He closed his eyes and let his thoughts wander as he eavesdropped on the conversation.

Then he heard a word: *ak-káwa. Acqua!* The accent was thick, the emphasis different, but it was Quegan for 'water'! They were talking about stopping somewhere for water. He listened and let the words flow over him without trying to understand, just allowing his ear to become used to the rhythms and tones, the patterns and sounds.

For an hour he sat there, listening. At first he could recognize one word in a hundred. Then perhaps one word in fifty. He was recognizing one word in a dozen when he heard footsteps approaching. He slumped down and feigned unconsciousness.

Kaspar heard two sets of footfalls draw near. In a low voice one man spoke. Kaspar heard the words 'good' and 'strong' from one man. There followed a quick conversation. From what Kaspar could judge, one man was arguing to kill him where he lay because he might be more trouble than he was worth, but the other argued he had value because he was strong and good at something, probably with a sword, since it was the only skill Kaspar had demonstrated before being overwhelmed.

It took total control on Kaspar's part not to move when an ungentle boot prodded him to see if he was truly unconscious. Then the two men departed.

Kaspar waited and when he was certain they were gone, he chanced a peek and caught a glimpse of the men's backs as they walked around the tent.

He sat up.

He fought to keep his mind focused on what he was hearing, and started to wrestle with his bindings. The danger would be to become so intent upon escaping he wouldn't hear anyone approach. He knew his best chance for escape was this first night, while they thought him still unconscious. He had very few advantages. They probably knew the surrounding countryside and were experienced trackers.

His only edge was surprise. Kaspar was a skilled enough hunter to know what cunning prey could do. He needed at least an hour's start on his captors, but first he had to free himself of the leather bindings around his wrist.

He gave in to the unreasonable desire to test the bindings, and found them tight enough to cause pain when he tried to pull his hands apart. He couldn't see, but they felt like rawhide.

If he could get them wet they would stretch and he might be able to slip them off.

After a futile period of struggle, he turned his attention to the rope he could see. He knew he would have little chance of getting the rope off the peg without bringing down the entire tent, but he could think of no other option. He had to turn first one way, then the other, to come to the conclusion that this was impossible with his hands tied behind him.

Kaspar sat and waited. As the hours dragged by, the camp quietened. He heard footsteps and once more feigned unconsciousness as someone came to check on him before turning in for the night. He let minutes drag by until he was certain that those inside the tent were asleep. Then he sat up. He glanced at the sky and was greeted with a display of alien stars. Like most men of his ocean-going nation, he could navigate by the stars, either on land or sea, but above him lay constellations unknown. He would have to rely upon basic navigation skills until he became used to the display above. He knew where the sun had set, marked in his mind by a spiral of rock in the distance he had glimpsed just before sunset. Which meant he knew where north was.

North and east was his most likely route home. Kaspar had read sufficiently to know where the continent of Novindus lay, relative to Olasko. Depending on where on this continent he found himself, his best chance to get to Olasko was to work his way to a place called the City of the Serpent River. There was almost no trade between this land and those on the other side of the world, but whatever trade there was started in that city. From there he could find his way to the Sunset Isles, and from there to Krondor. Once in the Kingdom of the Isles, he could walk home if he had to.

He knew he was almost certain to fail in the attempt, but whatever was to happen to him, let it happen as he struggled to return home.

Home, he thought bitterly. A day earlier he had been home, ruling his nation, before being taken captive in his own citadel, defeated by a former servant he had thought as good as dead. He had spent the night in chains considering the dramatic reversal of fortune that had overwhelmed him, and had fully expected to be hanged by now.

Instead, Talwin Hawkins, his former servant, had forgiven him, and he had been banished to this distant land. Kaspar was uncertain as to what exactly had transpired over the previous few days. In fact, he was beginning to wonder if he had truly been himself for the last few years.

He had heard guards talking outside his quarters while he had been awaiting what he anticipated would be his execution. Leso Varen, his magician advisor, had been killed in the battle for the citadel. The magician had first come to him years earlier, promising great power in exchange for Kaspar's protection. His presence had been only a minor distraction at first and he had from time to time provided useful service.

Kaspar took a deep breath and returned his attention to gaining his freedom. There would be time for more reflection on his past, assuming he lived long enough to have a future.

Kaspar was a broad-shouldered man of unusual strength, but his looks were deceptive. Unlike many men of his build, he kept himself limber. Expelling all the air from his lungs and hunching his shoulders forward, he pulled his knees hard up against his shoulders, sticking his head between his thighs, forcing his feet between his bound wrists. He could feel ligaments protest as he

stretched his arms as far as possible, but he managed to get his hands in front of him.

And almost pulled the tent down in the process. He found himself able to lie down, easing the tension on the rope and peg. He studied it. The bindings were indeed of rawhide, and he set to them with his teeth. Using saliva, he got the simple knot wet, gnawing at it until it loosened. For long minutes he worried at the loops of the knot, then suddenly it came loose and his hands were free.

He flexed his fingers and rubbed his wrists as he slowly stood up. Forcing his breathing to a slow, deep rate, he crept around to the front of the tent. He peered around the edge of the tent and saw a single guard sitting with his back to the fire at the other end of the camp.

Kaspar's mind raced. He knew one thing from years of experience: more harm came from indecision than from bad choices. He could attempt to silence the guard, thereby possibly gaining several hours on the pursuit that would certainly follow, or he could simply leave, and hope the guard didn't come to check on him before dawn. But whichever choice he made, he had to act now!

Without conscious effort, he took a step in the guard's direction. He trusted in his instincts: the risk was worth the potential reward. The guard hummed a simple tune, perhaps as a device to keep himself alert. Kaspar trod lightly on the balls of his feet and came up behind the man.

Some change in the light as Kaspar stepped between the guard and the camp fire, a slight sound, or just intuition, made the man turn. Kaspar lashed out as hard as he could and struck him behind the ear. The guard's knees wobbled and his eyes

lost focus and Kaspar struck him across the jaw. The man started to fall, and Kaspar caught him.

He knew his freedom was measured in seconds as he stripped the guard of his headcover and sword. But the man had smaller feet than him and his boots were useless to Kaspar.

He cursed the soldier who had taken his boots on the night of his capture. He couldn't attempt an escape barefoot. He lacked the calluses of those who travelled without boots and while he knew little of the terrain around him, what he had seen told him it was rocky and unforgiving. He remembered a small copse of trees on a distant hillside to the northeast, but doubted he could effectively hide there. What other cover might be nearby was unknown to him; he had had no time to study his surroundings between his arrival and the confrontation with his captors. His only escape option would be to find a pair of boots and put as much distance between himself and his captors before they awoke, climbing into the rocky ridge above them where the horses couldn't follow.

He stood silently for a moment, then hurried quietly to the largest tent. Holding the sword at the ready, he gently moved aside the tent flap. Inside he could hear snoring. It sounded as if there were two sleepers, a man and a woman. In the gloom he could see little, so he waited and let his eyes adjust. After a moment he saw a third body near the left side of the tent, a child from the size of it.

Kaspar saw a pair of boots standing next to a small chest, where he imagined he'd find the chieftain's personal treasure. Kaspar moved with the catlike stealth uncharacteristic of a man so large. He quietly picked up the boots and saw they were of a size he could wear, then moved back towards the tent flap. He

paused. Conflicting urges tugged at him. He was almost certain to be overtaken and recaptured, perhaps killed this time, unless he could find an advantage. But what? While he pondered, valuable moments passed, time never to be regained that would count against him as he sought to distance himself from this place.

Indecision was not part of Kaspar's nature. He glanced about in the gloom and saw the chieftain's weapons where he would expect them, close at hand in case of trouble. He inched past the sleeping couple and took out the nomadic leader's dagger. It was a long, broad-bladed thing designed with a single purpose, to gut a man at close quarters. There was nothing dainty about it, and it put Kaspar in mind of the daggers worn by the nomads of the Jal-Pur desert of Kesh. He wondered idly if these people were somehow related. The language of the Jal-Pur was unrelated to Keshian, but Quegan had been a dialect of Keshian, and these people's language bore a faint resemblance.

Kaspar took the blade and crept closer to the tent flap. He peered in the gloom at the child. In the dim light he couldn't see if it was a boy or girl, for the hair was shoulder length and the child's face was turned away. With a quick, downwards thrust, Kaspar drove the dagger through the floor cover into the earth below. The slight sound caused the child to stir, but not wake.

Kaspar left the tent. He glanced quickly around and saw what he needed, a filled waterskin. He then looked longingly at the line of horses, but ignored them. A mount would give him a better chance of survival, but trying to saddle one was likely to wake someone, and whatever chance his warning in the tent might earn him, stealing a horse from these people would certainly outweigh it.

Kaspar moved out of the village and towards the trees and the hills beyond. What he had seen before his capture indicated that it was rocky terrain and perhaps these horsemen might be disinclined to follow if the way was too harsh. Perhaps they had a rendezvous to make, or perhaps Kaspar's message might give them pause.

For unless the chieftain was a fool he would understand what Kaspar had done. The dagger next to his child would say, 'I could have killed you and your family while you slept, but I spared you. Now, leave me alone.'

At least that's what Kaspar hoped the man would understand.

Dawn found Kaspar climbing over broken rocks, high into the hills. There was almost no cover above the small copse of trees he had seen the day before, and he struggled to find a place to hide.

He could still see the camp below, though by now it was a distant dotting of tents on the floor of the wide valley. From his vantage he could see that this valley was a choke point of a broad plain, flanked on his side by broken hills with a plateau opposite. On the other side of the valley, a vast mountain range rose in the distance. Snow-capped peaks suggested that these mountains would be difficult to cross. The military man in him admired the defensibility of the location, should someone choose to place a fortress where the nomad's camp was. But scanning the horizon, he realized there was nothing to protect here.

The valley lacked apparent water. The trees he had passed through were a variety unknown to him. They were scrawny, had tough black bark, thorns, and obviously needed very little

water to survive. Everywhere he looked he saw rocks and dust. The valley below and the cut through the rocks told him that once a river had flowed through here. Shifting land or a change in climate had caused it to dry up and now its only function was to mark a quick passage for horsemen between one place and another, both unknown to Kaspar.

Distant sounds informed him his escape had been discovered, and he returned his efforts to climbing, feeling lightheaded and slightly weak. He had not eaten for at least two days, depending how he calculated the time. He had been dragged before Talwin Hawkins and his allies in chains at night and transported here instantly at dawn. He must truly be on the other side of the world.

He needed rest and food. He had found some sort of dried meat and hard cracker in a pouch on the side of the waterskin, and planned on devouring these when time permitted, but for the moment he was content to put as much distance between himself and the nomads as possible.

He reached a ridge, on top of which a narrow path ran. He pulled himself up off the rocks and turned to look at the distant camp. Tents were being folded and the tiny dots he took to be men and horses appeared to be moving at a sedate pace. There was no sign of pursuit below him. Kaspar took a moment to catch his breath and regarded the path.

It was wider than a game trail. He knelt and examined it. Someone had taken the trouble to compact the earth beneath his feet. He followed it as it climbed, leading him away from the area above the camp, and soon he found a rock face on his right that showed marks made by tools. The sun was partially blocked by the rock face, so he sat and ate the cracker and some

of the dried meat. He drank about a third of the water in the skin and rested.

He seemed to have escaped and it appeared that his message to the tribe's chieftain had been understood. No riders fanned out in search, no trackers climbed the hills below him. He was free of pursuit.

The air was dry. He reckoned his orientation from the rising sun. The trail he was on had once been a military road, which appeared to have been abandoned for some reason or another. The surrounding countryside was harsh and ungenerous, so there seemed little reason to claim it. Perhaps it had once served as a highway for a nation no longer claiming this region.

He knew the heat of the day would be punishing, so he sought out shelter. None was evident. He decided to spend a while along this old military road, for if nothing else it offered him a vantage point. He allowed himself one long sip of water, then replaced the stopper in the waterskin. He had no idea how long it would be before he found another supply.

The snatches of conversation he had overheard the night before led him to believe water was a source of concern to his former captors. He assumed they would be heading for a new source, so he decided to walk the trail in parallel to their course.

An hour went by and he noticed that the distance between himself and his captors was growing. They walked their horses, but they were traversing flat terrain and he was picking his way along broken stones. The roadbed was flat for a dozen yards or more at a time, then would be interrupted by breaks, overturned stones and gaps due to slides in the hillside below. Once he had to climb down half a dozen yards in order to circumnavigate a collapsed section.

By midday he was exhausted. He removed his shirt and tied it around his head as a rudimentary covering. He didn't know how he knew, but he vaguely remembered as a boy being told that the body could withstand sunburn as long as the head was shaded. He drank another swallow of water and then chewed the jerked meat. It was tough and with little fat, and very salty. He resisted the urge to drink more, determined to permit himself just one more mouthful when he had finished the food.

It took a while to chew the meat, but at last he finished and he took that one long drink. He sat regarding his surroundings.

Kaspar was a hunter. Perhaps not the hunter Talwin Hawkins had been, but he had enough wilderness lore to know he was in dire circumstances. Whatever rain visited this harsh countryside did so infrequently, for there were no signs of vegetation save the tough trees that scattered the landscape. The rocks he sat upon had no grass pushing its way up between cracks, and when he turned a stone over, there was no moss or lichen growing on the shaded side. This country was dry most of the time.

He let his eyes follow the ridge upon which he walked and he saw that it ran towards the south. To the east he saw nothing but broken plains, and to the west the arid valley. He decided he would take this trail for a while longer, and look for anything that would keep him alive. The nomads were heading south, and if he didn't know anything else, he knew that eventually they would be heading for water. And to survive, he needed water.

For that was the task at hand: survival. Kaspar had many ambitions at the moment, to return to Opardum and reclaim the throne of Olasko, and to visit vengeance on his traitorous

Captain Quentin Havrevulen and Talwin Hawkins, formerly of his household. As he walked, a thought arose. The two men weren't actually traitors, he guessed, as he had condemned both to imprisonment on the isle known as the Fortress of Despair, but whatever the legal niceties were, he'd have them both dead.

He'd probably have to rally forces loyal to him and seize the citadel from them. Most likely Talwin had forced his sister Talia to marry him, to claim his throne, and Havrevulen was almost certainly in command of the army. But he'd find men who remembered who was the rightful ruler of Olasko, and he'd reward them handsomely once he was back in power.

His mind churned and he advanced plan after plan as he trod the roadway, but whatever plan presented itself he first had to overcome several significant obstacles, starting with the fact that he was on the wrong side of the world. That meant he would need a ship and crew, and that meant gold. And to get gold he would have to contrive of a way to earn it or take it. And that meant finding civilization, or what passed for it on this continent. And finding people meant he had to survive.

He glanced around as the sun reached its zenith, and decided that right now, survival looked improbable. Nothing stirred in any direction he looked, save a small cloud of dust marking the passage of the nomads who had captured him.

However, he considered, standing still only guaranteed his death, so he would keep moving as long as he had the strength.

He marched on.