

## Chapter Two

Copé opened his eyes to blackness. He couldn't see anything, were his eyelids parted? It mattered not; the end was the same. He could see nothing. A large part of him desperately wanted to panic. Another part of him wanted to do nothing at all. That one seemed to be the deciding factor. On his back, he topped his fingers over the ground and squirmed a little. His body pivoted around like it would for a man trying to get comfortable. *This definitely isn't the bed I left myself on*, thought the thief. Fingers caressing beneath at the floor for a time, he felt something damn-near splinter into his skin.

That was enough to know it was wood. Copé arched his back up, like a dead man resurrected, and sat. An aching feeling became heavily apparent. His hand cradled the back of his head. He felt a large egg-shaped bruise but knew that was only the least of it. This was the aftereffects of a far worse head injury he was feeling. A lot of him wanted to drop back and slumber like he had never even awoken. He'd deal with the problems when his mind sobered.

All it took was a bump to render this thought too foolish to consider. Copé felt himself lift into the air for a second before falling back down. His head ached even more, but beside the pain was the feeling of fear. Not only was he moved out of the home of Azlak Temps, but he was still in the process of being moved. The winnie of a horse made everything else follow. He could hear every stamp it made. The sound of the man at the front slapping at it with the reigns to make it gallop faster, Copé heard that as well.

He felt it when the wheels hit rock. He, himself, was in the bed of the carriage. Copé felt more assured after this. If there was one thing, he knew better than most, it was how to paint the scenery. Copé felt around in the dead of night. A tarp is what shielded him from the night and gave him

darkness. Secrat could've easily thrown it off, but that would have caught the attention of whoever it was that snatched him up from the merchant's house. Or could it have been the merchant? Copé knew damn-well he threw enough knives in the bastard to kill three men, but could Azlak Temps amount to four?

It didn't matter. If the merchant was still alive, Secrat would kill the last of him. Or better yet, put a knife to his throat with the combination code as the demand. Toucan Veras would never condone torture, but Toucan wasn't there. Copé felt around his environment, the walls of the carriage were wooden planks. Large gaps were between each of them, and Copé could feel a draft of cold air from the outside. He knew what he had to do. The thief crawled slowly to the far-end of the carriage. Feeling around his waist, one of his many daggers remained strapped at his right side. Between his teeth, it went as he lifted the left corner of the tarp. This act was done with care, so as not to attract the driver. Another big bump happened and once more, Copé's head felt like it was on fire. He lowered his head down for a second, but only a second. It was time for action, and at that thought, Copé climbed over to the outside of the carriage, hanging on with his feet between the wooden planks.

The wind slapped against him. It did very little to alleviate the pain he was feeling. The chilliness of the outside air caused by the carriage's rapid pace felt refreshing. There was no time to cringe or take enjoyment in anything, however. Instead, Copé poked his head to see if he could have a look at the driver. It was almost as dark as it was beneath the tarp, but the stars and the moon lent just enough to distinguish the figures. There was nothing else he could see, only two heads and two average-framed bodies. This meant that neither were the merchant.

Copé had one theory about who they could have been. The Red Flux wasn't the only troupe in the unprotected wilderness. The tamest, they might have been, however. If what he thought was true, he was in-trouble, but he also had a chance at redemption. Maybe he would not leave his first outing with wealth, but he might leave with their heads on a pike. Toucan may not have liked murder, but even he

would make an exception for the swine that riddled about the forests. Their deaths would mean more than coin.

Copé shimmied more and more toward the front of the carriage. The horses galloped at such a very fast pace that he struggled to keep his footing. In-fact, at one instance, he lost it and had to rely on his arms to keep himself from falling off from the carriage. Before long, Secrat Copé was in arm's reach of the man holding the reigns. In earshot as well, but neither of them spoke a word. Copé took a look at the scenery around him. It was too dark for him to see, but something seemed familiar about the place. At the very least, he was certain they had long-since left Acera.

The blade sat, tightly clenched between the thief's teeth. His eyes could vividly see the outline of the man's neck. Everything felt clearer than ever. The adrenaline flowing through his veins. All the pain and anguish this night had given, in all ceased to matter. He plucked the knife out of his mouth and looked at it. A certain fascination with the knife, like he had never seen it before, but that left soon. In his hands, he drove the small dagger to the side of the man's neck. It went into his skin like it was meant to be there. Two star-crossed lovers long-since separated, but now brought together; blade and flesh.

"Ah, fuck," were the only words that the man could utter.

They would be his last words.

He flinched though, and that was enough to make all the difference. His forearm rudely struck Copé in the side of the skull. Never so weak and fragile was the skull. Copé fell off of the carriage and onto the hard ground. Down and down, and down and down, Copé landed into some bushes. The scrapes and bruises stung, but they weren't fatal. His head had just about had it though.

After all of this, Copé wanted to be home at the Flux.

It wasn't over though, not yet. There was more to this night. Another man was in that carriage. And the element of surprise was gone.

Secrat fought back to a vertical stance. It was something that was becoming much too hard for him to do. He felt around for a blade.

There was none left on his person.

Hand-to-hand wasn't his specialty, but if he could fend off the man long enough, he would be able to pluck the knife out from the other guy's neck and end this.

The horse's gallops silenced.

Copé readied himself.

His stance was firm, and his fingers tightly clenched into a fist. With everything he had overcome in this night alone, there was no way that he'd let it end now.

“Secrat!?” the voice of the man in the carriage cried out. “Secrat!? What in the hell were you thinking? Do you realize what you have done?”

Those all sounded more like statements than they did questions. Secrat Copé started to realize why this area seemed so familiar. The voice of the man belonged to Lukas Lewis, a fellow Red Flux. But, why was he in that carriage with that bad man he killed?

Lukas and Copé came face to face. Lewis seemed terrified and anguished with fear, but Secrat struggled even to keep his head up.

“Secrat!?” Lewis yelled for a second time.

All Copé did was smile at him.

After all, ... he was home.

Secrat Copé sat handcuffed to a chair.

His head still hurt, but it was better. He hadn't the faintest clue how he had gotten himself into this predicament. Lukas Lewis tried to explain it all to him earlier, but his head ached too much to listen. Since then, he had sobered up from his stupor and was ready to hear rhyme and reason. Reason appeared to be giving him the silent treatment.

There was no one-home for The Red Flux. They traveled as a troupe, and when they were together, that was home enough. That wasn't where Lukas had taken Copé, however.

This wasn't The Red Flux, wide-open and free.

This was a small, desolate, and dreary cabin. It smelled damp with the odor of mold and cedar, and there was fungus sealing the jamb of the door on the other side of the room. The chair Copé was shackled to rested on the wall opposite the door. The thief tilted his head, resting it some on his shoulder. A small window engulfed by moss was to his left, small crack in the top-right corner of the glass. Copé forgot about it and laid his head back against the wall. It brought a stinging sensation, but he didn't care. It was worth being able to rest his head.

The door to the cabin started to be cracked open. The force it took to push it open meant there was no way it could have been done discreetly. Secrat flinched fast, rattling the handcuffs as he did so.

He wasn't afraid.

It was more to say that he was caught off-guard. The man entered the room, taking note of how grimy and smudged the walls looked. He walked with a purpose. His dark black boots damn-near worn to the sole.

It was Father Toucan Veras.

Toucan walked the way Copé wanted to walk. The thief had far too much ego to come to grips with that fact, but it was true. The leader of the Red Flux had presence about him like nobody he had ever seen before. When he entered the room, eyes lent themselves to him. They belonged to him, like a

showman thief, stealing the attention off whoever else was in the room and putting it on himself. A bald head and a thick black beard, a large sword sat at his side in a scabbard. Olea is what he called the blade, named after the murderer of his deceased wife. The sword was enormous, shaped and structured like a scimitar with a deep curve at the end. Gifted with an enormous blade, Toucan made the sword look like one of Copé's knives.

A hyperbole, but the statement stood. Father Veras was a hefty size.

He was the type that was wise about concealing it as well. The rest of The Flux wore armors pillaged from either one of the five major cities; Toucan wore baggy robes. Nobody had too much of an idea how muscular he was.

Concealment made him easy to underestimate.

Toucan closed the door behind him before turning his attention over to the restrained thief. Copé wanted to rub the nape of his neck or clasp his hands over his head out of distress and discomfort, but he could do neither. Toucan's eyes were cold and serious. The white of his eyes blood-shot and the rest looked black as night. "You've really outdone yourself on this one, Copé." No inflection in his voice.

Toucan's temper and intimidation were well-noted. He rarely showed it, but when he did, it was bad enough for nobody to soon forget. Copé felt no fear, not particularly. He felt discomfort and vulnerability. Which was almost the same.

Everything was starting to piece itself together for him. His recent traumas blocked some of it out, but he had no doubt the reason he was keyed to a chair was for the murder of a fellow Flux. Lukas Lewis brought him here after and confessed Father the sins of his adopted son, and now, Toucan was here to pass his judgment.

"Why, Father, its fancy meeting you here, very, in-fact. I wish you would have mailed in a letter about your arrival, for, I haven't cleaned the place in ages! Over there, you'll notice the lovely décor, most vivaciously inscribed walls, marked and scrawled with sharp precision by fungi!" Secrat offered

up a cocky smirk. His heart wasn't in the sarcasm, but he tried his best not to let that show. For his Father's sake, of course. Even beyond all the other responsibilities Toucan had to contend with, like keeping the troupe together or being a strong leader, Copé was his son.

The young thief was born and reared before them, poised for greatness, and Father would fight above all else to protect him. But Toucan looked at Secret Copé with a strange look on his face, a look that signified confusion or bewilderment. Copé maintained his smile.

There was simply no way his father could stay mad at him.

Then, in one loving swoop, Toucan proved otherwise, swinging his fist like a club to Copé's face. This wasn't the smack a father gave his son when he stepped out of line. The punch felt more like something Copé might have expected from a sworn enemy. The chair flipped over to its side off the impact, and with Copé handcuffed to the front left-leg of the chair, everything came down, crushing his hand. Copé let out a cry of anguish.

"Elson Mans, does that name sound familiar to you!?"

Some inflection was in his voice now; it was anger and brewing frustration. Copé continued to whimper at the pain in his left hand. He had confronted a lot of pain in a day. He hadn't enjoyed any of it.

But on the bright side, thanks to a newly discovered "bendability" to his hand, he was able to free himself from one of the handcuffs. The bottom of the chair leg was thicker than at the top, had that not been the case, he could have freed himself from the other. Toucan mumbled something under his breath. He didn't seem at all amused by his son's master escape.

"Put out your hand," Toucan whispered softly.

Secret refused. He hid his hand like an animal hiding meat from a rival pack.

“Put out your hand,” he repeated. The statement carried more weight than it should have. If Toucan wanted to hurt Copé, he would have. This was his way of letting Copé have the choice. Copé put his hand in the air in-front of Toucan.

“Uh-ah, on the floor,” Toucan said, almost sounding nurturing and loving.

“Flat.”

Copé did as he was told. He put his hand down on the floor, flat. It looked like his thumb and index finger were already badly swollen.

Toucan raised his large boot up. Copé braced himself but didn’t pull away. His father drove it down on Copé’s mangled hand. The yell from Copé was loud. He whimpered loudly soon after like a baby, hyperventilating and tearful. His head lying manically twitching against the floor and the chair carried on his back. There was no reason to Toucan’s statement. He wasn’t looking for signs Copé wanted to be forgiven or felt remorse. He merely wanted to hurt him some more.

“I don’t want to hear your comments!” Toucan yelled. It was a wet-yell, unrestrained and crackly. He talked plainly after: “I don’t want to see that smirk on your face. I don’t want to see any of it. Last night was the most disgraceful night for The Red Flux. Do you know?” Veras stopped. He couldn’t seem to find the words in his blind rage. “I sent Lukas to finish stealing one of the biggest hauls we’ve ever had. Do you know how many mouths that would have fed? Of course not, in-fact, that doesn’t ever even cross your mind. None of that benefits you, and thus, it doesn’t faze you.”

If Toucan would have made eye-contact to Copé, he would have seen  
Copé was too busy whimpering over his gestating anguish to give a damn.

“Lukas, little Luke, ... we’ve known him since he was a small child, since you were a small child,” Toucan stopped once more and looked over at Copé for the first time since beginning his little speech. Apparently looking to obtain some sort-of emotional effect, his eyes looked even more haggard and

bloodshot up closely. “He woke me up to tell that my son, who I picked up off the streets when he had nothing, was responsible for the death of a fellow member.”

Copé stopped trying to squirm free from the chair for a moment and looked up at Father. “If they were supposed to be doing this ‘big haul’,” Copé tried to stress the part with hand-gestures but failed terribly, “then why did they become involved in mine? I was there for Azlak Temps.”

Toucan continued to look at Copé as he spoke: “They found you in the house of Gruff Helms. His bloody remains lay not far away.” He turned his back from the young thief and walked over toward the window, transfixed on the moss. “You never bothered with names or specifics, you just acted, always have,” he said, and then, with finality added: “But this time, you went too far.” “I made a mistake.” Copé admitted. He didn’t like that; admitting fault. “You know how many mistakes others in The Red Flux have made? Tell me how many times someone went looking for coin and came back with nothing more than the horse they left on? In-fact, you should be thanking me, I killed that son of a bitch! A feat that I shall stress was no easy-task, and only made it easier for them to steal the riches off the bastard. They ransacked the place, sooner or later, they found the combination ... they found the treasures. You’re welcome.”

“They weren’t able to find it. They were sent to extort the riches from him.

We had something on him. As it turns out, his money wasn’t exactly the cleanliest, and if the rest of Acera had wind of that, he would have been ripped apart and had his head put on a pike. Lukas said that they were really concerned about you. All you had was a concussion, but you looked worse than that. Like you were about to kill-over and weren't in your right mind. But that doesn't excuse what you did, Copé.”

“He won’t be missed.”

“That isn’t the fucking point!” Toucan yelled. His eyes grew wider, redder with rage than disappointment. Copé could even see the veins in his neck beginning to pop out. “We don’t kill in The

Red Flux. This isn't something to keep us from finding misfortune. It's a matter of morals, something that I am starting to feel like I failed to stress while raising you."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that in one-night, you killed a brother. And you killed two people beforehand. You don't belong with us."

Copé's ears pricked once he heard those words. An influx of fear started inside of him. There was nothing else for him. A thief was all that he knew how to be. It was his home. The Red Flux was his home. Toucan Veras turned his back and started away from Secrat, but the thief wouldn't accept that. Copé crawled with the chair still attached to him. He grabbed Toucan's ankle with his uninjured hand and pleaded with him. "Please, please, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," it was lies, and Copé knew it, but Toucan knew it as well, but he didn't care, all he cared about was having his way. He couldn't deal without the troupe. His father looked to have little sympathy for him. His eyes seemed apathetic and uncaring, but Copé knew there had to be something beneath all of that. He had to be hiding his feelings. Copé was his son, dammit.

Secrat looked in his eyes. Tears streamed down Copé's cheeks, dripping down his chin and dampening the wood floor. Almost entirely because the pain that he felt in his left hand. Toucan didn't know that. To him, Copé felt deep remorse for his actions.

Toucan dropped to one knee and looked at Copé. "Find a way to right your wrongs," he said somberly. "I don't know how you'll do it, and I wouldn't tell you if I did. This is your mistake, and now it is up for you to find your way."