

The sands always seemed to come alive in the morning.

The dawn was still prenatal when Hileo snuck out of the city. The desert offered none of the protection of the Dustubria's soaring walls, but there was a freedom in the open spaces, lifeless as they were. Barren but for the magic sand that provided the livelihood of everyone in the city. That, and the occasional vampire looking for an unwary dust smuggler who traveled too deep into the desert to harvest the sand wells. Night enhanced the risk of falling prey to one of those monsters; they could see you and you couldn't see them. But Hileo couldn't afford to be picky. He'd have to leave early in order to have enough time to not only harvest the Thief Lord's due, but also hit a more legitimate well on the way back. If the information he'd collected proved true, the sand he'd collect today would provide for him and Phaki for months.

Forty paces from the western wall. That was where Hileo hid his sand skiff, unobtrusive in a shallow grave. No marker distinguished the patch of sand from the rest of the desert. Like the dustsand wells that pockmarked the desert, the skiff was protected only by secrecy. Hileo swept aside a layer of sand, revealing a rusted metal ring. A strong pull on the ring opened the trapdoor. Hileo lifted the sand skiff out of its pit, then carefully closed and concealed the trapdoor with another layer of sand. Hileo's interference left no signs behind. The constant shifting of the sands by the wind could not be distinguished from human activity.

The skiff was nearly as long as Hileo was tall and constructed of lightweight wood. It ran on a pair of skis and was driven by the wind, harnessed by its small triangular sail. Its tan coloring made it nearly indistinguishable from the sand below. The color scheme was chosen in hope of disguising the skiff from a flying vampire looking down from the sky. Hileo's worn clothing was thoroughly stained with sand for the same reason.

The sand danced in accordance with the will of the wind and Hileo's skiff ran before it. The winds were strong today, and Hileo made good time. It wasn't until half an hour into his journey, though, when the dawn was beginning her labor, that he dared open the map. It had cost him all the coin he'd won in that nibbles game against the great Baron Reuntzky himself, and a bit more besides, to gather the information recorded on the highly illegal piece of parchment. Red dots arranged in a roughly circular pattern outside the city marked the locations of nine dustsand wells, each one belonging to different wealthy merchant. Bribing the guards on the harvesting crews to reveal one of their employer's secrets hadn't been easy. Only the most loyal crew members were given that information. But they had all given in, perhaps because Hileo ensured them that he had no intention of harming their masters' businesses. As proof of this he only asked for the location of the wells that gathered the *least* amount of dustsand.

Hileo tapped the center of the circle formed by the mapped wells. The attracters installed in each of these wells had underproduced almost since the day they were dug. Either fortune had seen fit to deal all nine of these merchants a short straw at the same time - or something else was effecting dustsand production. A tenth well, dug in the center of this circle, could be pulling all the dustsand towards itself, leaving the other nearby wells coming up short. Hileo suspected this well existed, and that it belonged to Lord Akagaro, the only merchant in the city to invest in dustsand and not own one of the

wells Hileo had mapped. Rumors said that tomorrow Lord Akagaro would send a crew of dust smugglers out to harvest his wells for the first time in weeks. That meant the attracter in the well should have accumulated an amount of dustsand worth a small fortune. If Hileo could get to the well before Akagaro's crew and steal its contents, he could pay off a substantial chunk of his debt to the Thief Lord, while keeping a good sum. He needed the extra money. Phaki had been growing lately, and could use a new set of clothes.

He had another stop to make before he could hit Akagaro's well, though. The Thief Lord had given him the location of three of his illicit wells, all powered by stolen attracters. As much he hated it, Hileo was in debt to that bastard, which meant he was essentially an enslaved dust smuggler. Only with an emphasis on the smuggler part, because in addition to hiding the dustsand from vampires, he also had to sneak it past the city's authorities so he could deliver it the Thief Lord's black market dealer.

Harvesting the first two wells on the Thief Lord's list went smoothly. Hileo brought the skiff to a stop and uncovered the well each time, then climbed down the ladder to scrape the faintly glowing dustsand from the attracter at the bottom of the well. With the precious sand safely tied in a leather pouch, he covered the well and set off for the next one.

The third well posed a problem.

Hileo ran his fingers through the pile of dustsand on the well's floor. Was the attracter buried beneath an unusually large harvest? No. It was gone. There was quite a bit of sand still in well, which meant it must have only been removed recently. Who would steal an attracter and leave the sand behind? Attracters were valuable, sure — too valuable for stealing. Each merchant marked his own attracters with his seal before installing them in his wells. Knowingly possessing an attracter without the permission of the merchant who had marked it was a crime punishable by death. Only associates of the Thief Lord would be so bold. But to steal an attracter *from* the Thief Lord — that was a death sentence in itself.

Hileo collected the sand. Why had it been left behind? He didn't look forward to delivering the news to the Thief Lord's contact. If the Thief Lord decided Hileo should take the blame for the attracter's disappearance, there wasn't much he could do about it. He didn't even know the criminal mastermind's true idea.

Of course, he still had the dustsand from the attracter. That gave him a way out. He could simply deliver the pouches of sand as usual, make no mention of the missing attracter, and pass off his dilemma to the next unlucky bastard sent to glean this well.

Hileo shunted thoughts of the Thief Lord's ire against said unlucky bastard from his mind and climbed out of the well. He had a mission to fulfill. It was already midmorning, and Akagaro's well was a good three hours journey. After giving the sand skiff a push to get it started, he let loose the sails and caught the wind. He glanced down at the map, tracing his route with his finger. An idea occurred to him. Stealing attracters was too much risk for too little reward, normally. But what if he were simply to take the attracter from Akagaro's well and put it in the Thief Lord's? He'd arrive home later than he'd hoped, but the risk of getting caught would be low, as he would never take the stolen device near the city.

The more Hileo thought of it, the better the idea seemed. Unlike the Thief Lord, he had no relation to Akagaro, and the wealthy Nolin merchant could afford to take a

loss. This way Hileo could resolve the problem quickly and forget it, with no worries of it coming back to bite him later. Furthermore, he wouldn't make some other clueless smuggler the target of the Thief Lord's vexation.

Hileo congratulated himself on the boldness and ingenuity of his plan as he passed one of the wells forming the ring on his map. He stopped to uncover the well's opening and ensure he was where he thought he was, but ignored the rather pitiful amount of dustsand gathered by the attracter. He was hunting a bigger prize.

It was past noon when Hileo reached Akagaro's well, finding it almost exactly where he had predicted it to be. He brushed aside the sand disguising the well's trapdoor. It was a circle made of warped wood, and seemed smaller than usual. Hileo heaved the covering aside, looking down at the veritable hoard of dustsand resting piled on the bottom.

He cursed.

The well was about ten feet deep. That was the expected part. The unanticipated factor was its diameter — only three feet across. It was designed for a child to crawl down and collect the sand. Hileo had heard rumors of new wells dug in this fashion, but without considering how they might effect his work out in the desert. The smaller wells were a logical choice for profit-minded merchants. Cheaper to build, and innumerable lower-class families in Dustubria would jump at the chance for one of their children to make a little extra income traveling to the wells with the a team of guards. Not to mention the added obstacles separating the well's bounty from full-grown thieves.

Hileo tried to descend the shaft, although he knew it was in vain. If he tried too hard, he'd end up trapped, wedged in the open well while the sun beat down on him. He beat down his frustration and took a sip from his canteen. The treasure was tantalizing close, yet maddeningly far away. No matter. Akagaro had children in his employ? While, Hileo did too. Phaki had been asking recently to go with him to work. It would be good for her to get out of the tenement occasionally. His sand skiff, burdened down only with one man and a little girl, would move faster than Akagaro's wagon, outfitted with guards to fight off a potential attack by vampires or bandits. If he left early tomorrow morning, he could still beat Akagaro to the well. Could he do it tonight? No, no, they'd be out too late. Too many vampires at night.

He paused to chew on some of the dry meat he'd brought for a midday meal. The sand skiff provided some shade, although the shortening autumn days meant the heat wasn't as unbearable as usual. Afterwards he had nothing more to do than to turn back towards the city. A brief stop to steal some sand from one of the other wells on his map made today's trip not completely unprofitable. Plus, the well belonged to Reuntzsky, as small-minded and petty a man as ever there was, even if he was a good nibbles player. Inconveniencing him was a bonus.

The wind must have been feeling playful that afternoon. Keeping the sand skiff on track amid the shifting air currents required Hileo to devote all his attention. With hardly any visual landmarks by which to correct his course, getting lost out in the desert could mean death. But when the sun began to dip below the distant horizon, Dustubria's southern wall came into view, and Hileo relaxed. He really should have been paying more attention, though. Perhaps then he would have noticed the dark shape swooping out of the sky towards him with bloodthirsty ferocity.

If the vampire hadn't let out a triumphant screech before pouncing on his intended prey, Hileo would've died. As it was, he turned his head just in time to see the pale spectre descending upon him. He jerked the rudder to the side, causing the sand skiff to sway wildly and fall on its side. Hileo hit the sand with a grunt, while the vampire, moving to quickly to correct its course, slammed into the skiff's now-upright bottom.

Hileo scrambled for the hydropistol belted to his waist, the only weapon he had on him. The vampire crashed into the sand, but soon recovered from its fall. A nimble leap carried it up onto the skiff's side, its grave-colored clothing flapping in the wind. It pounced, pinning Hileo's arm to the ground even as the hydropistol slid halfway from its holster. Hileo tried to reach the trigger, but in vain. With his arm trapped, he couldn't aim the barrel away from the ground and at his assailant.

The vampire's face, almost human but for the fangs, twisted into a mask of hideous joy. Claws extended from the hand he wasn't using to hold down Hileo, and he slashed at Hileo's throat. Hileo raised his left arm and caught the vampire's wrist. The claw hovered in the air a few inches above Hileo's exposed neck. Hileo grunted and exerted all his strength into pushing it back into the air.

A gunshot sounded. The vampire looked around wildly, loosening his grip on his victim's arm. Hileo took advantage of his foe's distraction to let loose a wild swing, crashing into the vampire's side with the butt of his hydropistol. The vampire recoiled. Hileo rolled and kicked it in the torso, pushing it off his body entirely. He sat up and tried to steady himself to get in a good shot from the hydropistol.

The vampire launched himself back into the air. Hileo jerked his arm in an attempt to follow his target's movements as he pulled the trigger. The shot missed and the bullet landed harmlessly in the distant sand. Water vapor streamed from the weapon's barrel. Hileo reached for another round of ammunition, knowing he probably couldn't get to it in time. The vampire flew towards him, claws outstretched.

A figure in tan clothing leapt through the air and tackled the vampire. Hileo gasped in surprise as he watched the newcomer fall atop the vampire and begin punching it in the face. The vampire screeched furiously, but the man's muscular grip kept it restrained. Suddenly the vampire went still. The man bent down and whispered in its ear, then got up and released it. Hileo started and leapt to his feet, expecting the vampire to attack him again, but instead his assailant looked around, a puzzled expression on its face, then flew away.

Hileo regarded his rescuer. With a black beard as wild as the werewolves of the Elder World, calloused hands, and sand-colored clothing, the man fit the unrefined stereotype of a dust smuggler. He walked a few feet and retrieved a hydropistol from the sand, light steam still coming from the barrel. That explained the sound of gunfire. A discarded wooden covering next an open hole in the ground seemed to confirm the man's occupation. He must have been in the well when Hileo was attacked. But where was his skiff? Had he walked all the way from the city?

The man sheathed his firearm. "Lovely weather today, isn't it?"

"Who are you?" Hileo asked.

"What, no 'thanks for saving my life?'"

"Well, er, yes, I'm very grateful that you saved my life. It's just that I'm not used to meeting people out here." Hileo regarded the stranger with interest. He could be another thief. Legitimate dust smugglers were usually sent to the wells in teams.

“Ah, well, I suppose that’s understandable. Your kind is a solitary lot, I’ve heard.” The stranger held out a hand. “Name’s Nind. I’m new to these parts. And you?”

“Hileo.” He shook the hand.

“Nice to meet you, Hileo. Always glad to help a brother in need. Anyway, I feel duty calling me back to yonder city. Goodbye. See you around.” With that Nind turned and strode away towards Dustubria. Hileo watched him disappear over a nondescript sand dune before setting his sand skiff upright. His pouches of dustsand were tightly secured, so none of his cargo had spilled. He pushed the skiff into motion and headed towards home on a path slightly divergent from Nind’s. Strange man. They probably wouldn’t meet again, though. As he’d said, dust smugglers were a solitary lot — especially illegal ones.

After stowing the sand skiff underground, Hileo trekked to the city’s main gate, to the north. It was dusk, and there was still a lot of traffic on the walls, including soldiers. He’d draw too much unwanted attention trying to climb over them like he did in the morning. When the gate was open he could slip into the crowd with relative obscurity.

Phaki was drawing on the wall when he arrived home. She was a willowy young girl of nine or ten, wearing a castoff vest and pants that pinched just above the ankles. Hileo couldn’t be sure of her exact age, although he expected she was small for it. He also suspected she was unusually bright for her age, although he had no reference point for either of those estimates. She was somewhat of a secret from his associates who were at best rugged adventurers who probably wouldn’t stab you in the back the moment it benefited them, and at worst black-hearted criminals who’d stab you in the back just for the fun of it. Among those kinds it helped not to be known as the guy who was soft-hearted enough to adopt an orphan girl off the streets.

“Hey, Hi!” Phaki threw aside her piece of chalk - where had she gotten that, anyway? - and ran to greet him.

“Hey,” said Hileo, sweeping her into his arms. “What’s this?”

Phaki dropped from his embrace. “My chalk drawings. Made them all day.”

Hileo knelt down and inspected the colorful lines, leaning close to see in the waning light. “Hmm.”

Phaki smiled proudly. She pointed to one of the drawings depicting two stick figures wielding oversized swords. The smaller of the two figures had dirty blond hair falling around her face. “This is you and me.” Her finger moved to a black scribble, formless but for a gaping fanged maw. “These are the people from your work. The ones that make you worried at night.”

The Thief Lord and his minions. Hileo let out a downcast sigh. If he ever had a reason to regret his entanglement in the city’s largest criminal organization, it was when it effected Phaki.

“Well, those are very nice, Phaki,” Hileo said. He stood up and slipped out of his stained coat. “How about some dinner?”

“Ok, Hi.”

Hileo walked towards the metal stove. The sun was descending fast, and he didn’t want to use his few precious candles for light by which to cook. He reached for the flour, but paused as an intricate depiction on a bag in the wall caught his eye. A closer look showed a drawing of a dark-cloaked figure wearing an iron crown. His hand were raised above his head, and in between them three red diamonds floated in the air.

A frown creased his face. Had Phaki drawn this? Hileo bent down and picked a piece of red chalk off the floor.

“Phaki?”

“Yes?”

“Where did you get this?”

“Oh, the storyteller gave it to me. That picture’s from his big book.”

“The storyteller?”

“He’s nice. You should meet him. You’d probably be friends.”

“Did you let a stranger in the house?”

“No, of course not. He was outside and told stories to lot of kids.”

“Well... ok. But you should be careful if you leave the house. It could be dangerous.”

Phaki laughed. “You know I’m careful, Hi!”

Hileo started making some flatcakes on the stove. He had never heard of a this storyteller fellow before. Phaki might not think he was dangerous, but she was much too young to know for sure.

“So, Phaki, would you like to come with me to work tomorrow?” asked Hileo.

Phaki threw her hands up in the air and cheered so loudly she could be heard a block away.

“We’ll have to wake up early, though,” said Hileo, flipping a flatcake over. He handed one to Phaki, who bit into enthusiastically. She probably swallowed a few grains of sand from her dirty hands along with the food. But then, sand was unavoidable in Dustubria.

“I don’t mind. The sun gets up early. To be born. I don’t think I ever did that.”

“What?”

“Being born. To be born, you have to have a mother, and I don’t have a mother. I think I must have fallen out of the sky. Is that how you found me, Hi?”

“Close enough.”

Phaki shrugged and continued eating. Hileo served himself and joined her. He wouldn’t be able to spend much time with her today. He’d need to put her to bed, then leave to meet Konyo, the Thief Lord’s contact, in order to deliver today’s batch of dustsand.

“Can you tell me a story?” Phaki asked after dinner. Hileo ignited a candle. The sun had vanished, and the scant moonlight was insufficient for seeing Phaki’s face.

“Get in bed first,” said Hileo. “You must have heard some good stories today from that storyteller, right?”

Phaki climbed in bed and nodded.

“How about this then: instead of listening to one of my stories, you tell me a story you heard. How does that sound?”

“Well... ok.” Phaki pulled the sheet over herself. Hileo smiled, relieved. His repertoire of stories featuring Phaki as an Aithreni princess had been repetitive of late.

“This is an *old* story,” Phaki began, her voicing taking on a dramatic lilt. “From the Elder World, when the Lords of Darkness ruled. The Creator saw the suffering of his people under their oppression, and called his good alyän from across all seven worlds, and sent them to help. A mighty battle ensued.” Phaki recreated the sounds of said battle as well as she could with her mouth. “But one of the good alyän, his name was

Kotor, turned evil and joined the Dark Lords. He betrayed his twelve companions and led them into a trap. But Calistar — he was the leader of the good alyän — took his sword and led the charge against the forces of evil.”

“Did he win?” Hileo prompted as Phaki hesitated.

“Sadly, no,” sighed Phaki. “He met the Supreme Dark Lord, Lädos, and they fought to the death. Calistar stabbed Lädos with his sword-” Phaki thrust her arm, hand wrapped around an invisible hilt, into the air - “But Lädos also struck Calistar with his mace, and they both died. Meanwhile the armies loyal to Lädos fought and overwhelmed the good alyän, and they all died.”

“This is a dark story for a girl your age.”

“Wait, it gets better. The remaining Dark Lords tried to kill the merin, who were the most devout servants of the Creator. Lädos had always hated them, you see, because he wanted to be the Creator. Anyway, the merin made a plan.”

“They opened the portals,” said Hileo. He’d heard this story before. It was an important part of Aithreni lore. To save a faithful remnant of humanity from the ravishes of ever-encroaching darkness, the merin had helped them travel through portals to other worlds. The Bazatese, Aithreni and Nolin people groups were all descended from refugees escaped from the Elder World.

“No, this was after that,” explained Phaki. “The surviving merin split into groups. Each one hunted down one of the Dark Lords and used their magic to form a trap. They managed to imprison the Dark Lords on the Elder World, but the power they used was too great for their bodies to bear, and they died. Except for one.”

“One?”

“His name was Glixafar. He was supposed to find and imprison Kotor, but he got scared and decided he didn’t want to die. When Glixafar found Kotor, the two made a deal. Glixafar said he wouldn’t bind Kotor if Kotor promised to be good from now on and stop killing people. Kotor agreed and he and Glixafar parted in peace.”

“But,” Phaki said. “Kotor was *bad*. He tried to take over the world, which he could do now that all the other Dark Lords, who were more powerful than him, were trapped. Glixafar realized he had made a terrible mistake. He swore never to rest until he had fixed it by stopping Kotor. But Kotor was crafty, and he slipped away from the Elder World so he could try to take over one of the other worlds. Glixafar dedicated the rest of his life to finding Kotor.”

“What happened next? Did he find Kotor?”

“I don’t know,” said Phaki remorsefully. “The storyteller never got to that part.”

Dustubria was built on stone but made out of sand. When its founders had begun construction on the city wall nearly a century ago, they knew importing lumber or bricks over the mountains would be unbearably costly. So they used what resources they had, namely, sand. Lots and lots of sand. From the buildings with walls made out sandbags, pasted together with some special chemical concoction made out of sand, to the pits of sand constructed for the disposal of human waste, sand here was put to more productive uses than anywhere in the world.

Hileo dumped the chamber pot into one of those sand pits before continuing the Farting Tree Tavern, his regular meeting place. Phaki was safely in bed, sleeping. Hileo would have liked to be nearby, doing the same, but the Thief Lord did not tolerate idleness.

The glow of firelight from rectangular-paneled lamps illuminated his path. His destination was identified not only by the crude sign over the door, but also by the riotous sounds laughing and hooting as a group of slightly inebriated customers cheered on their favorites nibbles players.

Konyo sat in his customary place, a shadowed corner. His black hood cast a further shadow over his features. Konyo thought it gave him an air of mystery and sublimity. Perhaps it would have, but for the fact that nearly everyone in the bar knew his name. As it was, the Thief Lord's chief enforcer looked like, well, someone trying too hard to look mysterious.

"You're late," said Konyo. He drummed his fingers on the tabletop as Hileo slid into a seat across from him.

Hileo withdrew three pouches of dustsand from his coat. Konyo hefted each one in turn, humming to himself. He then placed a scale on the table and weighed Hileo's delivery.

"Half weight each," said Konyo. "Less than usual, but within the expected range considering how recently those wells were harvested." He opened each of the three bags to check for dustsand's signature glow. "Looks pure."

Konyo tied the bags back up and pocketed them, then leaned back comfortably in his seat. Hileo waited a few minutes before coughing conspicuously.

"Oh? Are you waiting for something?" Konyo asked.

"Payment," said Hileo.

Whistling, Konyo pulled a few coins from his pockets and rolled them across the table. Hileo picked them up, then indicated he should be given more.

"This is half of what that amount sand brings," he said.

"Oh no, that's just what you take home. The rest is going to pay off your debt. Interest rates are on the rise."

"What? Why?"

"Wouldn't you like to know." Konyo smiled smugly. "But all knowledge comes with a price, and this particular piece of information happens to cost-"

"Never mind," Hileo interrupted. Insufferable bastard. Konyo wouldn't divulge so much as what he'd eaten for breakfast that morning without some form of money-grubbing. Hileo bit back his outrage, took his meager payment, and turned to leave. If only he could bring in some extra income, maybe get a more legitimate job, build a better life for him and Phaki. The bonus from Akagaro's well would help. This made it imperative now that he harvest it. If he started taking from the other wells on his map at well - slowly, carefully, so that the merchants wouldn't even realize they were being robbed - he might be able to finally dig himself out of this hole.

"Don't think you can run away from us," called Konyo. "The Thief Lord has eyes everywhere. We saved you when you were desperate. Reuntzky cast you off, we took you in, and now you belong to us. And you'll stay, until every penny of what you owe us is returned."

Hileo closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Akagaro's well, he reminded himself. With that he'd keep ahead of the interest for a long time, time enough for him to pay off the debt.

"Although, seriously, you're deluding yourself if you think you'll ever do that. I mean, four hundred and six—"

"You rainfired *bastard!*" screamed Hileo. He snatched the coins Konyo had given him and threw back on the table. "Take them! Take them all! Put them towards that debt! I'll pay it off, and then I'll never expect to see one hair on the despicable head ever again! Let your master know that!"

Konyo swept the coins into his grasp, whistling cheerily. He stood up and made mock bow towards Hileo. "As you wish. But until then, I'll be seeing you regularly." With that he strolled past Hileo and out the door.

Hileo stood in the center of the barroom, fists clenching and unclenching. His outburst briefly attracted the attention of a few other patrons, but after it failed to degenerate into a brawl or duel to the death, they turned back to their drink or their games.

"No, the vampires don't drink the blood their slaves, not often, anyways. There are rules against that. Slaves are too valuable to waste that way."

The strange comment drew Hileo's attention. An unfamiliar man with greying hair sat at the bar, a half-eaten donut in his hand. His garb was as outlandish as his remark - a suit that had once been nice but was now saturated with stains and poorly sewn together rips. He spoke to group of tavern-goers, who watched him with mild interest. Nind, Hileo noted with surprise, was among them. He gave Hileo a brief nod of recognition.

"Well, what do they drink the blood of then?" asked one of his tipsy audience members, taking a quaff from a beer mug.

"Animals, cows, mostly. They're only allowed to drink human blood if they go out on raids past the borders of Bazat. They follow the laws, of course. Nearly every vampire is a law-abiding citizen."

"But I thought the vampires only drank human blood!"

"Oh no, that's just what *they* want you to think. They hide the truth to make it easier to control us."

"Who is that?" Hileo asked the bartender.

"Oh, that's just Crazy Bob. Comes through here 'bout once a year. Goes into the desert, alone, every time, and comes back with crazy stories about the vampires. Freaky, if you ask me. Gives me the shivers every time."

"MY NAME IS ROBIROTO DE TORO, SCION OF THE NOBLE HOUSE OF TORO!" Crazy Bob yelled. "YOU'D DO WELL TO REMEMBER IT!"

Hileo glanced at the older man, then back at the bartender. "How long has he been doing this?"

"Six times he's journeyed out into the desert, each time for at least a month. Says he'll leave on a seventh trip day after tomorrow."

"And he's still alive? I'm impressed."

"Ask me? I say he goes out there so nobody can bother him while he gets high on drugs, then hallucinates his trips to the vampire capital." The bartender shrugged. "But then, what do I know? I just serve people their drinks."

Crazy Bob finished his donut in one colossal gulp. An equally colossal burp escaped him after he swallowed it. He called for another before continuing his story. “Now, once when I was there the slaves had a revolt. Took eighteen bloodfencers to put it down. There was blood everywhere then. The Supreme Ruler let his vampires kill the leaders of the rebellion to teach his slaves a lesson. Other than that, the slaves are relatively safe, at least until they get too old to work. Vampires need them for cutting down trees, digging holes in the ground, raising cattle, and the like.”

Hileo regarded the man with curiosity as the bartender handed him another donut. It could be sheer dumb luck that he hadn’t been killed or died of thirst already. But if he had actually found some way to survive in the desert, it could revolutionize the dust smuggling business. Sand wells could be dug further away from the city, in more prosperous areas. New cities would eventually spring up around them. If Hileo could somehow be behind this expansion, he could make an immense profit. Enough to pay off his debt and secure a good future for himself and Phaki. He could become his own dustsand merchant, as wealthy as Reuntzky and Akagaro and the rest.

Of course, all this hinged on Crazy Bob being more than just that. Which, Hileo thought as he observed the man lick frosting from his face, was implausible as vampires being law-abiding citizens. Oh well, it was worth a try. He could go to bed after this.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Why don’t the vampires kill you or, er, sell you into slavery?”

Crazy Bob’s eyes widened, and he laughed. “That’s a secret, young whippersnapper! But you can find out, if you go! I’m looking for men — men, mind you, not mice — who will journey with the great Robioto de Toro to the vampire capital and see with their own eyes what only I have seen all these years! Any who are willing may come! Is there any among ye with backbone? Come with me, ye who dare! HA HA!”

Alright, drop that idea, Hileo thought as Bob continued to laugh. The bartender’s theory was looking to be a more accurate one.

“I’ll go,” said Nind, raising his hand.

Crazy Bob stopped mid-cackle and looked at Nind in shock. “Yer serious?”

“As serious as the sun is when rises each morning.”

“You can’t come.”

“Excuse me? I believe you just invited anyone with a backbone to come with you. Are implying I lack a spine?” Nind rose threateningly. “Because if you are, I may be forced to prove you wrong. I hear you people have an interesting way of doing that.”

“Fight! Fight! Fight!” chanted a drunk man, pumping his fist in the air.

“Ah, fine,” grumbled Crazy Bob. He spat over the counter. “You can come.”

Laughters and jeers arose as Nind bid the weird old man farewell, reminding Bob to expect him early morning in two days.

“Does anybody know who that was?” someone asked. A ripple of conversation traveled throughout the tavern, with the general consensus being reached that nobody really knew who Nind was. Hileo decided against revealing his earlier encounter with the man. It really was too late, anyway. He went home and fell asleep.