

## Chapter Three

Copé drank ale from his flask. Formed from a strain of brewers' yeast and an oh-so decadent amount of malted barley, the stuff was amazing. It didn't sound so nice when explained in-depth, but the taste and aftereffects were heavenly. Life could and certainly would always be a cruel mistress, but alcohol was an easy-going whore.

He brought the bottle away from his lips, nonchalantly looking to see if anybody was watching. After that, he started to fidget around with the bottle, wrapped in brown-leather, until he pushed the little cork in there at the neck. He hid the flask away, between his knees, readjusting himself in his chair. In the Whispey Deserts, trading was common. In-fact, minus the hot-air and dreary décor, it was the only thing the Deserts offered. The thief liked it well enough. He only stole in small increments. One or two things here and there, The Trade Network was much too populated for traditional heists. Not only that, but a few miles deeper into the Deserts was the Thief's Network, where troupes like the Red Flux as well as petty thieves came to associate and trade.

It was impossible for Copé to know for sure who was a master thief in the Deserts and who wasn't.

He was able to get on just fine without stealing everyone blind. The Deserts had hundreds of homes, and not one of them was exactly distinguishable. By design, Copé assumed. Little box-shaped homes, each only with one room, and that one room could barely fit a twin-sized bed. Visitors only stayed for a couple of days and then went on their way, pockets lined with coin.

The thief leaned back against his chair. Behind him, he overheard the whispering of some merchants haggling not too far off. Copé found himself a proficient salesman, "Bullshit with a smile" is what he called it. A profound art that was unappreciated. Likely because everyone was too busy being duped

to notice. He listened in at what the merchants were saying, hearing only every third word. It took his mind off everything for a while. Made him forget why he was drinking so early in the morning. It wouldn't last though.

"Find your way," Toucan told Copé before heading back to the Red Flux. Father always hung onto sentiments like a blanket at night. And while he hated the Aeonians, he considered himself a man for a higher power.

A month removed from 'what happened', Copé couldn't help but still wince at the thought from time to time. After thirteen heists, one little mistake was all it took to unwind everything Copé had done for them. The thief squirmed a little in his chair, having trouble trying to relax.

"Do you want me to sit here quietly while you drink with that nifty flask you think nobody sees, or would you like some food to go with it?"

"The first one where you are quiet sounds like as good a choice as any." Copé didn't even make eye-contact before answering. He knew the voice belonged to a female though. Secrat brought his flask to the table and looked at, already almost empty. He didn't consider himself an alcoholic by any definition of the phrase. His pride didn't allow him to think so badly about himself. He felt ashamed about drinking from the flask, but this was one of his 'bad' days.

It was a bad day where all of his frustrations and grievances spilled out and made a big collage of self-pity.

"Let me rephrase that, order something or the future reads I'll be kicking your ass!" Her words were playful, not angry or of cruel intent. Copé smiled for a second and looked up at her. His hair unkempt and his haggard face paled in-comparison to her looks. "I didn't know I was talking to a fortune-teller."

Her hair was dark-red and her skin was tan. That's usually about how it went in Maharris. One-side had Acera, Urgway, and Jalint, while the other had Hardan and Italina. Like the first three, the Whispey Deserts experienced the heat. The Whispey Deserts felt like Hell upraised, if Copé wanted to be nice about it.

"Now you know, and I'm predicting that if you don't order something, I will have my friends over there throw you out." She smiled at him. Copé looked down at his flask and felt bad. He felt ashamed, almost wanting to kill all of her friends with his knives to impress her. He chuckled quietly at the thought. "Ham and wheat will do handsomely."

"Want it plain?"

"Course not."

She nodded knowingly and turned away. Copé took his flask back off of the counter and threw it down in the sand beneath his seat. Not for good, as the diamonds encrusted on the sides of it were about the most expensive things he owned. Copé leaned his body forward against the counter. The back of her looked almost as pleasant as her front. "Where do you come from?" Copé spoke out, trying to strike up a conversation. Never much of a conversationalist, a man of action, but maybe his gentler side was on the outskirts pushing up and waiting to poke through? Or maybe there was something else pushing up against the front of his pants.

Secrat looked down at his flask.

The damsel broke his concentration swift, dropping a glass-plate on the counter before him. He flinched but shrugged it off and looked up at her. She offered up a sly and sinister grin.

"Well, aren't you lovely?" Copé acknowledged.

"I try my best."

"You know, usually restaurants try not to give their customers a heartattack, I could tell your boss, you know," Copé mimed writing something down on parchment.

"Give him a well written complaint and such."

"I'll fetch you the ink, but I must warn you, he won't be surprised, nor will he care."

"It sounds to me like he knows a thing or two about business."

"He gets by, pays like shit, but I don't really care too well about money."

"Have a small fortune already?" Copé felt interest in her answer.

"Something like that," the woman replied. "I'm from Satin."

"Oh?"

"You asked where I was from a little bit ago. It's a small village off the reservations of Hardan."

"I'm familiar, so, in other-words, you're a no-good wanderer. I'll see to it that they have your head on a pike for not being under the thumb of one of the Aeonians." Copé tried his best to sound ferocious while playful. Not very skilled socially, she likely thought he was serious.

"You don't exactly sound like a townsperson either. Where are you from?" "Acera," he lied. If there was one place he'd never be caught living in, it was Acera. "I was born and raised in that God forsaken hellhole."

"Oh, really, what was so bad about it?"

"Everybody in Acera is inner-woven. They breathe the same air as each other. And that's fine, I mean, we all do, but they're the kinds that acknowledge it over-and-over again." Copé moved his

hands in a circle for emphasis. “We’re this BIG family, but they’re not really that close. No, no, no, no,” Copé reiterated the last part more times than intended. “If you make one mistake, it isn’t a family. Families forgive each other. They care about one another. Acera doesn’t care about each other. Acera is buried in its old ways, and you know, they seem intent to stay that way forever.”

“Lovely.” The woman pulled out a bar-stool from beneath the counter and sat down. “And so, that’s it then, you left, and came here?”

“I tried other directions, they took me left, they took me right, but this one seemed like the only one that actually went forward.”

He looked down at his food, black forest ham slapped onto a slice of bread, mixed with some type of dressing. It tasted plain, with a small and indistinct bean-flavor from the dressing. Still, the food was one of the few things edible in the Whispey Deserts. Available at a shop for a reasonable price, that is. Delicious food was brought in from all across Maharris, and in ways, The Trade Network was the melting-pot for all different types of food. Such comes with a price, however, and that price exceeded what Copé was willing to spend. Alsabenya was one of many small shacks throughout the Deserts that offered “filler” for a still expensive but more reasonable price. He took his knife and cut into the slabs of meat, raked at it with a fork until pulling it free, and brought it to his mouth. *Good enough*, he thought. “So, you left Acera to pursue getting drunk in the mornings and eating cheap food from a dumb shack?”

“Something like that,” Copé replied. “And what about you, you seem to like throwing down judgment, what made you decide to leave Satin?” “Me? I don’t judge.” She pushed her hair back behind her ears, exposing a dimple Copé hadn’t noticed before on her left cheek. Her eyes were a powerful blue. The kind so visually striking that somebody kinder might have pointed out.

“Hardly true, but by all means, indulge me, no matter.”

"I left because I tired of their mangled ways, cold and uncompassionate, selfish and vindictive. Once you realize something is wrong and that there is no way for you to change it. It makes leaving seem much easier."

"Indeed, it does," Copé said. "And so what does the future hold, you left Satin to serve cheap food from a dumb shack?" He stared into her eyes, mesmerized but interested in her response.

"I don't think it's that bad here. I try to enjoy myself." She speaks plainly and without inflection. "At the very least, it's better than the life I left, so I'm just optimistic."

"Biding your time until the wakes of something more?" Copé spoke understandingly. In the back of his mind, he was toying around with a different idea.

"No," she responded calmly, warmly even. "No, I don't really think about it like that. Life isn't meant to be lived anticipating or looking for something better. If I feel so certain that its bad now, where will I be tomorrow? Still thinking it's bad, but then does it not worsen? What if I feel so certain that its good, then does it become better? I don't want to live my life searching for more. I want simply to live my life." She had cooled off a lot from earlier. She spoke so rapid-fire that Secrat had trouble keeping up with her.

She went from being a smart-mouthed vixen to a cuddly little kitten. Copé couldn't say for certain whether he liked that about her. Her warmth bothered him. "I suppose I bide my time. I wait for my next chance, my opportunity. And my time for something else, something better."

"When it's all said and done, where do you end up?"

"What do you mean?"

“I mean, does it not feel like it’s insatiable? Like, no matter what you get, you always want more?”

“I think it’s too early to tell.” Copé stopped. He needed some time to think of the right words to say.

“Insatiable, implies I’ve been fed. I’ve only had one goal, and it’s not been reached.”

“Wealth,” she asked, “control or power?”

“Something like that. Who knows, maybe I’ll become rich, become bored and start over.” Copé joked with a smile then added, “It’s all yet to be seen.”

## 2

The Trade Network always had some sort-of commotion going on about it during the day. There weren’t enough words in any language to stress enough the importance of the network to Maharris and the five major cities; Hardan, Jalint, Urgway, Acera, and Italina.

A large ocean, the Amisoic Sea, surrounded the whole of Maharris. A boat would arrive from Olzaric and other major cities across the Seas on occasion, but it was rare to have available outsiders help scavenge items or vital resources. The Trade Network was the means to economic and social stability throughout Maharris.

Secrat couldn't help but smile at the audacity of it all, all of Maharris united as one without discrimination or prejudice swaying them. Conflict wasn't common in Maharris, at least it hadn't been for a long time. The last war was hundreds of years ago. It didn't mean everybody liked each other though, and in-fact, it was far from it. Italina's town came with a sense of entitlement and self-importance, looking down its nose at the rest of the lot, and Acera's tan-skinned residents would always play the fool in the eyes of its neighboring cities.

Urgway and Jalint got along, after all, they were so close to each other. In both ways, metaphorically and physically. The only way to get from Jalint was through the Whispey Deserts or through the Hickly

Swamps. The Swamps weren't a viable option because Urgway hid the passageway from civilians, and the Whispey Deserts spanned a great distance.

It is believed that Jalint's merchants came in through the Swamps to make it through to the Trade Network. They found it best not to travel through the Whispey Deserts with their goods, especially since, to make it to the trade post, they'd likely intersect with a mess of thieves. The only shared consensus that Italina, Urgway, Jalint, and Acera had with each other is their dislike for Hardan.

Hardan had made a legacy for their brutality and is credited for having some of the finest warriors throughout the land. They are also widely blamed for starting the only war that Maharris had in a three-hundred-year period. Copé arose from his chair. The banter between him and the miss who introduced herself as Christique had been lovely, but she had since begun tending more to other customers eating about the shack. Besides, he needed to leave, as he found himself absolutely infatuated with her chest. Make no mistake about it, Copé couldn't stop staring at the necklace dangling between her bosom.

An emerald as the centerpiece, the necklace shined with a dulled beauty. That is, Copé suspected, because an intentional lack of polish. This was Maharris' trade network, but not far from here, was the network known exclusively for thieves and criminals. The fact wasn't the best kept secret, but besides for higher-ups that knew for sure, it had been perceived by civilians as nothing more than rumor or gossip. But, at such a populated location, the woman had to at least consider the thought that someone might make a grab at it once or twice. She didn't keep it clean, but why would she wear it in the first place? Unless there was some reason for her not to be afraid.

Copé hadn't lied when he said had been familiar with Satin.

The village was small and never made any ripples of any kind. As a whole,

Satin was against the shackles imposed by Aeonians but did nothing about it.

They lived a humble existence and did little stealing or crimes to survive. Instead, they focused their attention more toward hunting and agriculture. The holes in Christique's story were obvious. Satin might, in-fact, be closest to

Hardan, of all the five major cities, it was hardly 'just off the reservations' of it.

And the 'cold and uncompassionate' description didn't really fit into what Secrat had gotten from his contact with the village. Looks can be deceiving though, but it seems more likely to Secrat that Christique was leaving something out of her story. Some of him wanted to know what it was, but more of him didn't care.

If there's anything that he knew with absolute clarity, it's that he intended on having that necklace of hers.

Copé dragged his feet while he walked away from the shack. His feet scraping into the desert sand some with every step. Sometimes he'd stagger or stumble, showing the alcohol in his flask was doing its job. It wasn't too much though. He wasn't COMPLETELY intoxicated but sobering up was imperative if he ever wanted to act on any of his desires.

"You! Stop!" A man yelled out from behind Copé.

Secrat felt a small chill travel up his spine. He knew the chance of there being another "you" was unlikely.

Copé didn't even have the chance to turn around before the sound of clamoring feet befell his ears, and with it, he could infer there was more than one of them. All he could think to do was overcome his drunken stupor and run. The sand might have caved in on his feet with every step before, but now, his feet were moving so fast he might as well have been flying.

Before him, Copé could see his free space becoming more and more scarce. The Trading Network always had some sort-of commotion going on about it during the day, and in-front of him, a crowd of men and women merchants stood, indistinguishable in their clothing, as well as tables filled with a wide assortment of items. Secrat gnashed his teeth, grinding them from side to side as he searched intuitively for his next move. With vivacity, vigor, and a silent prayer for good fortune, Copé made a leap of faith into the crowd of people, thinking not about the perhaps inevitability of being trampled.

One person fell down first, a gentleman, Copé only caught a glimpse of him, but watched the pot he was holding fall out of his hands. The pot, clay and of heavy size, was more than enough to take the woman in-front of him off of her feet as it struck her from behind. As she fell, so did the man she brought down with her, and someone else, and then another. It was a ripple effect that happened too fast for Secrat to truly appreciate.

Besides, the time was needed to secure safety, in the havoc of it all, Copé began crawling on his hands and knees, being careful not to be crushed by the large cast. As Copé searched for a means to make his escape, he looked over to the guards behind him that worked at trying to settle a dispute between some of the crowd.

The woman's husband didn't take too kindly to a man throwing a pot at her and a fight ensued as a result. Secrat made certain to take advantage of the diversion, hiding beneath one of the tables, letting the tablecloth conceal him. The ruckus soon started to quiet down, and when he peeked out from under the clothe, the thief could see the guards weren't focused anywhere near his location. His tactful retreat becoming a real opportunity, Copé now had his chance to flee. Secrat turned his back the opposite way of the guards. This side of the table was about as crowded as the other, but he'd more than likely be able to blend into it.

He waited for an opportune time to make his move, but before that could happen, his feet were dragged out from underneath him.

It was a guard, one that he must have missed or not seen. The fellow wasn't a knight or a warrior, or anything like that, not a skilled-looking fighter, but he held a sword in his hands, which was more than Copé had to work with.

The thief snatched up a small pile of sand and tossed it in the guard's face. The guard sold it like an arrow to the chest, falling backward, then plopping himself down on his bottom as he tried to remove some of the sand from his eyes. Secrat, flat on his back, rolled under the table and to the other-side. He climbed to his feet and started once more toward fleeing from sight.

There were beads of sweat traveling down his neck and chest as he ran forward. Once leaving the crowds, he was allowed an openness of mobility. Some of him felt fatigue, but a lot of him was being driven on the adrenaline soaking inside of him. The same adrenaline that made him a master thief and the same adrenaline that made him the best member that The Red Flux ever had. He felt empowered and as if nothing thrown in his path could deter him.

That is, until a guard tackled off from his feet. Copé gulped and sighed heavily as the air vacated his lungs. A dazed and haphazard stare followed for the thief as he tried to formulate a coherent thought for himself. He failed at it several times. But once the sensation of the ordeal started to spread thin, he was once more ready to think cognitively, or with as much logic and reason as he could otherwise.

The guard wasn't a guard after all.

It was Christique, smiling with a sprinkle of sadism in her disposition. She didn't smile for long, however, and instead, Christique dragged Copé up to his feet, making him wonder why she took him off his feet in the first place. The guards weren't in sight, but that didn't make escape any less

important. She led him back to the Alsabenya Shack, and it was there where he hid, crouched behind the counter where he once ate. Christique looked at him, like she was trying to decipher the puzzle in front of her. Copé smiled at her some. He wanted to tell her she had her work cut out for her but didn't end up saying anything. Some part of the thief was feeling the same way as she, that is, he was unsure about the person before him.

Her eyes left him. A customer stood at the opposite side of the counter. Copé couldn't hear everything that was said between the two, but he did hear some of Christique's more complimentary lines, such as "Thank you" and "Have a nice day". Before that, he watched Christique scavenge up the same slop she had fed him, the "filler food," as it was called. And after that, he heard a man walking away.

"Acera's finest is a petty thief, is that what I am to understand?" Her voice didn't sound offended, disturbed, or anything else with some sort of negative connotation, but it didn't sound thrilled or optimistic either. Melancholy, that was an excellent way to describe how Christique sounded. She gave a small smirk that Secrat fancied, however.

"You're not exactly a regular everyday member of the Satin village, are you?" Secrat said, rubbing his shoulder in the spot where she struck him. A small ache, but Copé dealt with it long enough to return the smirk back at her. On the inside, he was kicking himself about sharing his suspicions. But something about her heightened his intrigue and made him want to play along with her. The woman tried her best to look offended, offering a merciless stare that for some reason only added to Secrat's infatuation with her.

Copé looked for the guards, watched for them, until finally, at once, he felt confident enough in his own safety. He stood to his feet at the inside of the shack behind the counter and winced momentarily at the striking amount of pain he felt in his side. Christique's feminine beauty was matched by her

strength. It offered a small and bearable feeling that still didn't sit too well with him. He rubbed the back of his neck some more before regaining his wits about him. Christique looked at him with a sympathetic look that he knew wasn't sincere. "If you are about to break down and start crying then I might just have to alert the guards after all." Her not-so sympathetic look soon dissolved into a sarcastic smirk.

"I feel like there are nicer ways of getting people's attention." Secrat spoke earnestly. He took a look at some of the men and women conversing in the crowds. The merchants, the men, the women, all of them conjoined with making this encumbered blur. A man that looked something like an apothecary stood out to Copé. That made sense, after the dog pile the thief caused, some could most certainly use a bit of aid. Still no sign of any of guards. That was good. Better safe than sorry though, Copé thought upon falling to a seated position, his back leaned against the counter.

"There might be nicer ways of getting your attention, but none of the other ways had it where I could attack you." Christique replied.

"Why did you want to attack me in the first place?" Copé asked.

It seemed like a fair question for him to ask. Christique didn't seem to share the sentiment with him, and in-fact, she looked at him like he was an absolute idiot.

"I wanted to attack you because you lied to me about who you were!"

"You lied to me!" Secrat fired back, and for an honest second, he actually felt like a snot-nosed brat. It was something about the whiny way he said it. In a moment, he was feeling self-conscious, and felt the need to assert himself, "You think I don't know about Satin? I've been there before, and you know what, you're not a part of it!"

Secrat knew he didn't come off as fierce, sometimes he wondered if being intimidating was something even in his repertoire of abilities.

It was. But only with a knife in his hands.

Nevertheless, the thief would be no one's fool.

"At least I can say that I'm not a petty thief. What did you steal from them anyways?" Christique inquired that with a voice sounding riddled with judgment. Copé felt down at the hilt of the knife strapped to his leg, for no other reason than because he couldn't think of anything else to fidget with. "I didn't steal anything for what I needed. Some food that would have been considered as table scraps for them, and some coin that was no more than pocket change." Copé felt a jolt of insecurity surge through his veins again, and he didn't much care for it. An everyday scrapper not absorbed by power but concerned infinitely with survival. That was the perception she would have of him, and maybe that was for the best. More than anything, he wanted to stress his significance, his importance, and his worth, but he said nothing.

"They must really love their bread then." Christique said. Her attention threw itself back over to one of her customers.

His attention was now on her necklace and all its beauty.