

Chapter Four

Copé and Christique spoke long after the Alsabenya shut down for the night. Everything quieted a lot into the blackness of the sky and the heated and humid weather discarded for something much chillier. None of the old guards in all their glory were roaming about, and the new guards, starting their shift, didn't recognize the thief. "Why did you decide to come to The Trading Network of all places?" Copé asked, he played around with his fingers while he walked. That was always a problem with him, having something to do with his hands. Christique walked with him. She knew what to do with her hands. They dangled at her side fine and well, much more comfortable and at peace with herself than he was.

"I can't say it was my first choice. There was a time when I wasn't exactly thinking about what would be best for me. I wanted to escape from doing something I knew was wrong." Christique had much more inflection in her voice than Copé did. She enunciated her words and carried herself the way a soldier did; proud and like she could take anything on. Satin must have been very strong people, or wherever Christique was from.

They continued to travel the land, the sand beneath their hands felt nice and cool. The Whispey Deserts were unfortunate and disparate in that regard. Hot and humid during the day and very cold in the night. There was no pleasing them. There was a certain harmony to seeing the desert deserted at night, or perhaps simply a lot quieter. Footprints were almost everywhere to be seen but that's almost all there was. Tables weren't simply empty. Tables were taken apart and stored into the tents and shacks of the sellers.

The paranoia of items being stolen at night was a real one. There were guards posted around various areas, even at night, but most of the thefts went unnoticed until it was much too late. That was the nature of the beast and it came with the territory. It was only to be expected that such a populated

area, crowded, and filled with items would occasionally be robbed. How crowded it was meant it was basically the duty of a thief to at least try and steal something.

Copé couldn't help but kick himself for the fact he had been caught in the act. He had been slipping as a thief, and that was difficult to swallow. Copé turned his attention over to the wonderful Christique. All things aside, the woman had an astounding beauty. A beauty too elegant for the brothels that Copé frequented, albeit never actually paid for. Her beauty was the sort one would expect to see in a castle, it was a beauty one would expect from royalty.

Christique threw her eyes over to Copé while they walked. "What are you thinking?" Secrat asked, a sinister smirk started up on his face. Christique retorted a similar smile as they neared her small abode.

Their night began.

2

The warmth of his body was astounding, the idea that somebody could be so hot inside and not combust. Her scent was on him, that exquisite scent, an intoxicating perfume that he couldn't help but find himself obsessing over. Her arms fall over his chest, bare and naked, and that gave him a feeling of strength and masculinity he had not recently felt. She was different in some way, some sort or another. She felt more in control. Superior. And what Copé found strange is how much he enjoyed that about her.

In bed, they slumbered. Half of them did. Secrat put his hand over the top of Christique's head. As if alluding to a softer side of himself, more loving and less shallow. Alas, as his fingers strolled down the brim of her neck, that was revealed as false. He felt and observed her body to be warm as well, like there was a fire in her that awaited the chance to set everything else in a blaze.

He felt down her neck some more until finding the string of her necklace. Although, it wasn't just a string at all, not for a gem as extraordinary as the one resting between her naked bosoms. She opted not to take it off. And Secrat, wanting not to draw any attention to it, was certain not to object.

The blackness obscured his vision some, but the light from the moon out the window illuminated just enough of the room for him to see her face. Her eyes were what concerned him the most. They needed to remain shut. He fiddled with the back of the necklace between his fingers. He hooked it with his index finger, carrying the back of it up her neck.

His heart was beating fast while his eyes intently stuck themselves to Christique's lids. If she awoke, no doubt, he could handle it, but he didn't especially want to. Her hair posed an issue, as did the way she rested her head on the side of the string. The only way to retrieve it would be by lifting her head up or swiping at it swiftly. Both meant he would have to cross his fingers and hope for the best. Copé creaked his teeth some as he began to lift her head. He did it cautiously, knowing it was more of a game of luck than it was doing anything right or wrong. Heavy sleeper or not heavy, those were the components that spelled out what Copé's night had the potential to be. If she was, Copé would leave with a priceless jewel and sex he didn't pay for. That was a fortunate night by all definition of the phrase. Either way, that's what Secrat imagined happening tonight, even if he had to kill her, but it'd be really perfect if he could avoid the conflict.

As he pulled the necklace more up, all his aspirations were thwarted at once. Christique yawned and then rolled to the other side, her back now facing the thief. That could have meant rolling out of the necklaces' clutches, but that was not to be. Instead, as positioning would have it, the necklace kept with her, but Copé held the gem in his hands, marveling at it.

The jolt of fear he felt in himself from Christique's movement was enough to keep him from attempting to take it off again. At least with that method. Instead, Copé moved his hand down the

bedside in search of his leggings. He found them at once, and then struggled free one of his knives.

The handle felt cold in his hands, unlike how his body felt. Still, the knife felt nice to hold; empowering. He knew that with the knife, he wouldn't have to endure any screams or cries or conflict.

Tightly in his hands, Secrat slid the knife near Christique's throat.

The look of it was nice.

At last, he acted. Cutting the necklace off from her neck. He pulled the gem free, taking the piece of string as well. He had it. At last.

Copé rolled out of the bed as carefully as he could. Naked, the thief wandered for his clothes, trying to let the light of the moon guide him. He found them easy, and before long, is fully clothed. There isn't much that he remembered about the inside of the shack. He didn't really pay much attention to it when he had the chance. Luckily, it was small enough to where he didn't really have to. He approached the doorway leading to the outside and turned the knob.

In seconds, Copé was out the house and making way toward his own. The cold night air and the moon loomed over him, but the warm feeling inside hadn't escaped him. His way back wasn't eventful at all, of course, but he did take the time to behold the gem in all its glory.

There was a lot of dirt and grime over it, as well as a certain dullness, but there was more to it than that. The gem was deliberately allowed to ruin itself, and there was no telling how much it was worth. He held it in the palm of his hand. The jewel was much heavier than it looked. Certain inscriptions appeared to be on it, but he couldn't make them out very well.

By the time Copé made it back to his small sector of Maharris, his small and insignificant shack that cost him the littlest number of coin.

He'd have to leave the Whispey Deserts once selling the necklace. That much was for certain. He doubted there was any chance of Christique finding him. He was intuitive when it came to those types of things. Like the soldiers and knights roaming the desert, she would be easy enough to evade. She didn't know where he lived after all, and when the crowd was out, it wasn't like he would stand out. Wasn't like she could do anything to him in the first place.

It was more about having a new lease on life, a rediscovery of old passion.

This wasn't a petty thievery for bread or a few coin. This was of value, and for the first time in a long time, the thief succeeded without any form of conflict.

Secrat smiled at that as he stopped at his bed.

It wasn't until the next morning Copé realized he had lost his flask.

3

The flask might not have been worth a whole lot, but there was a sentimental value to it. After all, the flask often contributed to Copé's intoxication.

That much was special, but it was still worth at least a considerable amount on its own. Copé hadn't ever had a chance to get it appraised at the thieves' network, but he expected the flask to be worth at least enough coin for it to be missed. Secrat had nicked it not long ago from a merchant during one of his overtly elaborate sale's pitches.

Copé sat, cooped up in his home, perched on his bed. He looked at the gem. He had scrubbed at it earlier with some warm water and the results had been pleasant. No doubt, the item was worth more than Christique was willing to let on. The thief admired its intricacies.

On it, there were scribblings the thief hadn't understood at first. But upon closer inspection, he could see they depicted a dragon. Such an outlandish and ridiculous concept. The dragon didn't have

an array of colors or much depicting it. Sapphire eyes. Had Secrat not been intently studying it, he likely would have missed it. Otherwise, there was a gold plating around the emerald Secrat had earlier been oblivious to. It was what hooked it onto the necklace and kept it from being a plain, flat chunk of emerald. That, and of course, the dragon engraving.

Copé was taken by it, he liked the feel of it. Like a rock, but so much smoother. But, a part, nay, a lot of him was thinking about his flask. Far more than a fair trade off, the necklace probably could have bought him ten flasks and more, but Copé couldn't help but think about it. The perfect night unraveled by a foolish mistake. He was above such amateur mistakes. Another Azlak Temps fiasco. That was his ego talking, and he knew it, but that wasn't enough to simply dispel it out of him.

Copé took one of his pine sticks out and lit it. He liked the look of the flame in his hands. Felt special and unique. Once lighting a cigarette, he took a huff out of it. The feeling of tobacco in his lungs never filled him with the same satisfaction it did others.

Toucan Veras loved his cigarettes almost as much as he loved the Flux or hated the Aeonians. He'd constantly be taking in one of them. Copé never saw the appeal of it. Secrat hoped it would do some to calm his nerves, and although that failed, he, at the absolute least, had something to twirl around in his hands. To distract him.

Secrat bit the bottom of the cigarette. It was a habit. The taste was awful. He arose to his feet from his bed, and put out the cigarette, the stuff simply didn't do it for him. Near the window in his small shack, the fresh air felt more inviting.

There was a small but rambunctious crowd of merchants gathered around. Merchants usually started themselves in the early hours of the morning which made it difficult to sleep. The thief was accustomed to late hours, but the merchants didn't seem to care about that. How inconsiderate. The heat being so immense meant they wore something or another on their head. From turbans to straw

hats, anything that kept their heads from blistering would suffice. Copé watched them inattentively for a time, not able to hear what they were saying, but honestly not being all that curious. His eyes went down over to some children running around. It wasn't uncommon for children to be brought out to the Trading Network.

It wasn't uncommon for children to steal either. Petite and innocent, the opportunity was too 'there' to pass up.

Secrat stepped out from his shack home, standing out at the doorway just a foot or two. The flask was unfortunate. He wished it could have been salvaged somehow, but he knew it was not a priority.

No. Secrat Copé would travel to the thieves and do away with the necklace for as much as he could. After that, whatever happened would happen. Copé walked forward toward the merchants and made his way.