

Chapter One

Secrat Copé could feel the decadent blood drip down his arm and off his elbow. Things hadn't gone according to plan and the bastard wife of a merchant came at him with a knife. She managed to slash him a good one too, right after a punch to the jaw for good measure. This all, of course, happened before Copé had a chance to muffle her screams and slit her throat.

Father Toucan Veras wouldn't be happy about that. Subtracting from the world was looked down on in the Red Flux, but he'd have to understand the situation. Even still, Copé anticipated an inevitable shouting match approaching his way. That meant he'd have to savor his heist and make it all worth it.

And so, he took time admiring his handiwork and appreciating his quick reaction time. If he would have been one second slower, the broad would have squealed like a piggy and blown the whole heist. At a wince of pain, Copé looked to his bleeding arm and supposed he might not have been quick enough. His lock-picking wasn't nearly as stealthy as it could have been either, but he handled his mistake well, and it was only his first time pillaging on his own.

These mistakes were to be expected.

Grabbed one leg and the other before he began dragging the broad's dead body into the corner of the house that the moon's glistening didn't bring to light. Copé looked around but could only see what the glassless windows let the moon in the sky expose, and that wasn't much. That didn't bother him though, as he put one foot in-front of the other, he already knew there wasn't anything that would surprise him too much. A keen-eye was mandatory for the task at-hand, and he was proud to say that he didn't have to wait for that to develop over time. He was already skilled. Very much so.

He felt around the pouch in his leggings for a match. A match was such an amusing contraption, far ahead of its time, white phosphorous on a pine stick that caused flame with friction. They were very

rare in most of Maharris, except in the Thieves' Network out in the Whispey Deserts, as well as some other black markets.

Some also used white phosphorous to poison or cause severe liver damage but that was neither here nor there.

The light brought a lot more to view, for example, Secrat thought the floor had felt like something other than dirt but hadn't known that his feet were below an Italian rug. If I wanted to rob pompous jackasses, I'd have gone to Italina, not Acera, thought Secrat to himself, but knew better than to say anything aloud. The rugs were expensive, anywhere between one-hundred coins to a thousand, depending on potency, purity, or vibrancy of fabric, as well as the artistic value in the design. He bid it adieu and paid it little mind as there was no possible way for him to steal it. Much too heavy to move by himself. A wooden desk was to his left, a quill and inkwell atop it along with a piece of parchment, scrawled upon it were various names, presumably individuals the merchant had done deals with over the years.

Secrat's eyes skimmed through the names, a couple, here and there he might have recognized, but nothing noteworthy, it was hard for him to tell the Happick's from the Carlit's when it came to families he robbed. The sound of ruffling leaves almost caused for Secrat to scamper about; a strong wind was picking up outside. A dead body here and there, Secrat could NOT afford to be caught, Acera's civilians wouldn't sentence him to death, but their prisons were a dump.

Copé continued walking through the house, noticing some of the abnormalities while doing so, such as the little trinkets of useless junk lining the walls. Bizarre looking masks, crude illustrations, and other useless items that merchants tended to deem as absolute delicacies. Maybe they knew something Secrat didn't, but Copé had no interest in such items. He was only looking for one thing and only had the faintest idea of where to find it.

All he knew was that individuals found themselves to be cleverer than they truly were. In-general, that is. They tried to go with eccentric and sporadic hiding places for their wealth and fortune, but oftentimes ended up choosing the same places as several other citizens of the town would have. They had the same culture, similar life-styles and influence, so it was understandable. For larger cities, like Italina, Hardan and Jalint, it was easy to judge simply by using the popular consensus as a rule of thumb, but Acera was smaller, and therefore more individualized in-terms of trivial things like where wealth was hidden. Secrat noticed one of the houses in Acera had an especially magnificent garden, which made him guess if he kept ripping at flowers, he'd eventually discover a small fortune.

Before long, he hid his hand over the match, shielding the light from potential onlookers, and carried on his way through a small walkway, leaving the Italian rug and welcoming cold, hard dirt-floor. The walls were dull and abstract of color, made excellently out of sand, water, and clay, but there were several pieces of décor. Secrat didn't see anything worth taking, rather, it was all artsy and glorified junk. He eventually went onto find a more robust piece; at last, an illustration that looked to depict the Aeonian's on top of Jalint's mountain. *Veras would be pleased*, Secrat joked in his mind, knowing full-well there was nothing Father hated more than the theorizing folk did about those magical beings. Father Toucan Veras found it to all be a little too hokey for his taste, whereas Secrat approached it with apathy more than much else.

He didn't deny the existence of The Aeonians, but he really didn't care either which way.

The Thief clutched one of his wrists with his hand, keeping himself from the temptation of stealing the painting, knowing its quality wasn't worth his debauchery. No, Secrat was looking to rob this bastard merchant blind, and that meant tackling his whole wealth. Pockets and pockets full, big pockets too, a big characteristic in most clothes worn by The Red Flux, and even both hands for good

measure, whatever coins Copé would have chance to leave with, he would. There was a doorway to his right, he moved his hand away from his match and shined it over the door.

This wasn't your standard every-day wooden door with hollow insides. Something was very strange about it; elegant and kempt for an abode that was otherwise neither those things. The door looked to be made out of copper and appeared durable and resistant. Where would this room lead? Would it lead to the master bedroom, or was it his riches being hidden in plain sight? He looked to the door-handle, for durability and strength meant nothing if the lock mechanism could be rendered useless, but what was this?

This was like nothing he had ever seen before. There was no door-handle for him to behold, and no hole on the door to try at picking the lock. Instead, there was a small, circular device where the handle belonged, and it was every bit as small and feeble as a keyhole. Secrat brought his eyes closer to the contraption, inspecting it in disbelief and curiosity. There were three rows of numbers, each counting in-order from one to ten, and capable of being easily rotated.

It didn't take very long for Secrat Copé to figure out what he was dealing with, he needed a three-digit code that would provide him with the means to divulge the room's contents. The hand not toting the flame descended his side and felt the hilt of one of his knives, resting sheathed in one of the many leather scabbards that made up his attire. There was one strapped to the side of his left leg, and two on each side of his waist. His training made him very accustomed to knives. No doubt, he'd be able to get the merchant to blurt out the code, given the right "persuasion," but afterward, he'd have to kill him.

Toucan might understand the lady as self-defense. If he would have let her live, there's a chance she could have identified him and put himself and Red

Flux in-danger, the members lived in the unprotected wilderness outside Acera and other major cities, but a lot of them still wandered within them for reasons. They read the local papers, kept up with the current gossip, and screwed the occasional lady or gent that tickled their fancy, among other things.

With that knowledge, there was only one foreseeable alternative to help him unravel the means of entry and that was finding the numbers written down somewhere through the house.

He didn't even know for certain the merchant wrote down the grouping of numbers, but it was probable; a confessed insecurity against ones' ability to remember things, but Copé didn't have the haziest idea where to look. His own intuition told him that the combination was probably written somewhere on a piece of parchment in the merchant's master bedroom, but that was something he didn't want to accept.

If this were the case, then, there was no-chance whatsoever he could finish the heist without killing a second special someone.

And so, with a strong stubbornness, he backtracked to the Italian rug and lifted it up. Beneath it, he found nothing, at the underside of the rug, shining his match down to see if he might have written it down there, he found nothing.

There was the writing desk! Secrat went to it and began riffling through the pages and pages of scroll. Names and lots of information, but nothing that seemed relevant to Copé at the time.

Worse off, Secrat found his finger cut by one of the papers, a stinging sensation more aggravating than having a sword thrust into ones' chest! He brought himself back into the hallway of the merchant's house and began plucking one precious item after another from his wall, quietly tossing them onto the rug. Could have been one mask or item with sentimental value to the merchant where he'd stash the numbers.

It was a slow and quiet investigation, only one hand free, with the other carrying the aflame pine stick, but it didn't lead to any better results.

Secrat brought his knife out again and drove the blade into the Aeonian illustration, hoping to find something hidden within its confines. There was nothing...

Nothing. Nothing? NOTHING!? except the sound of a door closing at the other end of the hallway.

Secrat blew out the flame of his match, bringing them both into the darkness.

The merchant didn't notice Secrat Copé in his dreamy stupor, or at least, he didn't do anything to suggest it. The man might have seen a light, but that was it, and as far as he knew, Copé was his wife. This was not one of the loveliest images, but it was a logical one. His dame either never came to bed or left and never came back. The merchant, curious about the whereabouts of his companion at such an ungodly hour, went looking for her.

This was only natural, but his reaction after finding her could be very bad for Copé. The footsteps of the merchant as his feet stamped the ground were loud. They hit with such oomph that they flattened whatever came in his path.

The idea of tripping wasn't even brought into fruition.

Before long that skill would be handy, thought Secrat, thinking about all of the items that he threw on his living room rug. The thief moved haplessly in the blackened night, making good care not to step in-front of windows, or anywhere that could bring him in the view of the merchant.

He past the desk but kept close to it as he walked on the rug, knowing for sure where he threw nothing for him to trip on. At the end of the desk, he lowered himself to a crouched position and waited for the man to leave the hallway, and he did. "Jen, Jen," he whispered a couple of times almost quiet enough to be under his breath. Secrat wondered why he was whispering, considering that it was

his home, nobody was asleep, and it was Secrat that had to worry about being discovery. The girl didn't reply. *Odd*, Secrat thought to himself sarcastically, remembering the smell of flowers on her nightgown. *I wonder where she ran off to*, Secrat jokingly said in his head, but then felt a certain reality enter the sanctity of his mind.

Where had she gotten off to? Or more accurately, where was it in the room Copé left her? His eyes followed the sound of the man's breathing, if he continued in the direction he was heading, he would eventually come to his scullery, and thankfully, there were no dead bodies there. (to Copé's knowledge.) "Lady, where did you run off to? Left us all hot and bothered like that, it's not good manners."

There was a snort that followed soon after from the man. He didn't make it to the scullery. Not right away, of course, because there remained the pesky fact that almost all the merchant's decorations had been scattered about his house. The man stumbled over something or another, and Copé could hear him falling and crushing whatever it was he fell on. It sounded like a mask, but it could have been the shiny diamond encrusted skull or the glass Copé remembered pushing that way. Whatever, it mattered not, unless it somehow sent the man out of consciousness, but Copé doubted that fate would be so kind to him. "Dammit, ah, Jen, what is this?" He yelled out, but there was only silence given to him as response.

Secrat worked to silence his breathing as he began to navigate past the desk, his sights set back toward the hallway. "Where the hell, what did I just fall on, so, help me, if it's what I think it is, then, but, why would you even in the first place, dammit, light up a torch or something." The merchant yammered on-and-on, a few mumbled words while he tried to return to his feet, and in that time, Secrat scurried quietly off through the hallway, hoping the merchant's confusion would be enough to buy him some time.

Once passing the door with the number lock on it, Secrat lit another pine stick and hurried more toward the master bedroom. The combination would most certainly be in there, under his bed, perhaps, or his pillow, maybe in a noticeable item of sentiment, it mattered not where, just if Copé would be able to find it in the merchant's absence.

He grabbed the handle of the door and twisted, trying to be as quiet as he could. The door squeaked a bit, so he opened it slower. It was densely lit in this room. That was the first thing Copé noticed. A lot of candles spread sporadic around the area.

Once his eyes were allotted the means to adjust, they beheld a more appealing series of ornaments. Not one, not even two, but three broads resting, unclothed and naked atop the merchant's fine, violet-colored blanket. They were marvelous and seemed to be endless with creases and crevices that couldn't be described by words alone. The cover looked nice as well.

"Uh," is the only thing that Secrat could muster the strength to speak.

They were asleep. That was good, but it didn't change the fact they shouldn't have been there in the first place. The merchant, ... the merchant, Azlak Temps, that was his name, was married and (while Secrat didn't share their idea of the word) happily so, but happily married men didn't usually fuck random whores. There was a hole in the plot, but Copé couldn't find a way to fill it. All that he cared about was finding the numbers, getting some gold, and getting out of sight. That was The Red Flux's mantra, or at least, it would be if the Red Flux was conspicuous enough to have one.

He crept quietly into the bedroom, winking the whores would bring nothing good. He admired their bodies from afar but tried his best not to get mesmerized in their lustrous figures.

The bed was large. Big enough for all three sluts, one more slut, and of course, the merchant, but the ladies were being spacious with their limbs. This made it difficult to see whether there was anything hiding beneath a pillow. And so, with a heavy heart, Secrat began to wander more feverishly about the room; a decent size, the room, that is, enough that a bed made for a king would only take about one-third the room. Otherwise though, there wasn't a whole lot else to see.

Merchants oftentimes migrated from city to city. It all depended on where would pay more for whatever product they had in abundance. It made sense why his abode would be empty. Except Temps took the time to take out all his stupid souvenirs and set them all-over his hallway and even rolled out his Italian rug. Why was this room so empty?

Secrat turned where he had shut the door behind him, and the loophole filled itself for him. On this side, the door had no handle. All it had was a large keyhole. The thief pushed at the door. He poked into the keyhole as if his index finger was part key. It was not. No windows in this room. Secrat couldn't help but smile. He was screwed beyond restitution. It would have been easy to knock down the door; one or two kicks and it would be off its hinges. This couldn't be seen as an option though. The merchant would be alerted, and he'd absolutely wake up all five of the ladies. As skilled as he was, Copé doubted he could fend off and fight naked ladies coming at him. He didn't know if he wanted to fend them off either.

A small jolt of fear struck his chest. He washed it away shortly. Certain necessities had their way with being a thief, and one of them was the ability to act even when it seemed all was lost. He started around the room. If there was anything that could help him in the situation, he wanted to find it. He blew out the pine stick in his hand and threw it down on the ground. It wasn't like he would need it. The only thing in the room was the bed, the sluts, and the candles.

Copé went closer to the bed, looking over the feminine tabbies. He expected for one of them to wake up and make a jump at him at any moment.

His left hand touched the hilt of a knife strapped to his waist. He dropped to his knees and looked beneath the bed. A wooden box sat about midway underneath the mattress. The box was barely close enough for him to grasp with his arms stretched as far as they could reach. No combinations and no keyholes, Copé took refuge in that one singular fact. The numbers to the vault would most definitely be here.

The thief readied himself to open it. Everything felt slower. The moment was being preserved as if it was some special occasion.

Secret Copé heard the door handle turning behind him. He didn't have to think about it. All he had to do was react. He shoved the box back down under the bed and joined it. Hiding like a small child from the boogeyman. Azlak Temps opened the door, his feet being the only thing Copé could see. They were bare, without shoes, and dirty. His ankles were thick as well. Temps was a heavier fellow. He walked in slow.

"You'll have to excuse me, ladies. Our dearest Jen has taken it upon herself to stray out of my ever-so humble abode. I have to fetch her." He followed his words with a laugh. A nasally laugh that sounded more obnoxious than joyous. Copé wondered how much the man had to pay these ladies for their company. He thought about how that wealth would soon belong to the Red Flux.

Azlak walked deeper into the room. And then, something happened.

The sound resembled a small twig breaking beneath the paws of a grizzly bear. Copé watched from the under the bed while Temps moved his foot. The pine-stick he had thrown down had shattered away into something like soot.

He could hear the loud groan from the large man.

“THIEF!”

Every bit of the fear Copé had ever felt paled in-comparison to this moment.

It was the shock of it all that really scared him, but once more, he knew he had to react swiftly. He rolled out from beneath the bed and leapt to his feet.

Otherwise, he'd be dragged out by Temps, giving him the advantage. “Look what the cat dragged in,” the mammoth-sized man yelled out. Copé assumed that was what he said, but he wasn't for certain. There was so much blubber on him that his words sounded muffled even when he enunciated.

Under the bed, Secrat couldn't even have begun to appreciate the weight that Azlak Temps brought with him. The excess of flesh stood naked in-front him; except for a small pair of tan-colored clothe acting as shorts. His size was insurmountable by even all the broads and Copé combined. Copé wondered how Temps managed not to kill them during sex. He didn't have long to think though as Temps let out a grunt upon making a lunge in his direction.

Copé moved out of the way. His speed would prove an advantage. He readied a blade in his hands before making a stab to Temps' ribcage. The knife pierced his belly like butter, and Copé felt his arm sinking into his stomach. The blood shot out fast, but Temps paid it little mind. The large man simply threw a clubbed fist at Copé, sending the thief spiraling in a daze. Copé struggled, haplessly trying to regain his composure. If he couldn't, the monstrous man would certainly make ends to his life. He was turned around, but behind him, Copé could hear the loud footsteps of Temps. He desperately threw a boot behind him. It connected, but whether it did much damage, Copé knew not.

The distinctive groan from Temps told him that it did. Secrat Copé turned around as fast as he could, only to run into a wall of fat, strung out like a clothesline. Copé fell off of his feet. He felt the back of

his head hit the hard, dirty ground. The view around him seemed to be fading. It was flickering like a candle at wit's end. He fought back to a seated position. If he fell out of consciousness, everything would be over. He looked up at Temps. The knife was still stuck in his gut like a splinter.

Copé let out a breath of air and watched the man run toward him. He rolled out of the way and shot back up to his feet. He thought Temps might have lost balance, but that was thinking too much like an optimist.

He waited for Azlak to turn around while he took another knife from his ensemble. This one had been strapped to his left-leg. Once Temps obliged, Secrat threw the knife at him. It pierced his skin and went into his stomach the same way the other had.

It didn't seem to bother him. It was nothing more than an inconvenience. Copé let out a sigh. He wanted to curse but didn't. He wanted to flee. Beyond all else and more than anything, he wanted to escape. His eyes went over to the door.

It was closed.

The key was most definitely on Temps' person, but that meant nothing.

"Stop your running, bug!" Azlak Temps yelled. "I'll crush your skull like nothing!"

The pain felt unbearable beyond all else. The ache from his head felt piercing, he was surely bleeding. Copé readied another knife in his hands. This one had been strapped on his right-leg. However, before he could do anything with it, Azlak threw a fist to his stomach. Copé leaned forward at his whim only to be taken down to his knees with an elbow to his back. The knife flung itself out of his hands as Azlak towered over him.

Copé looked in his eyes. They were eyes of ignorance and impractical strength. The look of somebody that knew he'd always be on the offensive.

Azlak looked at him for a moment. There was a sadistic grin on his fat face. A grimace came to his eyes momentarily as he plucked one knife out of his stomach and threw it to the ground. He grabbed the other and pulled it out as well. He didn't throw this one. Instead, Azlak held it by the handle and made a fist. His hand nearly swallowed the knife whole.

Copé felt a spark of fear jolt in him. It didn't look well for him. It didn't look well for his legacy. Raised by Toucan Veras, and in his first solo heist, he was offed by some merchant?

He was better than that.

And like somebody that was better than that, like somebody with the utmost of class, he drove his head into the giant's crotch like.

This seemed to get his attention, Temps dropped to one-knee holding his groin. "You fuck!"

The fuck mustered the strength to once more find his footing. His head felt like the Amisoic Seas, swishing and swashing in waves. He walked toward the door where Temps threw one of the knives. He picked that one up, the one he dropped earlier, and the one Temps had kept. He threw two of them at Temps' stomach. They punctured two more holes for blood to let out. The last one, he kept. This one belonged in the side of Temps' neck. Copé moved to him. As the blood left his sides, Temps seemed to understand it as his end. Copé didn't have the energy left to smile. All that was left in him was used to watch over near him, the knife in hand. Except, before he could add the final nail, Azlak Temps fell flat ... he was dead.

Secrat Copé looked away from him. The whores were there, lying unresponsive and lifeless to everything that had happened. Beads of sweat fell down Copé's neck. Sweat and blood. He dropped down. Under the bed, there was the box. That was where the combination numbers were. In the box was the key to all of the wealth. He slid it out weakly.

The box opened easily.

Inside, Copé's eyes wandered about the contents. Vials of all different shapes and sizes, all of them contained a brown powder Copé had definitely seen before. He flipped the box over, emptied it all out and looked around. No combination code to be seen.

He didn't have the energy in him to be upset. He didn't have the energy to do much of anything. The feeling of light-headedness overwhelmed all else. His fingers caressed the thigh of one of the ladies before he used her leg to pull himself up onto the bed. He crawled inside, beneath the covers, pushing and shoving between the drugged whores. That is where Secret Copé lost consciousness.