

# CHAPTER ONE

The city was dying, of that there could be no doubt. Dying, decaying and derelict; its soul had long been irreparably tainted by years of corruption and infighting. The tired sun had set on another listless day in this sprawling, unplanned metropolis and its residents had either retired to the city's many taverns to drown their sorrows or else returned to their houses to forget them in sleep. However, for others night- time was when their work had only just begun.

Landing as soundlessly as if his feet were the air itself, Theo immersed himself in the shadowy embrace of a secluded corner of the docks. This maze of packing crates and machinery offered plenty of places to hide and mountains of easily accessible loot. All these dark corners and guards who were vacant at the best of times made the docks a lucrative target for any thief. In truth this sort of job would be one he would normally consider beneath his standards, but when Captain Larsson and his pirates were smuggling exotics, it was a chance he really couldn't miss. After all, the rent was due, and his landlord was more ruthless than the City Watch. Normally he would not have had any trouble keeping up with the rent. However, the City Watch's crime crackdown had made it hard for even Theo to remain undetected for very long.

The site of Blackheart Dockside Industries had two buildings. One housed local businesses that based their operations from the many units within, but Theo was after the bigger prize at Warehouse Two. It was here that the pirates smuggled in whatever they could for sky-high prices. Naturally this warehouse was a different proposition to the one before. More guards, tighter security and, of course, Captain Larsson's pirates meant that some major risks were required to get what he really came for. As much as he appreciated the quick cash he could make from the occupants of the other warehouse, nothing could compare to the astronomical price of exotics, which the Governor, Joseph Ramirez, had put on his lengthy list of banned items. Spices, various perfumes and assorted textiles were just some of the items that Theo could expect to nab if he avoided detection. It really was a brilliant opportunity.

Theo entered from the gangway connecting the two warehouses and crouched in a corner as he observed what lay before him. Attention to detail was one of Theo's strongest assets, saving him from many a premature ending to his life in the past. He noticed a layout not dissimilar to how it had always been. Wide open spaces went down the centre of the cavernous warehouse, with crates piled high on the sides. At the end was a large door for moving in the larger shipments. Up the stairs was a second floor where the offices of Blackheart's top brass lay.

The side door at the far end was open; clearly Larsson was already here. All Theo had to do was seek out his illicit wares.

The task was easy for him; break into the office of the Captain of the Guard and pinch his key to open the crates left by Larsson for ease of access. Theo could not believe the naivety of Blackheart in thinking that he could trust every one of his staff, for it was common knowledge that his captain was corrupt. Larsson paid him an indecent sum to look the other way, and often it worked. Theo kept a close eye on the guard who was passing him. When he was certain that he was out of the way Theo glided down towards the end of the narrow corridor that housed the senior members of Blackheart's staff. Theo knew the offices off by heart. The guard captain's was on the left, just before Blackheart's office. Of course, before this he had to check out the other offices and see how the business was doing. What they said in public was one thing, but in private quite another. Things were uncertain at the moment and Theo wanted to know all he could.

What Theo found in these rooms was telling. It may have seemed like little to the naked eye, but over the last few months he had spotted an alarming pattern. Many shipments had mysteriously disappeared, the excessive anti-corruption laws passed by Ramirez were causing devastating

losses to the company and many were simply deserting the company and seeking work elsewhere.

Theo stopped for a moment to think about what on earth he was doing this for. At first, he just needed to eat. However, this job notwithstanding, he didn't have that problem anymore and the risks were becoming greater following the citywide crime crackdown. He could have worked for one of the city's crime lords for an easy life, but he didn't want some fat nobleman profiting off of his hard work. Now his plans were grander, for he would surpass all of the city's greatest ever criminal names. If he could take a few of the city's upper crust down with him, all the better.

He methodically worked his way through each office, being careful to leave everything as he found it before moving on. Before entering the guard captain's office, he could not resist a look in Blackheart's office first. The owner of the whole operation was far too tempting a target. As usual, he sprung the lock with ease and slipped silently inside.

Blackheart's office was several degrees more comfortable than the others. His desk was a dark mahogany, with a plush rug and several paintings adorning the wall. What Blackheart had never worked out, however, was that Theo knew the combination to his safe, which was behind one of his paintings.

Theo manipulated the lock of the safe into position and heard the satisfying click as it opened.

Theo smirked as he found Blackheart's diary, the one window into his soul. Anything he could find to point him towards any future targets would be in here. However, one of the more recent entries made Theo freeze, his blood running cold at the sight of it.

*"I must be losing my nerve or something. Has going legitimate turned me soft or is there really nothing more I can do? Every day it seems I lose a shipment to Larsson and other pirates, and every day it seems I report it to Ramirez or High Captain Morgan and every day it seems I simply get a shrug of the shoulders as if they are powerless to prevent it. What did I do wrong? So many of my colleagues have either been driven out of business, died mysteriously or otherwise disappeared altogether, families and all. I may have no family, but it feels like my days are numbered. My tenants feel the same, I think. Either way it feels like my company's fate is no longer within my full control and my destiny not within my hands. That nutter Julianus isn't helping matters either."*

Theo had heard Julianus' name before. He was Chief Secretary of the Treasury and a ruthless tax collector. He had been the driving force behind much of the laws that were forcing people out of business. Theo was sure he wasn't the saint he claimed to be, but he had no way of proving it. Either way,

he had other things to think about. The guard captain's office was next door to Blackheart's and within it the key that would open Larsson's chests. Crouching down, Theo slipped back outside and began to pick the lock, but felt his eyes widen in horror as he realised something seriously amiss.

The problem for Theo was that the lock refused to work. Try as he might, the lock that always opened at his command was not responding. This was bad news; the captain had changed the lock to make it unpickable. This new brand of lock was recently made and it came with a price to match its complexity. None of Theo's equipment seemed to work on it; only the key would do.

Theo froze for a moment, gathering in the enormity of the situation. With no way to get into the office he had only one other option and he shuddered at the thought. The only other key was on Captain Larsson's ship, which would spell certain death for Theo should he be caught. Theo may have been an outstanding thief, but as a swordfighter he couldn't even best a young peasant girl. Steeling himself, Theo sauntered off back down the corridor.

Crouching in the corner he had entered the building from, Theo cast a wary eye around for the guard who had passed him barely a few minutes previously. He listened intently, barely even breathing, lapping up

every minute detail of his surroundings. He was not frozen by fear, but his senses were keen. He wasn't trying to compete with his surroundings, for he had a knack of simply becoming them. This is what set him apart from the other thieves in the city. Confident in his ability to board Larsson's ship and make a serious impact on his profits, Theo bounded out of his hiding place and quickly approached the main area of the building.

"What's that? Who goes there?" Theo started, unaware of what lay to his right. The guard he thought had disappeared had simply been hanging around on his patrol, which induced a sense of panic in Theo momentarily. Startled, Theo naturally glanced over to his right to see where the commotion had come from. Thankfully experience had taught Theo that even the best thief occasionally got caught, so he simply shrank back into the shadows as fast as he could. However, this did not stop the guard from suspecting him.

It was to Theo's relief that the guard had not spied him totally but had rather heard him and glanced upward. If not, Theo would have had to make his escape and leave empty-handed. Theo's heart was racing, his brow sweating, his chest heaving with nervousness and anxiety. From his corner it would not take much for the guard to spot him. Theo watched unblinking as the guard started to search the area that he had seen Theo.

“I know you’re out there. Come out and I promise you a quick ending.” This was hardly an incentive for Theo to leave his position, and, like all the other times, Theo crouched motionless as the guard searched, his frustrations growing at not being able to find anything amiss. It felt like hours to Theo, but in truth it had only been minutes.

Finally, the guard grunted in resignation. His search had been fruitless, and he stalked off to continue his patrol. Theo let out a long, unbroken breath to signal his relief. It was times like these that he earned his reputation for seamlessly blending in with his surroundings and not getting caught once. He allowed himself a wry smile as he marvelled about how brilliant he was at his job. Creeping out from the corner, Theo darted off soundlessly in the opposite direction to where the guard was walking and ascended the stairs down to the bottom floor of the building.

As he sauntered down the narrow passage between the crates and the warehouse wall he stopped abruptly. Out of the corner of his eye, he swore he saw someone looking at him for just a moment. He was sure it wasn’t a guard, but the thought of being followed made him deeply uneasy. He carefully peered through the gap in the crates, looking left and right several times for the source of his unease. Satisfied that the threat had passed, he



moved on, though the troubling thought of being followed niggled him at the back of his mind.

At the bottom Theo was met by a mountain of packing crates piled high in every corner that they could fit. Somewhere amongst them lay Captain Larsson's smuggled goods, unreachable save for having the proper key. Also down here were various members of Larsson's crew, a motley collection of pickpockets, thugs and other unpleasant people Theo would rather avoid. For all his bravado Theo was not a brave man when it came to confronting people like that, a fact he chose to ignore as much as possible. He would not need to cross swords with them here if he simply kept his wits about him and stuck to the many shadows that a maze of crates offered. He stole away to the side and pressed himself tight against the wall before purposefully proceeding forward.

True to their thuggish nature, Larsson's crew were incredibly thick. Theo was easily able to slip past them and out on to the dockside where he was confronted by Larsson's ship, an imposing caravel designed for one thing and one thing only: destruction of other vessels. This many merchants had found out to their huge cost, but tonight Larsson would find out about his own failings.

Theo scanned the ship overhead from a vantage point behind a small pile of crates. It was well guarded, for Larsson was patrolling it with all the

purpose of an attack dog defending its territory. Theo was willing to bet that Larsson would be just as vicious if he were to catch sight of him. It was clear that Theo was not going to be able to take the most direct route, but he was rarely, if ever, able to. What Larsson did not know was that there was always a weakness in any stronghold. Theo was sure that on a ship of that size there had to be some mode of access that Larsson had overlooked. He was an excellent swimmer, so Theo silently dived into the water, trying not to look too much at the permanent fog that covered the Bay of Sorrows in the distance, and began to descend into the depths.

Theo's insides screamed in protest at the iciness of the winter sea. The feeling was of his blood freezing and his skin being cut by unseen blades, all intent on drawing out his suffering for as long as possible. Despite this Theo had to maintain concentration. He swam around the ship, searching desperately for an opening. There was nothing obvious but one way, which appeared to Theo to be suicide. The captain's cabin had an open window. If Theo could somehow lodge his grapple hook onto the ledge, he could pull himself up. If the water weren't so cold Theo may have decided against it, but in the circumstances, he considered it to be the best plan he had.

He was confident in his aim most of the time, but it wasn't often that he had to do this in the water. Concentration was the key here, for one slip

could mean the end of his evening's work and a very difficult morning with his surly landlord. Theo leant back in the water, twirled the rope in his hand and hurled the grapple hook at the windowsill. This time, like every time, his aim was true. The hook lodged itself into the frame and remained motionless. Theo silently punched the air as he contemplated the warmth of Larsson's cabin. Keeping a firm hold on the rope Theo swiftly shimmied up it and into the cabin.

Theo sniggered at the grandeur that Captain Larsson lived in, though he was fairly certain that he had hardly paid for any of it. Everything about the room was ornate, from the bedstead right down to the pen he kept his log with. This was something that Theo was particularly drawn to, so he decided to have a quick peek. As he flicked through the pages, one thing in particular caught his eye.

*"Dunno what's been happenin' to me loot, but I'll be darned if I let it happen again. Gotta double me patrols or risk losing another shipment to whatever landlubber dares lay 'is 'ands on me goods. I've heard tell it's some snotty brat named Theo. If that's true I be lookin' to run 'im through with me cutlass next time I find 'im. Nobody gets the better of me on my ship, 'specially some yellow-bellied kid who doesn't even show 'is face."*

This concerned Theo slightly. He thought that there was honour amongst thieves, but who on earth had told Larsson that Theo was the one behind this?

It reminded Theo of how keen people seemed to be to turn each other in at the moment. It was the same as the concerns Blackheart had been raising privately and Theo was at a loss to explain it. Theo was no stranger to tests like these, but he could never be sure that his luck would not run out one day.

Theo turned away from the log and grabbed Larsson's key, which was lying right next to it. He initially decided against looting the room for any more goods, lest Captain Larsson come back into his cabin and find them missing. At least with just the key gone there was a chance he would think he had merely misplaced it. However, as he was about to leave, he spied something that his greedy eyes would never be able to pass up.

On the table was a beautifully jewelled necklace that appeared to be one of a kind. The purest gold was beset with exquisite sapphires that glinted in the moonlight that shone through the windows. Feeling giddy at the price he could get for it Theo pocketed it without further hesitation before making his exit.

Theo descended the grapple, unhooked it from the ship and swam back into shore. Now he had what he wanted he could move to find Larsson's stash of goods.

His crew may have become greater in number, but that meant that there was merely an increase in dunderheads to outsmart, which wasn't overly difficult. Theo waltzed past them with consummate ease, eventually coming to one of the spots where he knew Captain Larsson often hid his wares. He hadn't hidden them here for a while, so Theo's instinct led him to here. He ascended the crates and floated around behind them, where it was difficult for all but those who knew they were there to trace the contents. Eventually, after much shimmying around, Theo came to a crate marked with a black handprint, which was the mark of Captain Larsson whenever he delivered a fresh shipment. Using Larsson's key Theo opened the crate.

Inside was a sight that amazed even Theo. He had dared to hope for a good haul judging by the size of the crate, but even Theo could not have dared to hope for a better amount than this. Larsson was going all out on this one, for the crate was loaded with the finest exotic foods and textiles. This pleased Theo, who had enough room in his specially adapted travelling cloak to fit the entire amount in with room to spare. Theo estimated a value of around five thousand florins, which would cover the rent easily beyond even Easter. He grinned widely as he emptied the crate's contents into his cloak and made his way out of the crates. He was forever grateful to his fence, Fergus, for introducing him to this magic cloak that could hold vast quantities of items

without weighing down the wearer. The price he paid may have been steep, but the investment had paid off many times over.

He usually replaced keys, but Theo decided to let Larsson realise his loss when it was too late. Just for good measure Theo made his way back up to the guard captain's office and removed his own payment from Larsson. This would be sure to cause trouble between the two, but Theo had no concern for them. All he cared about was his self in a world that had never cut him any slack or shown him any kindness or compassion. That was how it was and that was how it would always be. Putting faith in others was for weak people and love for those who had lost all sense of reason. Those sorts of pathetic thoughts only got in the way of profit anyway, so Theo saw no reason to risk his livelihood for anyone, for what people existed in the world who were worth that risk?

Having now laden himself down with the entire contents of Larsson's treasure chest, Theo proceeded back to Warehouse One, where he first entered the site and where he also knew he could get away without much chance of being noticed. Leaving was a formality, despite the extra weight that Theo was now carrying. He was still physically strong despite the fact he couldn't swordfight to save his life. He took one final look around before he climbed back over the wall, in satisfaction of another job well done (*I am*

*incredible*). Turning back to face the wall Theo vaulted over it and landed gracefully on the grass outside.

He may have pulled the job off, but Theo's work was not yet complete. He still needed to fence his merchandise so that he could pay his landlord in a few hours. It was time to go and pay a visit to Fergus the Fiddler, as Theo liked to call him, so called not for his musical ability but for his ability to con even the most untrusting of people. His weakness was that he was even more useless with a weapon than Theo, which he found out to his horror when Theo threatened a few months ago to run him through with a carving knife. Since then, Theo had enjoyed exceedingly favourable treatment by Fergus's standards.

Just before he set off, Theo thought he heard a rustling in the bushes behind him. As he turned sharply on the spot to look around, he could have sworn he saw someone wearing a travelling cloak not dissimilar to his own retreat around a corner. It was so slight a vision that Theo wondered whether he had imagined it. He thought to himself that it really was a sign of the times if a mind as grounded in reality as Theo's were to have strange visions. He decided that he had best fence his goods quickly and get some sleep before the landlord called round, then these hallucinations would stop. Satisfying himself with that thought, Theo stalked off into the darkness.