

The Dust Smugglers
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Chapter 1

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. The freedom was found in places scarcely inhabited, places where only the bold or desperate dared to go. The desert was barren of resources or life, except for the magical sand that provided everyone in the city with their livelihood. 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 an 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 identity.

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 obstacle 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 restrained his frustration and took a sip from his canteen. The treasure was tantalizingly 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 players. 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 too 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 ten or eleven, 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. She was the one good thing Hileo did with his life. He couldn’t let his ties to organized crime rings bring her harm.

“Well, those are very nice, Phaki,” Hileo said. He stood up and slipped out of his stained coat, reminding himself of Akagaro’s well. That, and maybe one or two other jobs like it, and he’d be free from the Thief Lord soon enough. “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 snorted in derision. “You needn’t worry about me.”

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 froze and dropped her chalk. She turned around slowly. “Seriously?”

“Yes. We’ll have to wake up early, though,” said Hileo, flipping a flatcake over.

Phaki smiled. “That would be nice, for sure.”

Hileo handed a piece of bread 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.”

“Whatever you want to believe, then.”

“Wait... what?” Hileo cocked his head at her. 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 a beautiful Aithreni princess whom everyone adored 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 firmly held as history by the fire-kings of Aithrenar, although the priests and clerics of Nolinwik contested its validity. In short, the story went like this: 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 Bazatense, 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 else 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 for the Rogues."

"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. Says he trades with them. 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 picking up dead 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.

Chapter 2

Hileo pulled a glass sphere out of his bag of hydropistol ammunition and turned it over between his fingers. Not the slightest fissure even though he had fallen on top of it yesterday. Inside the sphere, clear water contrasted against black, roiling smoke, angry clouds over a tranquil sea. A storm contained. He would have marveled at the wonder and beauty of it, if he'd had time. Instead, he dropped the sphere back into the pouch and grabbed another one, inspecting it with the same results.

I should learn how to make these myself, Hileo thought. The spheres were blown from glass made from the very same magic sand he spent most of his waking hours pursuing. But then, he'd heard that the skill required to blow effective ammunition wasn't come by easily. Shaping the glass into a sphere was hard enough. Doing that without spilling any of the rainwater took talent only acquired by a life fully dedicated to the craft of glassblowing. Most of the dustsand merchants hired their own glassblowers. Hydropistol ammunition was the most practical use of dustsand, but the rich often came to Dustubria to purchase vases or other novelty items made of dustsand glass. And then there were several groups of Nolin scientists dedicated to finding new ways to use the sand. So far their efforts had been in vain. No one really understood the properties of dustsand, especially how kept it the explosive gas from vanishing like it did in spheres made from any other type of glass.

Hileo closed the pouch and slung it over his shoulder. Vampire attacks seemed to be getting rarer lately, but as his experience yesterday proved, one could never be too careful. He belted his hydropistol to his waist. With Phaki coming along today, he wanted the maximum amount of protection possible. Hileo crossed the room, flung open the door and took a deep breath of morning air before going to wake Phaki.

"You have be quiet while we sneak over the wall," he told her as they walked down the street. Technically the city didn't have a curfew, but anyone who saw him would be suspicious.

"Ok, great, I'm SO EXCITED!" Phaki shouted. Hileo gave her a stern look, at which point she lowered her voice and amended, "Well, we're not sneaking over the wall *yet*. Oh, is that a lizard? I think we should catch it."

"What would we do with a lizard? Keep it as a pet?"

"No, silly, we should *eat* it. You said it would be nice to have more meat in our diet."

"Phaki, that lizard is *two inches* long. It would provide less meat than one of your fingers."

Phaki scowled and put her hands on her hips. "And you'd better not be thinking of eating those."

"Well, with your help today, I think I might be able to get you a special treat afterwards."

"Really? What is it?"

"Er, I think it'll be a surprise." Hileo made a mental note to think through what would please Phaki. She shouldn't be too hard to make happy, if she was excited by the prospect of eating lizards. If this whole well thing with Akagaro worked out — if he could give Phaki a good upbringing, or at least sufficient food and clothing and shelter, and deal with the problem of

educating her later — he'd finally be able to know he'd done something worthwhile with his life. He had always been somewhat of a drain on society, but he felt he ought to do something more. Maybe then he'd rest easy, knowing that he hadn't wasted his life. Well, at least not entirely.

When they ascended to the rampart of Dustubria's western wall, Phaki swung over the edge and began descending with skillful rapidity. Her fingers sought the cracks in the paste holding the sandbags together almost automatically. Strange. Hileo didn't remember her spending any time practicing climbing the buildings of Dustubria. But then, he hadn't always known her. He swung himself over the wall and followed her, lowering himself down at a slower pace.

Phaki pushed herself off the wall several feet above the ground and rolled. She sprung to her feet, grains of sand trailing from her fingers. "Hey, why are we in the desert anyway? I thought this place was dangerous. A vampire might jump out from behind a rock and eat us!"

"That's only if you're not with me," said Hileo. "I have a gun, so I can shoot any vampires that try to attack us." Hopefully. It hadn't been much use against that one yesterday. He had been one of the flying ones, though. Unfortunately, although vampire attacks overall had been going down recently, sightings of the more dangerous kind — bloodfencers, they were called — were becoming more common.

Finding the sand skiff took longer than usual. Hileo shortened his stride to allow Phaki to keep pace with him and had to start over at the wall in order to properly measure the distance to his hiding place. Phaki clapped her hands when he withdrew the lightweight vehicle and unfolded it.

"Oh! I see, it's a boat. I've never seen a boat before."

"Get in. We'll have to go quickly to get to the well on time." Hileo wasn't sure when Akagaro left with his caravan, but they couldn't get to the well soon enough. Unless they arrived at exactly the same time as the guards were collecting the dustsand. That could be awkward. Hileo hoped to avoid any encounters with, well, pretty much anyone else on the desert. He gave the sand skiff a running start, then hopped in it behind Phaki.

"Look at the sand!" Phaki yelled. "It's moving!"

"That's just the wind," said Hileo. The sands looked alive, though, animated by the wind to perform their morning ritual of dancing before the sun. The wind outside Dustubria was always active in the morning, another reason Hileo preferred to start his dust smuggling runs early. Phaki seemed to be enjoying it. She laughed, arms outstretched, as her hair flew back behind her head and whipped at Hileo's face. Hileo spit out a strand and focused on steering the skiff.

"So, what exactly are we doing today?" Phaki asked, half an hour into the journey.

"We're going to a well. I need to climb down the well, scoop up some sand, and bring it back up to me, understand?"

"I thought wells were dangerous. You always told me not to go near one. I might fall in."

"Yes, but this is a well for sand, not water. After you get the sand—"

"Why would you need a well for sand? Sand is all around us."

"It's magic sand. As I was saying, after you get the sand, I need you to climb back down the well. There should be a device there, a metal square with a glowing piece in the center.

Unscrew the device from the walls of the well and bring it up. That's all you need to do. After that, we'll make a few more trips, and then go home."

Phaki nodded, her face grave. "You can count on me, Hi. I'll do my duty. Now, onward!" She struck a dramatic pose and pointed towards the horizon for about two seconds before giggling and nearly falling out of the skiff.

It was a stroke of luck that they reach the well with plenty of time to spare. Hileo heaved open the trapdoor while Phaki watched curiously. The dustsand was still there, and Akagaro's caravan was nowhere in sight. Hileo gave a Phaki a pouch and bid her climb the down well. She harvested the dustsand without incident.

"Hileo?" She called from the bottom of the well, the bag of dustsand pressed against her legs and the wall.

Please don't tell me you've suddenly realized you're claustrophobic, thought Hileo as he called back.

"This metal thing won't come off the wall."

"The attracter? Be careful, we really can't afford to damage it," Hileo said. "There should be a bolt you can unscrew."

"It still won't unscrew."

"Hold on, let me get you a wrench." He'd remembered to bring one of those fortunately. He took the wrench out of his pocket and tossed it down the well.

"OW! You hit my face!"

"Sorry!"

Five minutes later, Phaki climbed back up, tossing the bag of dustsand to Hileo. She went down again and emerged with the attracter and the wrench.

"I hope you don't mind a little blood on it," she said.

Hileo looked at her face and started. "Oh, your nose is bleeding!"

"What did you expect? You threw a wrench at my face."

"I didn't mean to! Anyway, we should get that cleaned up." Hileo poured a small stream of water from his canteen onto to his shirt, then wiped the blood from Phaki's lip.

"I'm alright," she muttered. "It doesn't even hurt anymore. Oh, and I caught something else." She pulled a small crustacean from her shirt. It wiggled in her grasp. "Can we eat it?"

"No, Phaki, do not put that in your mouth! Chammal meat is poisonous to humans."

Phaki sighed with disappointment. Hileo turned to get back in the skiff and felt something bounce off his back. Was that the miniature chammal? He glanced over his shoulder to see Phaki looking at him with unusual vehemence. Was she really that mad that she couldn't eat it? The moment passed, and her face turned back into a smile. A closer look at her face, however, revealed that it didn't reach her eyes. Something was wrong. The sudden change in her demeanor troubled Hileo. Maybe he could try talking to her about it on the way back.

With the dustsand, the attracter, and Phaki loaded in the skiff, Hileo set out once more in the direction of the Thief Lord's well. The journey took some time, but once there it was a simple task for Hileo to climb into the empty well and install the stolen attracter. He stood up and surveyed his work. The attracter would start collecting sand soon, and the Thief Lord's wouldn't even notice the hiccup in production. As for Akagaro... well, everyone had their bad days, and as the one of the richest, most influential people in the city, Akagaro seemed to have gotten less

than his fair share. Hileo was just... evening things out. He'd had an abundance of bad days himself, although admittedly most of those were at least partly his fault.

Fortunately for Hileo, this was turning out to be a good day. At least, that was he thought until he climbed out of the well, looked by the sand skiff, and realized Phaki was absent.

"Leave her. She's too small and frail to do any work for the Supreme Ruler."

Hileo spun around. His blood froze as he saw Phaki surrounded by three vampires, one of them gripping her arm.

"You're getting soft in your old age, Deathfang," the vampire said. Phaki punched him in the stomach. "See? She's feisty, and she'll grow. She'll be very useful when she's older."

Hileo withdrew his hydropistol of its holster, trying not to make any sound. He leveled it at the nearest vampire's back. His heart pounded. Miss this shot and he and Phaki would both be dead. If he turned and ran now he might be able to escape... but then, would his life be worth anything? If he failed in this one task he had assigned himself, this one burden he bore to try and make up his past failures, he'd be reduced to nothing, a parasite better off dead.

"I said, leave her," repeated Deathfang, hovering a few inches off the ground. He appeared to be in charge of the other two. Should Hileo shoot him first?

"What, just because she's an *innocent little girl*?" The first vampire sneered and lifted Phaki in the air. "Fine, I'll leave her, leave her dead on the sand." He held out the hand that wasn't holding Phaki. An ominous red blade, curved and hooked on the end, materialized there.

"Stop, you fool!" Deathfang yelled. Phaki kicked her captor with both legs. Hileo fired.

The shot rang true. Phaki fell to the ground as the vampire's grip loosened. His blade vanished, and he dropped on one knee, looking puzzled as he observed the hole in his chest. Then his body dissolved, vanishing and leaving a cloud of black smoke as the only evidence he had ever existed.

"Fine, we'll take the girl," snapped Deathfang. The remaining vampire grabbed Phaki before she could rise to her feet. Deathfang dived down and took hold of Phaki's other arm, then looked up at Hileo as he began to rise into the air. "It's that guy again! Quick, get out of here before his friend shows up!"

Hileo reached for another sphere of hydropistol ammunition, fingers trembling as he snapped it into place. He steadied himself and took aim. Phaki was thrashing madly, doing everything she could to impede the vampire's ascent. Hileo didn't know if he could trust himself not to hit her at this range. Did it matter? She'd be dead anyway if the vampires took her. Everyone knew they lusted after human blood more than anything else. He took a hasty shot at Deathfang's retreating figure, screaming a battle cry. Had the bullet struck him? Some blood fell to the sand from the sky. If Hileo had hit Deathfang, he hadn't done any serious damage. Phaki stopped struggling and appeared slumped over, unconscious or dead. He reloaded again, but as he raised the pistol it was too late. The vampires were too far away, flying faster than a human could run.

His arms trembling, Hileo stood in place for a moment, gun still pointed at Deathfang's pin-sized figure. He screamed again, rage, grief and fear mixing in one cry, and dropped the weapon. The full impact of what had just happened hit his mind like a battering ram, and he fell to his knees. His thoughts ran across his mind like panicked rabbits. He tried to capture them but failed. He had failed.

Hileo rose slowly. He could go back to the city. Maybe leave it, go somewhere else entirely, start a new life with some other purpose-

No. Hileo stopped deluding himself. Phaki was dead, or would be soon, and with her any shreds of honor Hileo could muster. He'd brought her to this, dragged her to this accursed place out of greed for Akagaro's wealth. This failure could not be forgiven. Hileo would never accomplish good that could outweigh causing the grievous death of an innocent little girl, unless-
She's too small to do any work for the Supreme Ruer, Deathfang had said.

The vampires don't drink the blood of their slaves, Crazy Bob had said.

The vampires kept human slaves? The irrational, savage monsters that prowled the desert and hunted for blood certainly didn't. But these vampires seemed different. They spoke articulately, and even seemed to have some sort of command structure. Perhaps Crazy Bob's trips to the desert weren't all hallucinated after all. Maybe something had changed with the vampires, and they were capable of thinking beyond their present bloodlust. If that was the case, Phaki might not be in immediate danger. If the vampires wanted to keep her alive for whatever inscrutable purpose-

Hoping to rescue her would be in vain, unless Hileo had someone who could show him the way to the vampire capital. As whatever whim of God or twist of fate would have it, he did, questionable sanity aside. Crazy Bob left tomorrow, and the way Hileo saw it, he had a standing invitation to accompany him.

A thin thread of hope was all that remained to illuminate Hileo's path. He planned to take hold of it. He'd get Crazy Bob to take him to the vampire capital, force him if he had to, and then... get Phaki out, somehow. Would he plot a daring escape? Bargain with the vampires for her freedom? A possibility occurred to him, but it was unnerving enough that he shoved it aside. He could devise a better plan on the way there. For now, he had to return to the city and find his guide.

Customers were just beginning to trickle into the Farting Tree tavern when Hileo arrived. Crazy Bob wasn't among them, so Hileo went to ask the bartender where he could be found.

"What could I get you today? Your usual?"

"No drinks," said Hileo. "It's only the afternoon anyway. What I need is information. A man came in here last night-"

"Sorry, can't help you," said the bartender. "I just serve drinks, not collect information on my patrons."

"I only want to know where he is so I can talk to him about a, um, job offer."

"No."

"I'll pay."

The bartender indicated his graying beard. "How do you think I lived to be this old in this part of the city? It's because I don't get involved with your type."

"Type? What type?"

"Don't think I haven't seen you meeting with the black-cloaked man in the corner. You're part of the Thief Lord's gang. If you want a beer, I can get that for you. Food? I can do that, too."

But I'm *not* an information broker. Your master knows I don't talk to him, I don't to anyone, understand? Now, are you going to order something, or do I have to call my bouncer to get you out?"

"Er, I think I'll have some food," said Hileo. He hadn't eaten anything all day but for a few bites of dried meat while on the way out of the city with Phaki. Exhaustion and hunger both gnawed at him. He slumped down on a bench, intending to plot his next move while he waited for his food to be served, but found himself staring morosely at the floor.

Hileo snapped back to attention when one of the barmaids put a plate with of grub in front of him. He couldn't afford to waste time. He had to find Crazy Bob before tomorrow. After eating hastily, he stood up to search for someone else who would tell him where the self-proclaimed noble of Toro was hiding.

It was an hour before he found a man he remembered glimpsing in the bar last night. Although he had no idea where Crazy Bob lived, he knew that he had come to the same tavern every night for the past week, regaling the customers with his eccentric tales of his journeys to the city of the vampires.

"What has he said about the vampire city?"

"Says it was built on the ruins of the old capital of Bazat," the man said, sipping from a mug. "That the vampires treat him very well, even give him his own room in their chief's palace while the negotiate Oh, and get this: he says the governments of Nolinwyk, Dustubria and Aithrenar are all in a giant conspiracy to keep us from knowing the truth! As if they would need to conspire. Nobody wants to go that hellish place anyway." He snorted in amusement.

Hileo feigned a smile. "Yeahs, sounds pretty insane."

"Haha, speak of the devil," said the man Hileo spoke to, pointing to the doorway. Crazy Bob himself entered, swaggering with confidence to the bar. Hileo observed his target for a moment. He desperately needed to know how much truth hid in Crazy Bob's claims.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I already have one man coming with me on this trip," said Crazy Bob. "Ain't no room for more. Besides, where's all this interest coming from? No one has ever offered to come with me on any of my other trading journeys."

Hileo's face fell. He searched his mind for ways to change that of the bizarre merchant's and came up blank.

"I'll tell you what it is," Crazy Bob whispered. "It's *them*. They're on to me."

"Who is?"

Crazy Bob made quotation marks in the air with his fingers. "*Them*. The government. The criminal overlords. You know, the usual suspects when it comes to conspiracies. Probably all of them in collusion."

"I'll pay you to take me with you," said Hileo. Not that he had much to pay with, but for the bag of dustsand in his pocket. It pressed heavily against the inside of his coat, almost as if it was pulling him in Crazy Bob's direction.

Crazy Bob chuckled. "How about this. You tell me why you want to come, the real reason, and I'll see what I can do."

"I..." Hileo hesitated. If he was successful in rescuing Phaki, the vampires wouldn't look kindly on Crazy Bob for causing them to lose one of their slaves. Would Crazy Bob be willing to risk losing whatever exclusive trading rights he had with the vampires? Um... no. That answer was obvious.

"I've always wanted to see the world," Hileo said. "Especially parts that, you know, nobody else has ever seen."

"Hmmm..." Crazy Bob took a bite of stale-looking donut - where had he gotten that, anyway? - and regarded Hileo for a moment. "Ye'r lying. Ye'r horrible at lying, and I can tell when you do it. Get out of here and don't ask me again."

"What?... no, I, er-" Hileo stopped. It was hopeless. He sighed and went home, pondering his next move while he walked. He could follow Crazy Bob's caravan in his sand skiff. That might work, although it might also result in him perishing, alone and miserable, out in the desert. He had no idea how long the journey would take and didn't think he could fit sufficient provisions in the skiff. Besides, whatever deal Crazy Bob had with the vampires wouldn't apply to him. If he was spotted, he'd be dead or captured immediately.

Or... he could give up. He was already tired, and just wanted to go home and collapse on his makeshift bed for a good night's sleep. He could pay off the debt faster if he wasn't supporting-

No! Hileo berated himself for his selfish thoughts. Phaki had been gone for less than a day and he was already considering abandoning her? Parts of him were revolting at times.

If you don't try to save Phaki... that revolting part will be all that's left of you, Hileo thought. He was already a criminal, after all. But that wasn't - couldn't be - all there was to him.

Hileo paused, stopping in the middle of the street. He raised his right hand in the air. "I swear I will find Phaki and bring her home. There; I've said it aloud."

Feeling better about himself, Hileo went home, then froze as he stepped through the doorway and felt a knife pressing against his throat.

"Hileo," a feminine voice said. "Why did you take the attracter from Akagaro's well?"

"What?" whispered Hileo. It was hard to talk with the blade on his neck. "Who are you? How do you know that?"

"The Thief Lord has eyes everywhere. He knows when one of his associates is planning something. He was surprised at your boldness, though. Foolishness, too, but there was boldness in what you did, taking the attracter along with the dustsand."

"Why does he care? It wasn't his well."

"How little you know. Akagaro was paid up for the month. It's a little hard to run an efficient protection racket if word gets around that you're not going to protect people who pay you. That is why you must return the attracter. You have until sunset tomorrow. Do so, and you may be rewarded. The upper ranks of the Thief Lord's organization have been growing fat and weak off all their abundance. He's looking for someone to replace them. But fail to return the attracter... you'll pay for it with your life. Konyo will be waiting at his usual place. He'll know what you do. For now, here's a reminder of your duty."

Hileo caught a glimpse of the hand holding the knife, a smooth and dark skinned one. A woman's hand. The knife moved with lightning speed and Hileo felt a stinging pain in his palm. He looked down to see a clean gash across its center. Blood welled up out of the cut. Hileo let out a brief cry of pain and whirled to catch a glimpse of his attacker, but she was gone, as if vanished into thin air.

Heart pounding, Hileo knelt down and let out a strangled moan of fear. Blood dripped from his hand to the floor. Who was that? Since when had the Thief Lord hired female assassins?

Well, he thought with a grim smile. That oath has teeth to it now. I don't have an attracter to return, so I'll have to flee the city regardless.

Hileo stumbled to feet and felt around for a candle to light the dark room. He finally found one and ignited it, illuminating a small sphere around him. The light helped banish the fear of the threat he had just received, at first. But soon a nameless dread crept into his heart. He meant to go to bed, but paused when the picture Phaki had drawn on the wall yesterday caught his eye. A pale figure, ghastly and terrible, with three - no, *four*, red symbols above his head. For a drop of blood had splattered from Hileo's hand when he whirled around and landed on the wall, where its stain soaked into the sandbag. The figure's gaze seemed palpable; the red signs in the air above him, a pulsating evil looking to devour. Hileo shuddered and scrambled for something to erase the figure. He found a bucket of water and threw it on the wall before remembering he'd probably want to drink that in the morning. The drawing blurred, but didn't fade completely until Hileo took an old blanket and scrubbed it away. Only then did he feel capable of sleeping.

Chapter 3

Hileo ran down the street. He had awoken later in the morning than he had expected, and he needed to catch up with Crazy Bob before he left the city. His breath came in ragged gasps as he sprinted faster than he'd ever needed to before. The frenetic beat of his heart seemed a chant saying, *Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop.*

Out of breath, Hileo paused to ask some random people on the street for information. A woman with holding a baby told him to look by the main gate of the city. Apparently some people were gathered there to make bets on how long before the eccentric merchant returned to the city, or if he would return at all, her son among them. Hileo gave her a hasty thanks before taking off again. He had an theory - it was an unlikely possibility, but it had come to him in the night while his brain subconsciously reordered the events of the past couple days. If it was true, he could force Crazy Bob to take him on the journey.

The bag of dustsand from yesterday thumped against his side, still carried on the inside of his coat. Hileo reached the front gate to find a small crowd watching two men debate over some pieces of paper and stone chips.

"Nah, he took someone else with him this time," one man said. "Probably a bodyguard. That increases his chances of survival."

His opponent snorted. "That bodyguard probably just wants to kill him and take whatever it is he selling. Good for him; rid the city of a dangerous nuisance and make a small profit as well. I bet three to one that one of the two returns, alone."

Hileo interrupted the betting to inquire how long ago the subject of the bet had departed. It had only been a few minutes, he discovered. Several eyebrows were raised in his direction when he announced he was following Crazy Bob. The crowd watched the gambling with renewed interest as he left. This new factor made things much more interesting.

The wagon was still visible on the horizon. From what Hileo could see, it was pulled by two giant chammels - a sensible choice for the desert, although if they ran off you'd be stranded. Hileo ran around the city's wall to find his sand skiff, then set off in pursuit. The chammels were rather slow, so he probably could have caught up with them even on foot, but no sense in wasting energy. Beside, the skiff would be useful later, like when he needed to escape with Phaki and return to Dustubria.

Hileo aided the skiff's acceleration by pushing against the sand with an oar. Only a few minutes later, he was within range of the wagon. The dustsand pouch stood upright now, pulled towards the wagon. Hileo reached inside his coat and removed it from his pocket. Holding it at arm's length, he saw clearly that it pointed directly at the back of the wagon. He smiled and released it.

The pouch flew through the air and stuck to the backboard of the covered wagon. Hileo slowed the sand skiff to a stop beside the wagon and leapt out.

Crazy Bob spluttered indignantly. He sat at the front of the wagon, guiding the chammals with leather reins. Nind rode on top of the left chammal. "Where did you put your brains last night? I told you can't come. Now get back to the city before I have to beat you back."

“If I return to Dustubria before I see the vampire capital,” called Hileo. He moved his hand to the hilt of his hydropistol. It was underneath his coat, hidden so Crazy Bob wouldn’t react negatively to the sight of a weapon, but Hileo wanted to be ready should the confrontation turn violent. “I’m telling the Thief Lord, and every legitimate merchant for good measure, that you’re the one who’s been stealing attracters from their wells.”

Crazy Bob froze for a moment before speaking again. His voice became laced with rage. “Rainfire. How did you know about that?”

“You had one with you in the bar last night, didn’t you? I assume it must have been one you’d just stolen. What I wonder is why you didn’t hide it before taking such a valuable stolen object into a public place.”

“Rainfired city. Only one bar in the whole place makes good donuts. What does a man have to do to buy a good donut without being accosted by young whippersnappers like you?”

“Show said young whippersnapper the way to the vampire capital,” replied Hileo. “Do this, and I promise not to breath a word about what you’re trading to anyone.”

Crazy Bob scowled.

“Robiroto,” said Nind. “I believe this man could offer some useful services. And because he’s not asking for any pay, there’s not much to lose by taking him on. Why would you pass up some free labor? Especially since you were complaining about how long it usually takes to unload the, er, cargo once we reach our destination.”

“I suppose you’re not considerate enough to forget what he just said?” Crazy Bob grumbled.

“I’ll make a deal with you, Robiroto,” said Nind. “I’ll take any oath he does regarding the secrecy of what you deliver.”

“So, er, Robiroto,” called Hileo. Crazy Bob seemed to prefer that address, and there was no point in antagonizing him. “You don’t usually live in Dustubria. What country do you come from?”

“Nolinwyk.”

Hileo repeated the gesture he had made last night when taking an oath. “I do solemnly swear by the tenth secret of Yengit Dhan that, if you take me to the vampire capital, I will never speak a single word implicating Robiroto de Toro in any way with the theft of multiple attracters from various dustsand wells.”

“I’m not a warder.”

“Well, it can’t hurt, can it?” Hileo wasn’t sure what, exactly, the tenth secret of Yengit Dhan was, but he knew that to the majority of Nolins, an oath sworn by it was considered unbreakable.

Crazy Bob turned to Nind. “And you?”

Nind looked strangely troubled, but repeated Hileo’s oath.

“Fine. You can come. But you have to know the Rules. First, you call me Robiroto. I’m only Crazy Bob in the city. Here, there are no conspiracies, no government out of get us, only Robiroto, and people obeying Robiroto. That’s the second rule. You do whatever I say, understand?”

“Understood.”

“Anything else you need to know, I’ll explain when you need to know it.” Crazy Bob - no, Robioto, - cracked a whip in the direction of the chammals and his wagon lurched forward. Hileo pushed his sand skiff forward to keep pace with it.

“Excuse me, Robioto, but how long will this trip take?” Hileo asked. “You see, I was in a hurry when I left this morning, and I forgot to bring any food.”

Roberto chuckled nefariously. “Well, you’ll fit right in then, because *I didn’t bring any food either.*”

“What? But you can’t survive in the desert-”

Robioto held up a finger to silence him. “That’s one of the many lessons you need to learn, boy. The desert is no match for Robioto de Toro.”

The rest of the day gave Hileo reason to doubt Robioto’s claims. They carried on without any rest, but for brief water break in the middle of the day. Hileo soon became exhausted, especially when the wind died down and he had to push against the sand with his oar to keep his skiff moving at the same speed as the wagon. Those chammals weren’t as fast as the skiff when it had the power of the wind behind it, but they were consistent. Hileo noticed that they didn’t even have to stop to eat, but opened their mouths to scoop up gulps of sand as they walked.

Unfortunately, Hileo didn’t share the chammals’ ability to derive their sustenance from sand. By the time the sun began to drop beyond the horizon, he was thirsty, hungry, tired, sweating, and in short, exceedingly glad when Robioto halted the wagon. He braked his skiff and sat down, running his hands through his hair.

“We’ll need to stop for the night,” said Robioto. “We’re deep into Rogue territory now, and traveling further won’t be safe until our escort arrives. You! What’s your name?”

“Hileo.”

“Come here. It’s time to make the flag.”

“The what?”

“Didn’t you promise to do what I say? Get over here! You too, Nind.” Robioto vanished into the wagon for a moment, then reappeared with a cylinder of black cloth tucked under one arm and a roll of bandages in the other hand. He tossed the latter item to Nind and unrolled the former. The cloth was plain but for three red diamonds, arranged like points on a compass. Robioto descended from his seat and spread the flag on the ground. He drew a knife from his belt and cut his palm, sprinkling his blood on the lower portion of the flag.

“Your turn,” he said, handing the knife to Hileo. He turned to Nind. “Bandage my hand.”

Hileo’s palm still burned from the Thief Lord’s little ‘reminder’ from yesterday, although he supposed it was better to reopen a recent wound than to create new one that would take more time to heal. Biting his teeth, he repeated Robioto’s action, spilling his blood on the flag. Three red diamonds became four, the fourth one made of blood.

Nervousness roiled in Hileo’s gut as he watched the blood spread across the fabric. The flag inflicted the same nameless dread that he had felt last night.

“What is the purpose of this?” he asked. Nind wrapped his palm quickly and took the knife, repeating the strange ritual.

“This flag is evidence of our protection by the Supreme Ruler,” replied Robiroto. “It shows our escort where to find us, and tells the Rogues to stay away.”

“Do you know why it looks like that? And why did we have to shed our blood on it? Couldn’t someone just sew the flag with four red diamonds instead of three?”

“Well, the three red diamonds probably represent the gems the Supreme Ruler wears in his crown,” said Robiroto. “As for the fourth part, no, I don’t know the reason. But I’ve performed this ritual each time I’ve come out to the desert, and each time I’ve returned unharmed.”

Nind knelt and ran his fingers over the flag as his blood dripped upon it. His face creased in trepidation before he rose again. Robiroto rolled up the flag and fetched a flagpole from inside the wagon before climbing up its side to mount the flag on top of it. He stood by the flag as it rose in the wind and looked off into the distance, as if proud of his work.

“You are right to feel disturbed by those symbols,” Nind murmured. Hileo jumped in surprise. He hadn’t noticed Nind moving closer to him. “There is dark magic in that flag.”

“What kind?”

“I’m not sure, but look.” He pointed to the flag as it flew in the breeze. The bloodstains on the flag had arranged themselves into a perfect diamond mirroring the other three. For a moment Hileo received the faint impression of a face in the center, looking at him, but it vanished.

“That is no natural fabric,” said Nind.

“What did you expect? It was probably made by vampires.”

“No, this is magic beyond the skill of the vampires. Theirs only seeks immediate gratification of their bloodlust. This is purposeful, guided.”

A chill seeped into Hileo’s bones, despite the still-present heat of the waning sun. “What does it mean?”

“I know not, but watch your path. I believe the city of Zjwazimar holds dangers not even our guide is aware of.”

Hileo nodded. What had he gotten himself into in? And Phaki...

His stomach growled, reminding him of more pressing needs than mystic dark forces on the horizon. “Um... are we going to eat anything tonight?”

“Now Nind tells me,” said Robiroto, descending from the wagon’s top after a long pause. “That he is already acquainted with the ways of the desert. Which is just great, because it means that I don’t have to teach this fool.” He indicated Hileo. “Nind, show him how to get food. I’m going to prepare for our escort’s arrival.” He disappeared back into the wagon.

Nind grunted and turned away, walking across the sand. Hileo followed. “So, what exactly are we going to do? I didn’t know there was food out here.”

“That might be true, if we were closer to the city, where all the digging of all those dustsand wells has scared away the jabbits.”

“Jabbits?”

“You’ll see.” Nind unhooked a canteen of water from his belt - Hileo fervently wished

he'd remembered to bring one of those - and began pour a thin trickle of its precious liquid on the sand.

"Wait, we need that!" Hileo exclaimed.

Nind stoppered the flask and tossed it to Hileo. "Take a drink if you want. But if you want any dinner tonight, you have to sacrifice a little water. The jabbits like it."

Hileo poured the water into his mouth and sucked greedily. They waited for a few minutes, staring at the patch of moist sand, before something began to stir beneath the surface. The sands parted, and a scale-covered head poked out. In a flash, Nind grabbed the creature by its neck and jerked it out of the sand. The small beast struggled furiously, kicking with its long hind legs and attempting to bite Nind with its fangs, but Nind pulled a knife and slit its throat.

"This is a jabbit," he said, throwing it down on the sand. "They're actually fairly common out here, but they live almost their entire lives underground, so they're hardly ever seen. They eat the miniature chammals, but their meat isn't poison. We'll have to travel further to catch some more. You'll hardly ever find two jabbits in the same territory, except maybe during mating season."

"Fascinating," said Hileo. "Did Cra- I mean, Robiroto, - teach you all this?"

"No. I studied in Nolinwyk for a time." Nind walked forward, counting his steps. "And I came out her once before, but never reached Zjwazimar."

Nolinwyk? The Nolin culture's emphasis on the accumulation of knowledge meant they had some of the best universities in the world, but tuition was expensive, far above the pay of any dust smuggler, except maybe one who owned his own wells. But hardly anyone that rich took the risk of harvesting dustsand personally, preferring to hire underlings for that task. So who was Nind?

Probably the son of Nolin nobleman, Hileo thought. That made sense. He could have been sent to a university by his father, but then rebelled, squandered his money, and fled the country. That didn't explain why he wanted to come with Robiroto, though. Hileo didn't ask, partly to avoid having to answer the same question himself, and partly out of etiquette. Likely criminals didn't pry into each other's personal lives.

They captured five more jabbits before running into trouble.

"There's just one thing about hunting jabbits," said Nind, pointing to a figure in the distance. "The Rogues like to eat them too."

A vampire stood several yards away, hissing. Its clothing was ragged and tattered, and its eyes were wild, more bestial than the ones Hileo had seen yesterday. It growled and charged at them, clawed hands outstretched.

Hileo scrambled to his feet, missing a jabbit as it poked its head out of the ground. Nind drew his hydropistol and fired. The vampire stopped and scrambled away, looking frightened.

"Rainfire! I missed," said Nind. "Don't let him get away!"

Hileo pulled out his own hydropistol and fired at the vampire's retreating figure. His bullet went wide as well, and his target escaped behind a rock. Nind bellowed and gave chase, beckoning to Hileo. After hastily snapping another round of ammunition into place, Hileo followed. They rounded the rock to find the vampire gone.

"He must have had some sort of tunnel leading back to the main burrow," muttered Nind. "Blast it, that means we'll have visitors tonight."

“What is a Rogue?” Hileo asked.

“Oh, right, Robiroto didn’t give you the rundown on the political situation out here in the desert,” said Nind. “The Rogues are vampires that aren’t under the control of the Supreme Ruler. The Supreme Ruler has been sending his bloodfencers to slowly hunt down and eliminate them, but there are still some remaining. They used to hunt alone but now usually run in packs for protection from the Supreme Ruler’s hunters. And as you’ve probably heard, there’s nothing they like more than human blood.”

“So, that one is going to get the rest of his pack to help kill us?”

Nind sighed and nodded. “Let’s get back to the wagon. We need to set up defenses in case they attack tonight.”

Robiroto had a small fire started by the time they returned to the wagon. Nind threw down the sack and bid Hileo roast the jabbits. Hileo took a knife and started skinning the creatures before impaling them on a stick and holding them over the fire. Robiroto took his own stick to roast his own dinner.

“Someone’s following us,” murmured Robiroto. He pointed to the horizon, where the silhouette of a single-masted sand skiff was visible against the backdrop of the setting sun. “He been doing so for half a day, but hasn’t come close to us.”

“Do you know what he wants?” Nind asked, kneeling by the fire.

“No, but he’s an idiot. As soon as nightfall comes the Rogues will get him.”

“A Rogue spotted us while we were out. We scared it off but didn’t manage to kill it.”

“Rainfire,” swore Robiroto. “Our escort should have been here already. If he doesn’t arrive in time, we could have trouble.”

“How many Rogues are going to attack us?” Hileo asked.

“Could be anywhere from five to twenty,” said Robiroto. “The bands are less common now thanks to the Supreme Ruler’s intervention, but when you run into one they tend to be larger.”

Nind nodded. “I suggest you plan for the worst and allow me to temporarily repossess the terms of our agreement.”

“Fine,” spat Robiroto. “But you’d better return it after the battle.”

Nind stood up and went inside the wagon.

“What weapons do you have?” Robiroto asked.

Hileo’s hand went to his holster. “A hydropistol. Only one.”

“Make sure it’s loaded and ready to fire. If our escort doesn’t arrive soon you two might actually be useful for something.”

Nind emerged from the wagon, holding a silvery longsword. He slipped it into a sheath on his side. “Convert the wagon to battle mode?”

“What battle mode? That wagon is intended for civilian purposes only.”

“We could remove the roof and lower the sides. Then we’d have a mounted platform for shooting at the vampires. Plus, they won’t want to come near the cargo, so having it right next to us will offer some additional protection.”

Robiroto considered for a moment, then nodded. “Make sure the flag stays up. We wouldn’t want our escort to miss us.”

Nind arranged the wagon in the way he had described. Hileo ate his rabbit - the meat was bland, but filling - before cooking one for Nind. The three climbed in the wagon as the sun dropped out sight. Since the roof was down, its planks having been lashed to sides to reinforce the makeshift fortification's walls, Robiroto set up the flagpole on the center of the platform.

A howl sounded in the distance. Hileo started. He'd heard that vampires howled to each other just before they began an attack. As if to confirm this theory, glowing eyes appeared in the distance, then vanished again.

"Truth be told, I wish we fought under some nobler banner," Nind murmured, glancing at the ominous flag flying over them. The four red markings flamed brightly against the night sky.

Hileo nodded. The flag's presence still unnerved him. How could it be connected to the Phaki's drawing on the wall? Could Phaki have drawn a picture of the Supreme Ruler of the vampires, and if so, why?

The weak glow of the moon was obscured by smoky clouds. Robiroto lit a torch and mounted it in a bracket on the wagon's wall, providing a pittance of extra light. The chammals let out a long, low moan, clacking their shells together.

"By the way, Nind," said Hileo. "What do you know of a person in Dustubria called the storyteller?"

"Vampire!" Nind shouted. His hydropistol rose into the air and went off. A pair of eyes disappeared from the night. Hileo couldn't tell if Nind had hit his target. "That might have just been a scout, come to observe our strength."

Another howl arose, and a multitude of eyes appeared. By the faint glow of the torchlight, Hileo could make out a series of vaguely humanoid forms, clawed and fanged. The vampires began to chant, although Hileo couldn't discern their words.

"If you see their leader, shoot him!" Robiroto yelled. "He'll be a bloodfencer, likely flying, maybe with a bloodblade in hand. But don't shoot our escort if he arrives. That would be bad."

"How do we tell the difference between a Rogue bloodfencer and our escort?" Hileo yelled back.

"Ideally," said Robiroto, firing a shot at the multitude of approaching vampires. "It'll be that the escort is the one not trying to kill you!"

The chanting stopped and turned into screams of rage. The Rogues charged, darting across the sand like scurrying ants. Hileo successfully hit one and had the pleasure of watching it vaporize into smoke, but before he could reload, another vampire climbed the wagon's wall. Hileo struck at it with the butt of his hydropistol. Its grip loosened and it fell back to the sand, but Hileo suffered a long scratch on his arm from the vampire's flailing claws. He gritted his teeth against the pain from that wound and from his hand. The scar from earlier flared as he loaded another round of ammunition in his weapon.

The next vampire that ascended the wagon Hileo shot point-blank in the head. When the smoke cleared, Hileo looked around for more attackers, but saw none. Nind stood with his hand on the hilt of his half-drawn sword. Robiroto held a streaming hydropistol in either hand, aiming out across the sand.

"Was that all of them?" Hileo asked, still yelling although the din of battle had faded. The sound of gunfire continued to ring in his ears.

“A small band,” replied Robiroto, spitting over the wagon’s side. “We got lucky.”

“No,” said Nind, releasing his sword and pointing to the darkened distance. “There are more.”

Howls. The vampires were still hunting, but now they sought different prey. Hileo saw a flash of fire illuminate the night, accompanied by the sound of an explosion.

“That would be the fool who followed us out to the desert,” said Robiroto. “Well, whoever he was, we won’t have to worry about him now, and with luck not the Rogues either. It’s always nice when a potential liability turns into an advantage, don’t you think?”

“Hmm,” mused Nind. Another flash of fire. “He’s well armed.”

Hileo frowned. The explosions seemed to be coming closer. He moved to the back of wagon and took the torch from Robiroto. He thrust it out into the night and saw the dim outline of a sand skiff - a *moving* sand skiff. “He’s coming towards us.”

“What?” Robiroto snatched the torch back. “Rainfire, he is! And he’s dragging the Rogues behind him.”

The sand skiff picked up speed, fire streaming behind it. Hileo spotted a figure standing at its stern, his back to the wagon. What was he burning? Chanting and howling, mixed in a bestial frenzy, grew louder as the vampires pursuing the skiff grew near.

The flames vanished, going from a bright inferno to nothing within the space of a second. The skiff continued to move, however, its speed only decreasing when it collided with the back of the wagon. A mighty crack sounded. The skiff’s boards shattered, and its occupant was flung violently against the rear wall of the wagon. A gasp escaped his lungs as he crashed, and he fell to the sand amid the wreck of his vehicle.

The vampires continued charging. Hileo readied his hydropistol for another battle as the newcomer scrambled to his feet and climbed over the side of the wagon, requesting protection.

“You idiot,” snarled Robiroto. “Do you think I came out here to protect fools who attract vampires to my wagon?”

“They were coming for you anyway,” retorted the newcomer, clinging to the wall. “Now you’d better let me in so I can help fend them off. Trust me, you don’t want to face a glut of vampires after they’ve been worked into a frenzy by the taste of human blood.”

“I know,” grumbled Robiroto, hauling the man over the barrier. “You’re going to have some explaining to do if we survive this night, though.”

The newcomer offered his thanks, then swirled around just in time to draw his own hydropistols and meet the tide of vampires as they swarmed around the wagon.

“Spread out! Each of you defend one side of the wagon!” Robiroto bellowed. Hileo took the eastern end as a Rogue pulled himself over the side. A bullet reduced the invader to smoke, but two more appeared to his place. Hileo popped another sphere in his hydropistol. He was low on ammunition. How many more vampires could they fend off?

“Small band, huh?” Nind bellowed. Black smoke swirled in the air around him. Hileo coughed as he fired again. The smoke from dead vampires reduced what little visibility the moon and torch supplied, and as it became thicker the air become increasingly difficult to breath.

A cold hand struck at Hileo’s chest, and a pale, snarling face appeared from the smoke. The vampire pushed Hileo over, and he fell to the floor of the wagon, his opponent on his chest. A hand appeared in the air above him, claws outstretched.

I am about to die, though Hileo. He had failed after all. Phaki would never be rescued. He'd go to his grave and his body would moulder in the ground, while he wandered for all eternity knowing he had failed to fulfill his purpose in life.

Is there really any purpose to life? If we all die in the end, is there any reason to live at all? Would be better to just get over death? It is, after all, the true state of all mankind in many ways.

"No," murmured Hileo as the leering visage of death prepared to deliver the killing blow. He had no rational thinking behind it, but he had a fierce desire *not* to die. Not here, anyway. Not now. He prayed - to whom, or what, he could not tell, but it was among the few times in his life that he did so - that he would live through this night. To reunite with Phaki. To fulfill whatever purpose he was on this world for.

Silver flashed against the night, and a look of surprised pain crossed the vampire's face a moment before it puffed into smoke. Nind stood over Hileo, his sword drawn and impaling the air where the vampire had been.

"Close," he said. "You alright?"

"He didn't wound me," said Hileo, rising to his feet.

Nind smiled broadly and lifted his sword above his head. He turned to speak to the vampires still mobbing the wagon. "O foul scions of darkness! Fear the power of my mighty blade!" With that declaration he leapt over the barriers protecting the platform and landed in the sand.

"What? Is he crazy?" Robiroto held the torch out over the side of the wagon, illuminating Nind below. Nind swung his sword in one continuous, fluid motion, decimating the vampire ranks around him.

"Hydropistols are overrated," remarked the newcomer. "Too few Dustubrians are learning proper sword fighting these days."

Hileo noted with relief that the vampires had stopped attacking the wagon, instead focusing their strength on bringing down Nind. The bearded warrior laughed brazenly while he fought against superior numbers, as if death held no fear for him. With trembling hands - that near-death encounter had scared him more than he'd have thought - Hileo raised his pistol once more and fired at Nind's foes.

"We drew out their leader," said Robiroto, pointing. A vampire flew down to attack Nind, a glowing red sword - his bloodblade, as Robiroto had called it - in his hand. Another one of his kind came to help him, attacking Nind from the other side.

"Two bloodfencers," muttered Robiroto. "That explains why the attacking band was so large."

"He'll never defeat them all at once," said the newcomer. Nind parried a swing from one bloodfencer. There was flash of light, and the attacking vampire screamed and was flung backward by some invisible force. Nind swung his blade at the other bloodfencer. It met with the bloodblade, producing similar results. The two vampires soon recovered and rose in the air to attack again, but Nind took advantage of their temporary distraction to retreat to wagon's side. He pressed his back against it as his foes approached, fury in their eyes.

Nind glanced up at the platform. "I could use some help here!"

A few surviving Rogues got up to join their masters' assault. The lead bloodfencer, however, turned his attention away from Nind, flying to attack those on the platform. Hileo ducked under the bloodblade's first swing, and looked up to see it descending on his head.

The bloodfencer's strike was stopped as another bloodblade appeared in the air, blocking it. The bloodfencer looked upon the one who had parried his attack and screamed in rage and horror.

"Well, well," a calm, cold voice said. "It seems the Merchant has actually done something useful for once. Drawn out the biggest batch of Rogues still hiding under their puny rocks out in the desert. I've been looking for you two for quite some time now."

The speaker hovered several feet above the platform. Unlike the Rogues, his clothing was neat, and long black cape flowed behind him, giving him a regal appearance. His face shared the paleness of the Rogues', but it betrayed no hint of anger, only cold contempt. There was something majestic, if hideous, in his demeanor, something that both repelled and attracted Hileo. Something familiar as well.

Deathfang.

"You should know by now," Deathfang said. "*Never* defy the Supreme Ruler."

Deathfang flicked his bloodblade and sliced the other bloodfencer's throat, killing him. He laughed before proceeding to eliminate all the remaining Rogues, including the bloodfencer that was attacking Nind. Hileo hoped he would stop there, but Deathfang turned on Nind, thrusting his bloodblade with cold precision.

"Stop!" Robiroto yelled. "Escort, these two men are in my employ. The Supreme Ruler would be displeased if you killed them, for now anyway."

Deathfang released his grip on his bloodblade, and it vanished. His gaze flicked from Nind, to Hileo, to the newcomer. "And him?"

"He is a present for the Supreme Ruler," said Robiroto. "He'll a good worker in the mines."

"You *bastard*," said the stranger. He jumped over the side of the wagon and tried to run, but Deathfang was upon him in a flash. He fell to the ground, rendered unconscious by a blow to the head from the hilt of Deathfang's sword.

"Hmmm," said Deathfang, regarding the fallen man, then focusing on Hileo and Nind. "Seriously? You people again? This will make the trip very... interesting."

Chapter 4

Phaki smiled.

The action grated against her heart like fingernails against a chalkboard, but she did it anyway. She stood in the corner of the sparsely furnished building, gripping her left arm. The bleeding had stopped, leaving a matrix of thin scars where Deathfang had cut her. Nobody had given her a second glance when he'd roughly thrown her into the room late last night. Nor had anyone spoken to her when they'd rolled up their sleeping mats and shuffled outside in the morning. That was alright, though. She was used to being alone.

The ancient, rotted door to the house creaked open and a man poked his head through. "You, girl. Get out here before you get us all in trouble."

Phaki nodded and complied. The other slaves were gathered in a courtyard. With a start Phaki realized that the building they'd been sleeping in was much larger than she'd assumed from the brief glimpse she'd got of it by the lurid light of Deathfang's glowing blade - a veritable mansion, in fact. Decay had long ago begun to set in however. The windows were cracked and dried bloodstains marred the once-fine marble walls.

The slaves were an eclectic collection of raggedly dressed men, women and children of all nationalities. They filed into a line, holding ceramic bowls, to receive stew from a soldier. A human soldier, Phaki noted, not a vampire, wearing armor and a spear lashed onto his back.

Phaki got in line, her eyes downcast. When she reached the pot of stew, she looked down at her hands. She had no bowl. The soldier appeared not to notice this, however, and simply ladled the stew into her cupped hands. It dribbled through her fingers and onto the floor. She lapped some of it up, but the soldier rebuked her for holding up the line and shoved her out of the way. She stumbled, spilling most of the stew.

"Move!" the soldier yelled. "You've got no time to waste today. The Supreme Ruler has upped your quotas again."

A groan ran throughout the slaves gathered in the courtyard. Phaki licked her the stew off her fingers. It actually tasted better than she what she usually ate, although it was gone in instant and her stomach was still rumbling.

The soldier stomped his foot, rattling his armor. "Stop complaining! If you'd worked the way you were suppose you lot would have been promoted to soldiers by now."

"Better an unwilling slave than a willing soldier in service of the forces of evil," murmured a voice. Phaki glanced at the speaker. He was an older man, unkempt hair and beard just beginning to fade to grey. His words were directed to the ground, not to the soldier.

"Hush, Father, it's not worth the risk to it to say such things," said a younger woman beside him. She took a sip of stew out of her bowl, then noticed Phaki. Pity flashed across her face, and she knelt by Phaki's side. "Are you new here?"

Phaki nodded.

"Oh, poor girl," said the woman, offering her bowl to Phaki. "Here, eat some of my stew. Where did you come from?"

Human beings are a strange lot, a ghost of a voice spoke in Phaki's mind. Trant's voice. The animals focus on what's necessary - food and reproduction and such. But we all have this

desire, a desire to belong to something, to mean something. It's from this desire that you get what's called love. But the thing about love is - it only exists to satisfy a need. Once this need is satisfied, there goes your love.

That's what he'd told her about Hileo. *Let him think he loves you for real*, Trant had said. And she had, for the brief time he appeared every evening, to feed her and exchange a few sentences about how her day was going. She'd fed him pretty lies, and he'd gone away happy believing he loved this child. Yesterday morning she'd begun to hope that Trant was wrong, that Hi cared about her in a way that went deeper than merely using her to stopgap the holes in his own heart without paying attention to those in hers. She'd felt joy and peace for a moment, riding before the wind with Hi at her back. But then she'd found out he'd only brought her because he was too big to fit down the well.

And that had brought her here. Scarred, tired, hungry, and drawing the sympathy of this woman whose pity came from the same weak, ignoble source as all other affections, and would ultimately fail just like they had. Her parents had left her, so long ago she barely even remembered their faces. Hileo had left her. Trant was gone as well, although he had always been open about his lack of true commitment to her so that didn't really come as a surprise.

Phaki smiled again, her heart splintering over the strain of doing so. The smiling was a tool Trant had equipped her with, at once a shield and a lure. She murmured her thanks and took the woman's bowl. This was an exchange, a bargain. The woman gave her soup, and in return she fulfilled her need for - for whatever it was she wanted today. That was all life was, really. A series of trades between different beings, each one seeking to satisfy their own desires above all else.

Another voice inside of her told her that wasn't true, but it was small - a newborn, really. She had only heard it two days ago.

"My name's Masua," said the woman. "What's yours?"

"Phaki. I'm from Dustubria."

"I'll make sure you go with me to the fields today. I can teach you how things are done around here, what the soldiers expect. They have no compassion for new arrivals. The bloodfencers brought you in alone?"

Another nod.

"Hmph. They've been bringing in more children nearly every day, because they're lighter to carry, I suppose. The Supreme Ruler demands more workers and seems to expect children to carry the workload of adults."

Another soldier rushed in through the rusted gates of the courtyard. He held a hurried, whispered conference with the other soldier, then turned to the slaves. He pointed at Masua's father. "Kazjad! The engineers are having a problem. You'll be escorted to the engineering building immediately."

"On whose orders, Corporal Nerulen? I don't believe you have the authority to change a slave's work duty."

"Uh..." the soldier looked at loss for words. "Just do it, okay?"

"I thought as much," replied Kazjad. "I'll help you. The usual conditions."

"As for the rest of you, the men go to the forest, the women and children to the fields. Line up now."

“MOVE! You lazy louts, what do you think we’re feeding you for?” Nerulen’s companion yelled. He turned to Nerulen, muttering “You have to be authoritative with this lot. They’re rebellious.”

“Aye, sir.”

Masua took Phaki’s hand and guided her into a line of slaves forming behind Nerulen. “Ayādar Himself has blessed us. This is going to be a good day.”

Phaki glanced over shoulder at Kazjad, who spoke in undertones with the other soldier. A half dozen more soldiers marched into the courtyard and started leading the men among the slaves outside the gate. Phaki and Masua followed Nerulen, who took his group of slaves in the opposite direction.

I wonder what he wants, thought Phaki as Kazjad vanished from her field of vision. She didn’t ask Masua what was making this a good day. There was no point in bothering her. Best let her think she was content until she actually needed something.

The street they walked down was paved with cracked stones and lined with more buildings like the one they had just exited, huge and ornate, but neglected. The mansion she had spent the night in was actually one of the better kept dwellings. Some had immense, scraggly thorn bushes covering the entire yard, preventing all access, at least through conventional methods. Phaki saw a vampire launch from himself from the highest tower of one of those buildings, spiraling downward for a moment before soaring into the sky.

They joined with other groups of slaves, also with soldiers as overseers. There didn’t seem to be very many vampires around. Another girl, younger than Phaki with jagged black hair that fell loosely about her neck, broke from one of the groups as it approached, running past her overseers and embracing Masua.

“Tatchka!” Masua knelt down to wrap her arms around the girl. “Where have you been?”

“Come on, keep moving,” said a soldier, slamming his spear butt against the ground. “You know she’ll be expected to harvest a full quota of leaves from the field today, and that won’t be easy if she doesn’t get started early.”

“I know,” said Masua, picking up Tatchka. “But she’s so young, and she’s terrified. She must have been separated from our group yesterday, and she didn’t manage to find her way back until now.”

“Look, lady, I don’t make the rules. Lord Darkmaw gave those orders, and if the Supreme Ruler’s cows don’t have enough food for the winter, guess who he blames?” The soldier pointed to his chest.

Masua frowned. “Wait, Lord Darkmaw? I thought Lord Deathfang was in charge of the fieldwork.”

“Lord Deathfang’s going to be temporarily absent,” replied the soldier. “Darkmaw is taking his place. He’s in charge of the forest detail as well.”

Tatchka whimpered and clutched Masua’s shoulders. Phaki would have liked to do that too, once. Trant and harsh experience had taught her to be stronger. Masua couldn’t convince the girl to let her put her down and instead carried her all the way to the fields.

“These are fields?” Phaki asked as the soldiers commanded the slaves to get to work. The border of the city was defined by a ring of shiny metal staked into the ground, studded, strangely, with squares of glass, like windows through which nothing could be seen but dirt. Past this

border was a desolate wilderness. Stumps of severed trees dotted the landscape, but beyond that Phaki could see no crops worth harvesting.

“Gippen! Klend!” Masua called, beckoning to two boys around Phaki’s own age. They dashed across the sand to join her. “This is Phaki, and she’s new here. Would you mind showing her how we harvest - I mean, how we fight the enemy around here?”

The two boys saluted. “Yes, sir, Princess Masua!”

Phaki looked at them in bewilderment.

“The first thing you need to know,” said Gippen. “Is how-“

“No, Gippen, I’ve got this,” said Klend. “You start catching spies.”

“Hey, I’m a general, you’re just a colonel!”

“An army that fights among itself is sure to lose the battle,” said Masua. She spoke softly to Tatchka, gently patting her head. “Would you like to join them today? I’m sure you could become good friends with Phaki.”

Tatchka shook her head vehemently.

Masua sighed. “Oh well, you can stay with me then.”

Klend and Gippen looked at each other. “The princess has spoken! Phaki, come with us.”

“Do you see any enemy spies?” Klend asked.

“What am I supposed to be looking for?”

“Little black stems sticking out of the sand. That’s their spyglasses.”

Gippen nodded solemnly. “They like to hide behind stumps. If you see one, pull one it.”

“Like this one?” Phaki asked as they passed a jagged grey stump. She wrapped her hand around the woody tube poking out from beneath a crack in dead tree’s bark. It refused to budge, so she pushed again the stump with her calloused foot, heaving with all her might. She fell backward as the tube shot from its hiding place. Something bright green exploded from the tube, smacking her in the face.

“Ow.” Phaki rolled over and stood back up. The small black tube had been replaced by a larger one sprouting four leaves, each one as long as she was tall and with their stems connected to the same spot in the tree’s bark.

“WHOOOHOOO! You found a general! Quick, attack its weak spot!” Klend and Gippen leapt on the plant, pulling on its stems.

“Come on, Phaki, it’s a tough one! We need your help!” Gippen knelt down and took the stalk of one of the four leaves in his mouth, biting a large chunk out of it. He spat it out with a grimace, then resumed bending the leaf. This time it broke off, and Gippen dragged it away triumphantly. Phaki followed his example as Klend finished breaking off his own leaf, stacking it on top of Gippen’s.

“This is our victory pile,” explained Klend. “When the counter arrives with the wagon we’ll put it in there, and then it’ll get fed to the cows. But until then we need guard it, ok?”

“Nah, we should focus on finding more spies,” said Gippen. “I’ll mark this pile so everyone knows it’s ours.” He broke off a portion of a leafstalk and wrote ‘Klend and Gippen’ in sloppy letters in the sand.

Phaki took the makeshift pen from him and added an additional mark. She didn’t know how to spell her own name, so she drew a crude picture of herself instead.

“That’s not how you spell your name,” said Klend. He erased Phaki’s drawing and replaced with some more inscrutable markings. “There, like that. Pha-ki.”

Gippen patted her on the back. “It’s okay if you don’t know how to spell. None of us knew either, until Princess Masua taught us. Now, off to find more spies!”

“We must defeat the enemy!” Klend declared. “Ha ha!”

They raced off again, darting behind stumps. As Phaki followed, she smiled again. It didn’t hurt as much this time.

The three of them hunted enemy spies until noon, when the counter’s wagon arrived. The driver was an immensely fat vampire - but not a lord, as Phaki was informed. The slaves dragged their leaves to the wagon while the vampire made notations in a heavy leather-bound ledger, its cover rotting with age. Was anything in this place not in a state of decay? At least he wasn’t writing in blood. That would be freaky. Now that she thought of it, that ink did have a slightly reddish tinge...

Some soldiers brought the midday meal in another wagon. It was the same lumpy, grayish stew as this morning, only not as warm. Phaki slurped it up. Pulling up spies was hard work, and made her hungry.

“If you think this is good food, just wait until a feast day comes,” remarked Gippen as he watched Phaki consume her stew.

“You have feasts?” Phaki put down her bowl.

“No, not us. The soldiers get the lords’ leftovers, and we get the soldiers’ leftovers. But when the lords have a feast, it trickles down to us.”

“There’s going to be a big feast sometime soon,” said Klend. “When all the spies are gone from the field, they won’t be able to feed the cows anymore, so the bloodfencing lords will eat them all. Then comes the war - that’s when all the soldiers are going to be useful, you see. I hope the war comes soon. The Supreme Ruler won’t need us anymore then, so he says he’s going to set all the slaves free.”

“Hush, Klend!” Gippen said. “Don’t say such things! The princess is scared of the war.”

Klend shrugged and swallowed his last bite of stew. “Seems silly to me. We’re not going to fight in it, after all. Anyway, Phaki, that’s the real reason we want to capture all the spies. Once all the work is done, we can go free.”

An invasion. The vampires are going to attack, Phaki thought. She’d heard there were lots of small raids by vampires along the Aithreni border, and of course Hi said she could never go out at night because of the vampires, but this sounded like something different. Not a raid, not a skirmish. *A war.* And fought by human soldiers, for some reason, not vampires.

Oh well. There was nothing Phaki could do about it. Even if she somehow managed to escape, cross the desert, and alert someone, nobody would believe her. Besides, the kings and lords of this world held no concern for her. Why should she even bother helping one side or another win in a war? The start of this war might be beneficial to her, if Klend was right. Right now she needed to focus on surviving.

“Why is Masua... er, the princess, worried about the war beginning?” Phaki asked.

Gippen glanced around nervously, then whispered, “I’m not sure, but I think they’re lying.”

“About what?”

“If the bloodfencer lords don’t need us anymore, they won’t set us free. They’ll kill us and drink our blood.”

“HA!” Klend snorted. “Vampires don’t drink human blood. What do we think we raise the cows for?”

“Actually, I heard that vampires only drink human blood,” said Phaki.

Gippen’s face went pale, and he almost fell off the stump he was sitting on. “See, it’s true! Princess Masua just didn’t tell us because she didn’t want to frighten us.”

“Hmph.” Klend looked thoughtful. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter anyway. One of the kings of fire will return and rescue us from the vampires if that happens.”

Gippen gasped. “You’re not supposed to talk about that either! We can’t let any of the vampires know that Princess Masua has a... a...” he glanced across the field, where a vampire adorned with flowing black cape that fell well below his feet hovered in the air. “Lord Darkmaw is here! He’s watching us!”

Klend shook his head. “Don’t worry. He can’t hear us all the way over there. But still... we should get back to work harvesting leaves.”

“What? What is that Princess Masua has?” Phaki asked as they ran across the field to a patch of stumps they hadn’t seen anyone visit earlier.

“A secret,” said Klend. “It’s too dangerous to talk about it here.”

Phaki bit back her tongue. She didn’t need to pry into other people’s lives. *Focus*, reminded herself. She needed to find enough ‘spies’ to meet her quota. Lord Darkmaw looked terrifying, and she doubted making him angry would be a pleasant experience.

And then what? Will you go on pulling leaves every day until they kill you? Are you just going to hope they’ll set you free instead? She couldn’t rely on the benevolence of vampires, by all accounts monstrous beings without a shred of pity within them. She needed a plan. But she couldn’t come up with a reasonable one, perhaps because she didn’t really know what she was planning for. She shoved the problem aside for the moment, resolving to work on it later.

Klend and Gippen were much more somber in the afternoon than in the morning. They hunted the plants with few words, and when they did speak they spoke of ‘leaves’, not ‘generals’ or ‘spies’. The heat spiked shortly after their brief meal, and Phaki was sweating as she hauled the titanic leaves towards the counter’s wagon. They worked for hours, the leaves becoming scarcer the more they spread out to look for them. The burning eye of the sun had already begun to close by the time they finished.

“That’s your quota,” said the counter, marking his ledger. He was eating some sort of scaly beast raw. Phaki’s stomach roiled as she watched him rip into it. There was no blood, however. Any that spilled vanished when he touched it, as if absorbed. “Just in time, too. The soldiers have arrived to escort you back to your barracks. Which number are you?”

“Ten,” said Gippen and Klend simultaneously. Klend elbowed Phaki as she stared blankly at the counter. “You’re with Princess Masua, so you’re nine.”

“Oh. Nine,” said Phaki.

The counter ripped some more flesh of his meal while he scribbled in the margins of his book. “Make sure you go home to your proper place, you understand? Lord Darkmaw won’t tolerate slaves who run off. He’s just what we need in this place. Deathfang was alright when he was young, but he’s gone soft. We’d have had another revolt on our claws if he’d been allowed

to continue giving the slaves so much slack. What are you still standing here for? Move! Get over to the soldiers. I need to take my wagon back.”

The counter closed his book, got down from his chair and waddled over to the back of his wagon to shut the doors. Phaki, Gippen and Klend departed, heading towards a throng of slaves slowly arranging themselves into lines based off their barrack number.

“Wait!” Masua called. She was hauling two leaves in either hand, trekking across the field. Tatchka was walking beside her, lifting Masua’s right arm above her head. “I have more.”

The counter grumbled, but reopened the back of the wagon and his book. Masua made her way across the barren sand, each step taken as if she carried a huge load on her back. Trembling, she swung the massive leaves over her head and into the wagon. Phaki’s brow creased as she watched the princess. Masua was evidently exhausted.

“Forty-seven... forty-eight...” murmured the counter as he flipped through his book. “You’re still under.”

Masua leaned against the side of the wagon, her breath ragged. Tatchka still clung to her arm. “I’ve been pulling double duty all day, caring for Tatchka as I worked. The Supreme Ruler is going to need another generation of strong, healthy workers after we’re gone, right? You know what Lord Deathfang would say to that.”

The counter slammed his ledger shut so violently that one of the covers fell off. “What Lord Deathfang would say doesn’t matter! What matters is that now I have to waste my time dealing with you and your pitiful brat. We’ll see what Lord *Darkmaw* has to say about that.” The counter spat at Tatchka, then turned and beckoned to Darkmaw, who was still hovering over the field. A cold dread gripped Phaki’s heart as he flew overhead.

Darkmaw landed by the counter, his cloak flowing behind him like living nightfall. He held conference with the counter for a moment, who pointed a clawed finger at Masua. Tatchka whimpered and curled into a ball behind Masua, burying her head in the back of the princess’s leg.

Across the barren field, the soldiers began driving the slaves back into the city and to their barracks. Phaki thought that she should follow them, if only to get away from Darkmaw’s terrible presence, but she remained rooted to the spot, Klend and Gippen similarly frozen on either side of her.

“Your excuse is pitiful,” spat Darkmaw. “The Supreme Ruler needs strong workers, you say? That’s right, and *only* the strong. Not this weakling! If the child stops you from carrying out your duty, leave her behind.”

Masua stood up straight and met Darkmaw’s gaze. The two faced each other and were still for a moment, a silent battle raging behind their eyes.

“You’re of Barrack Nine, aren’t you?” Darkmaw asked.

Masua nodded.

“I should have guessed. The same cesspit that fomented the revolt six years ago. I see your kind hasn’t learned its lesson.” Darkmaw took Masua’s face in one hand. “Too bad I don’t have permission to kill and end your corrupting influence for good.”

Darkmaw threw Masua to the ground, clawing her face as he did so. Masua put a hand up to her cheek. It came away stained with red. Tatchka screamed.

“Gippen!” Klend whispered. “We have to save the princess!”

Gippen shook his head. "There's nothing we can do! That's a full bloodfencing master out there. He'll slaughter her and drink her blood, and if we draw his attention he'll kill us too!"

"Stop panicking!" Phaki snapped. "You heard him say he doesn't have permission to kill her. Your princess will be fine."

Masua screamed.

Tatchka screamed again.

"Of course, there was no definite limit set on the amount of pain I could cause you," said Darkmaw. His cupped was outreached before him. A thin stream of red was floating through the air from Masua's wound to his hand. Was that her blood?

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO HER?!?" Klend screamed.

Phaki started and gripped his shoulder. "Hush! Don't antagonize the bloodfencing master!"

"Too late," murmured Gippen. Darkmaw turned towards the three children, a hideous smile on his face.

"What are children doing outside of their barrack after work hours?"

Klend stomped forward. "THAT'S OUR PRINCESS! STOP HURTING HER!"

"It's all right, Klend," gasped Masua, rising to her hands and knees. "Go home now. I'll be fine."

Darkmaw raised an eyebrow. "Princess? You seem to have quite a following. Too bad it's comprised entirely of children even weaker than yourself. I'll have to show you... weakness brings no rewards." He grabbed Tatchka by the collar of her shirt, ripping her away from Masua and throwing her rudely in the direction of Klend. "Your aid to others is not what the Supreme Ruler desires. The Supreme Ruler needs only the strong to serve in his army. We shall purge the weak from our ranks, and then the whole world will tremble before us." Darkmaw raised an arm, clawed hand outstretched. He smirked. "As for you... Princess, see that breaking the laws of nature will only bring pain to those you intend to help."

"Stop, please, stop!" Masua rose to her feet and stumbled to Darkmaw's side. "The children have no part in this. They are only weak because they are young. Give them time, and they will become strong. It's me you have a problem with."

"Really? As you wish," said Darkmaw. He thrust both arms toward Masua. Red streams of light shot from his palms and slammed into the princess, throwing her backward. They wrapped around her limbs, pinning her to the ground.

Tears sprung unbidden to Phaki's eyes. Tatchka was wailing, Masua was screaming in pain, Klend was yelling at Darkmaw. Phaki wanted nothing more than to escape from that spot. She let loose the strangled cry, and the spell binding her feet to the ground seemed broken. She turned and ran, not knowing, not caring, where she went. Tears blinded her eyes, and she stumbled and fell. The racing of her own heart grew louder and louder, until its roar nearly drowned out the horrible sounds behind her.

"Phaki... Phaki?" It was Gippen. Phaki slowly opened her eyes. She didn't know how long she'd lain there. "He's gone."

Slowly Phaki stood up. The sun was almost gone. Masua's form lay motionless on the sand. Klend knelt beside her, doing his best to comfort a distraught Tatchka.

"The princess needs our help."

Nodding, Phaki rose to her feet. She followed Gippen to Masua's side.

"Don't cry, Tatchka, the princess is still alive," said Klend. He lay a hand on Masua's breast. "See? She's breathing."

"Tatchka..." murmured Masua. She sucked an immense breath and opened her eyes. Tatchka's breath caught in her throat and she threw her arms around Masua, then gently kissed the scars on her cheek.

"She's never going to let go of you now," remarked Klend.

"Don't worry, Tatchka, I won't let go of you either," said Masua.

"What did he do to you?" Gippen asked.

"I don't know. It wasn't something I'd ever seen Deathfang do." Masua pushed herself up on her elbows, then collapsed back down. "I'm tired. I don't think I can walk."

"Then we'll carry you!" Klend declared. "Gippen, Tatchka, you pick up her feet. Phaki and I will get the shoulders."

Phaki complied, gripping Masua's left arm and heaving her a few inches off the ground. Shame burned in her breast. Why had she ran? She should have stayed, should have done... something. There was nothing she could have done, but somehow that didn't make running right. She should have at least tried, like Klend had.

Why am I feeling this? She'd been betrayed and abandoned before. Hadn't she learned? In a way, Darkmaw was right - Masua's love was foolish and weak. What sort of need were they meeting for her?

Masua smiled weakly as the children lifted her and stumbled forward. They were supplying her with something she needed - to get home. But that wasn't why she loved them. That wasn't why she'd intervened with Darkmaw on their behalf. If that was the case, she would have simply ignored them, harvested her own leaves, and returned to her barrack with the other slaves. No, the love had already been there. The need sprang from the love, not the other way around.

She's different, Phaki thought. She stumbled forward a few more steps, but moved too fast for little Tatchka, who dropped the leg she carried. This threw Gippen and Klend off balance, and the whole human apparatus tumbled to the ground. Masua's head sent up a puff of sand as it hit the ground. She laughed.

"I think I can walk now. Here, pull me up." She held out her arms. Gippen and Klend grabbed them and pulled Masua shakily to her feet. She took a step forward and tumbled, but Gippen caught her, acting as a human crutch. Phaki joined him, helping Masua stand up. She took another step, support by Klend and Tatchka on her other side. They walked the whole of the way back to Barrack Nine in that manner.

It was long past sunset when they passed through the warped gates. A lone fire flickered in the courtyard. Kazjad sat by it, looking out past the gates and into the night.

"Masua!" he exclaimed, leaping up. He rushed to his daughter's side and she collapsed on him. "What happened?"

"I'll tell you about it later," said Masua. "Could you help me get inside? I'd like to get some sleep."

"Of course. Gippen, Klend, thank you for helping my daughter get back. You'd better to your own barrack and get some sleep."

“You know, Gippen,” said Klend as they departed out the gate. “I don’t think I want the war to start soon after all. Not if that Darkmaw is going to be anywhere near it.”

“Tatchka, lend Phaki your sleeping mat,” said Masua. Tatchka pointed at Masua. “Yes, I know you want to sleep with me, and you can. But since you’re not sleeping on your own mat, I want you to give it to Phaki. Can you do that for me?”

Tatchka nodded and led Phaki into the mansion, past huddles of sleeping slaves, and to a mat rolled up against the wall. She pointed again, and Phaki unrolled the mat and lay down on it.

“Praise Ayādar you’re safe,” said Kazjad, leading Masua inside. They lay down on their mats, Tatchka resting her head on Masua’s stomach and closing her eyes. Phaki did the same. It was some time before she could fall asleep though, with her heart and head so full of questions she couldn’t answer.

Chapter 5

Masua was reading when Phaki awoke.

Phaki's eyes flew open as she was startled awake by some bizarre dream about Deathfang smashing a window at the top of a tower. That, or maybe it was the cold. She had no blanket, and the mansion's broken windows let in the night chill. Regardless of the reason, Phaki rubbed her eyes and sat up. It was dawn again. Masua was by the one of the windows, sitting with her arms wrapped around her legs. An open tome rested on her knees, its pages faintly illuminated by the pittance of light offered by the nascent sun. Masua bent over it, absorbed in thought.

A yawn rose to Phaki's lips. She stifled it and made her way over to the window. Masua started when she noticed Phaki looking over her shoulder. She grabbed the book, slamming it shut and making to hide it. After a moment, as if realizing Phaki wasn't a threat, she calmed and gently opened the book again. Phaki couldn't read the writing in the volume, but she knew it was old. Old, but not as old as most things in the city. Or was it simply not as neglected?

"Phaki," Masua whispered. Her eyes were red from weeping. "What brings you here?"

Phaki hesitated for a moment, then pointed at the book. "What is that?"

"It's... a secret. You must not tell any of the soldiers, or even any of the other slaves unless you ask me or Father first, about this. Do you understand?"

Phaki nodded. "But... what is it?"

"A book. A book full of ancient stories from the time before the vampires came, before the Supreme Ruler became supreme. You must understand that the Supreme Ruler would be angry if he knew we had it, or the other one like it."

Phaki knelt down beside her. "Can you read it to me?"

Masua was silent, her face blank.

Rainfire, what am I asking? she thought. Masua was clearly distraught. Surely she wouldn't want to be bothered by such trivial requests. Phaki was wasting-

Masua breathed in deeply. A shudder ran through her body, as if she was awakening from a trance. "Of course."

The story was an old one, Phaki realized, older even than the ones she had heard from the storyteller. It was set before humans had fled the Elder World. Phaki was surprised to learn that the new world had been inhabited before that.

Thaddeus was the name of the hero of the story. One of the kings of fire, Masua called him - a man who had been granted supernatural abilities by Rehon of the alyän, intended to fight against vampires. Apparently his powers involved immunity to fire and the ability to generate flames from his own body, feeding them with some unseen fuel. The tale was a rather tragic one. Thaddeus's friend was captured by vampires and Thaddeus tried to rescue him. He came upon the most fearsome vampire chief and they engaged in a mighty duel. Thaddeus emerged victorious, only to find that his foe had actually been all that was left of his friend.

"So all the vampires were once people, then?" Phaki asked.

"I think so," Masua said. "A while ago some of the Supreme Ruler's master bloodfencers died-"

Masua paused. A grimace formed on her face, but just as quickly as it appeared, she shook it away and resumed speaking. "And he needed some new vampires to take their place. He

had some of the soldiers engage in gladiatorial fights to prove who among them was the strongest and most vicious. Those who won were ‘promoted’ to the rank of bloodfencer. Something the Supreme Ruler did to them made them change. They forgot everything about their past lives... it was as if they had lost their souls entirely.”

“Can they ever change back?”

“Father says there is a way, but it is long and difficult, and no vampire he knows has ever wanted to take it. He thinks the process could be expedited, but doing so would almost certainly result in the death of the vampire involved.”

Phaki nodded. She glanced back at the inscrutable pages of the book. “Why are you reading this story? It seems depressing.”

“Because the kings of fire may one day return,” Masua said. “After Thaddeus’s time, the vampires vanished for a thousand years before the hubris of another ruler caused them to be recreated. The kings of fire reemerged as well, and after a war unprecedented in its devastation, they managed to destroy the vampires once more. Now it has been another thousand years, and the vampires oppress us for the third time. For a while they have been contained to Bazat. Soon they will spill out and attack the rest of the world.

I have seen that we are slaves. The Supreme Ruler and his minions are too strong for us to defeat if we were to rebel. Our only hope, unless Ayādar were to step down from heaven and intervene directly, is for a hero to come from outside the desert and lead us out of this wretched place. I can only hope and pray that the hero will come, but if he does I think he’ll be one of the kings of fire, born to defeat the evil of the Supreme Ruler.”

Phaki heart raced. She wished she knew more of world politics outside of the streets of Dustubria. But she’d heard a little about the dynasty that ruled Aithrenar to the west, and she that the royal family held powers similar to the ones Masua had described. “I think...” she said. “That some the kings of fire have already returned!”

“What?” Masua looked up, a shocked expression on her face. “Tell me. We get news of the outside world so infrequently here.”

“Well, the Aithreni royal family is full of them. They call it... what was it... ‘the Talent’ or something like that. And they shoot fire. Just like Thaddeus in the story. I think it was why they were able to make all the tribes of Aithrenar obey them in the first place.”

“Oh, Phaki!” Masua face burst into a bright smile, and she embraced Phaki, laughing. “I’m so glad to hear this!”

“Crazy woman, what are you laughing about?” one of the other slaves snapped, sitting up. “Some of us are still trying to get some sleep around here before the work day begins, you know!”

Masua lowered her voice, her face becoming serious once more. “Do they know about us?”

Phaki shook her head. “They help fight the vampires when their towns are being raided, but I don’t think they know about the human slaves, or have any intention of coming to rescue you.”

“Oh well.” Masua’s face fell. “I suppose they’re only people, after all. But perhaps there are others, maybe even some who are hiding their abilities at the moment. God could be preparing one for the purpose of freeing us even as we speak.”

If that's the case, he'd better prepare quickly, Phaki thought, recalling the events of yesterday. Masua couldn't possibly work as hard as the vampires demand of her, fulfilling both her and Tatchka's quotas while taking care of Tatchka at the same time. If Darkmaw continued to be as cruel to her as he had been yesterday...

A vision flashed before Phaki's mind, one that smote her heart with its falsehood. The vision portrayed Hileo as that hero, traveling across leagues of sand and battling legions of vampires, to find her. He rescued her and freed all the other slaves in the city. As sweet as it first appeared, the idea turned bitter almost immediately. Whatever purpose she served in Hileo's life certainly wasn't important enough for him to justify embarking on a perilous journey to a city he couldn't even know existed.

"I'll have Father call a meeting of the faithful remnant tonight. Would you mind telling everyone there what you just told me?"

Phaki nodded, although it occurred to her that Masua might not even survive that long. How far under your quota did you have to fall for a master bloodfencer to get permission from the Supreme Ruler to execute you? "Masua," she asked. "Have any of the slaves ever been... executed?"

Silence.

"Masua? Princess?" Phaki looked at Masua's face. It was expressionless, her eyes staring off into some void. Her body was rigid. Suddenly something snapped, and she breathed again. Without answering Phaki's inquiry, she stood up and brushed off her dusty, patched-together dress.

"You didn't get any dinner last night, so you must be hungry," said Masua. "Fortunately, Father was at the engineer's building last night. His own father was a cannon engineer in the Bazatense army back in the days before the Vampire Apocalypse, and he inherited some of skill. Technically the Supreme Ruler has banished from any work duty other than menial labor ever since the... the revolt, but the engineers sometimes still seek his advice. They pay him in dried meat from the soldier's storehouses."

Masua pulled some strips of meat from a bag in the corner and handed one to Phaki. "Eat it. It will keep your strength up. Today is going to be hard day."

"How do you know?"

"They always come after the easy ones."

Yesterday was an easy one? Phaki wanted to scream. But then a bell started ringing, and soldiers shouted out in the courtyard, and the slaves rose almost as one and made their way outside to respond to their master's call.

The first meal of the day was uneventful. Masua talked with the slave first in line and convinced him to share his bowl with Phaki after he was done. Phaki got in line last so he'd have time to finish his own gruel before handing her his bowl. The downside of this arrangement was that she had barely any time to scarf down her food before the soldier began herding the slaves out of the courtyard. Kazjad was drawn off again, this time summoned by one of the engineers in person. Apparently they needed his help with one of the wagons for the army.

It was strange that they weren't competent enough to fix it by themselves. But then, Phaki thought as she eyed the engineer, they probably hadn't had much training. His clothes were just as shabby as the other slaves, even though most of the workers in Barrack Nine

seemed to envy his higher position. And it wasn't just the slaves that were ill-dressed. Even the vampires' suits were ragged and torn, although that helped give them an air as one of a ghastly apparition of death. Only the soldiers' armor seemed new.

Phaki was surprised when the soldiers didn't separate the men from the women and children. Instead, they herded all the soldiers down the streets, away from the fields and across streets that had been reduced to dirt. The cobblestones that had once lined them had been torn up and put in piles off to the side, usually in the alleys between abandoned houses.

"But why does the Supreme Ruler want the stones moved in the first place?" Phaki asked.

"I'm not sure," said Masua. "Something to do with his warbeasts. Mainly, though, I think it's just menial labour meant to keep us busy until the war starts."

Regardless of its purpose, moving stones was what they were expected to do today. They came to a section of the city where the dirt streets gave way to cobbled ones running in front of more empty dwellings. The command the soldiers gave to the slaves was simple: pick up the stones. Set them in piles. The counter would show up again later to ensure each one met his quota.

Phaki got to work beside Masua, keeping an eye out for Gippen and Klend. No other groups of slaves appeared. Phaki wondered what sort of work the vampires had them doing. Whatever it was, it couldn't be harder than this. The labour was arduous, the stones seeming to weigh as much as she did. Tatchka didn't stand a chance of moving one, especially since she kept one hand clinging to Masua's skirt just above the knee.

Phaki bent down and wrapped her arms around a cobblestone before rising up and carrying it a few feet to the edge of the road. She should do something to help Masua. Trant's face appeared in her mind, telling her she owed nothing to the woman, that she ought to focus on saving herself. Anything beyond that would only bring her suffering. Phaki banished that train of thought from her mind. In reality, it wasn't what her streetwise elder brother would say. Keeping Masua alive was in her best interest. She had already helped Phaki immensely and would probably continue to do so. Or so Phaki hoped.

No, it went deeper than that. Masua had raised questions in Phaki's soul, questions as recently as yesterday morning she would have dismissed as preposterous. Trant may have been older and more experienced than she was, but he couldn't know everything, and Masua was a living contradiction to his philosophy.

So either Trant was wrong, or Masua was an idiot. Those were the only two explanations she could think of for what had happened last night.

"Nice to see Deathfang's little pet finally being treated equally with the rest of us," a voice sneered. Phaki looked up. The speaker was an older slave, bearded and wrinkled. He was looking at Masua, who was bowed under the weight of a stone.

Masua heaved the stone up into the air and set it on top of a pile. "What do you mean?"

"Everybody knows the former master of our work duty favored you," he said, spitting. "Always giving you the easiest assignments, you and your father both. Even when you had the same work he lowered your quotas."

"Ah, just shut up and get back to work, Vlark!" another slave yelled.

Vlark spat at Masua again. "I'm old, too old for this world. They'll dispose of me soon enough. What do you think you're doing, getting all high-and-mighty with us? Do you really

think taking care of that child is going to solve anything?" He indicated Tatchka. "She'd be better off if you let her die. We're fodder for the lords; our lives have no meaning. We're all doomed. I can't stand you people who act like this isn't true!"

Phaki shot up. "Well, maybe that's because it's not true! I think one of the kings of fire is going to show up and lead us in a glorious revolution against the vampires!"

"Phaki!" Masua gasped. "Don't say such things out in the open. You never know who might be listening."

Vlark kicked some dirt at Masua, muttered some obscenities under his breath. "Fools. That talk led to the revolution last time, and you all know how that went. You're going to get us killed."

"If, according to you, we're all going to die anyway, why does it matter?" Phaki asked.

Vlark spat again, this time at her, and went back to moving rocks. Phaki did the same, allowing herself a small flush of pride. She wasn't really sure how brilliantly defusing Vlark's argument would help Masua, but it was a start.

Klend scrambled over a wall and landed in the alleyway where Phaki was stacking the stones. "Oh, there you are, Phaki, Princess Masua. It took us forever to find you. The vampires wouldn't tell us where you were."

"Klend," said Masua. "Did you run away from your group?"

"None of the vampires who were supposed to be watching us were paying any attention," replied Klend. "We got away easy. They can't catch us in the city. Too many places for us to hide."

"That's still dangerous. You could get in trouble," Masua chided.

"We've come to help you," said Klend. "If they get angry at us for not filling our own quotas, we'll just hide in one of the empty barracks for a night. The counter's lazy. He won't bother chasing us, and everyone knows the Supreme Ruler doesn't actually care about what happens to these stones."

"Thank you, but you really should go back," said Masua. "I'll be fine."

"No, you won't," said Klend firmly. "Not if you complete Tatchka's quota as well as your own. Gippen should be here in a moment - he had to make a detour to check on his other project. With all of us working together, we'll easily move enough stones to satisfy that bastard Darkmaw."

"Watch your language, Klend," Masua murmured. But she offered no further protest to Klend's aid, nor Gippen's when he arrived.

Sweat saturated Phaki's clothing by the end of the day, when Darkmaw descended from the sky to speak with the counter. Gippen and Klend had darted off several minutes earlier. Darkmaw grabbed the ledger from the counter, reading the marks made next to Masua's name himself. Then he went over to the pile of stones assigned to Masua and counted them personally, becoming increasingly dissatisfied as he went on. Finally he summoned his bloodblade and slammed it repeatedly into the pile, sending rock chips flying in all directions. Masua shielded her face from the onslaught. Darkmaw shot her an incensed glare before propelling himself into the air, vanishing from sight.

Phaki snickered, relieved at Darkmaw's frustration. Masua was safe for the day, it seemed, although this proved that Darkmaw wasn't done with her. Phaki was content that she -or

actually, Klend and Gippen- had foiled whatever the lord was planning for today. He'd try again tomorrow, she suspected, but they'd deal with that challenge when it came.

Masua took Phaki aside for a moment after Darkmaw left. "Phaki, I implore you not to tell Kazjad of what's happening with Lord Darkmaw."

"What? Why?"

"He loves me fiercely and I know he'd do anything to protect me, especially since Mother died. Rash things, and terrible things. I don't know why Darkmaw hates me, but whatever happens, I'll suffer the consequences myself. Don't feel an obligation to protect me."

Appreciation welled in Phaki's heart. She nodded, without actually agreeing.

When they returned to the barracks, the soldiers left them, returning to their own lodgings. Phaki supposed they had no reason to fear an escape by the slaves. The city was surrounded by miles of endless desert. Any attempt to leave it could only result in death.

The slaves took their food and lounged idly around the courtyard. Kazjad asked Masua about her day, and she reassured him that nothing was wrong. Phaki didn't speak to him. For now, Darkmaw seemed to be under control. As long as Masua moved her quota of stones, he couldn't harm her without breaking the Supreme Ruler's laws.

"What about you, Father? What did the engineers need you to do this time?" Masua asked, changing the subject.

"Nothing significant. Some idiot found a pack of tobacco buried in an old dresser and decided to smoke it next to the water barrels. There was still some residual gas in the air from the last rainfall and it exploded, causing a fire that damaged some of the wagons."

Phaki cocked her head in curiosity. The rain had lasted long enough ago that there shouldn't be any explosive gas remaining in the water. Rainwater usually purified itself within one or two days.

"I helped them repair the wagons quickly and they paid with some more dried meat." Kazjad indicated a second bag in the corner of the mansion's entryway. "If you want to take in any more orphans, there should be plenty of food for them."

"No, Tatchka should be the last one for a while," Masua laughed. "Unless the vampires bring in more children from the outside world."

Kazjad smiled, then stepped closer and dropped his voice to a whisper. Only by standing on the tips of her toes and wiggling her ears could Phaki hear him. "I'll start gathering the faithful for our meeting tonight. If Klend and Gippen show up, tell them to spread the word, but to do it secretly."

"I know," said Masua. "Klend in particular can be a bit overenthusiastic."

"Do you know where Tatchka's parents are?" Phaki asked after Kazjad departed. Tatchka sat on Masua's lap on a bench, eating a strip of jerky.

"Her father left his family to pursue advancement through the ranks of the soldiers," said Masua. "He doesn't even know if his daughter is still alive. Her mother was stunned at his betrayal and lost her will to live. A sickness claimed her soon afterwards. Tatchka was traumatized and hasn't spoken her mother's death. I don't think she understands why her father abandoned them."

"Maybe he only loved her because he needed her. Maybe he really did love her for a time, but once that need was satisfied and a greater opportunity came along, his love vanished."

“I guess you could look at it that way.” Masua looked over the courtyard’s walls. “Strength is the only virtue prized in the Supreme Ruler’s army. Any attachment to a family would be perceived as weakness.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“From what I’ve heard, he was a strong soldier, one of the greatest warriors. He claimed victory in one of those gladiatorial fights I mentioned this morning. Now, the form that was once his body is somewhere in this city, watching us, but I believe his soul is departed forever. Oh, here comes Klend.”

Instead of coming through the gates, the boy climbed over the wall of the courtyard. Phaki enjoyed climbing herself. It was a useful talent to have in Dustubria, especially after stealing fruit from a merchant’s stand in the marketplace. She’d done that often with Trant, and needed to be able to make an escape route anywhere.

“Where’s Gippen?” Masua asked.

Klend jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Off again. He’s working on his secret project.”

Masua sent Klend off again to spread the word about the upcoming meeting. When Gippen showed up fifteen minutes later, she gave the same command to him. By the time they returned night had begun to fall. Tatchka had drifted off to sleep in Masua’s arms. Masua gently laid on her a mat inside the barrack before turning to leave.

Bidding her to be quiet, Masua led Phaki outside the mansion’s boundaries and to another building sporting elegant, curvaceous architecture and bizarre, overgrown statues scattered among the courtyard. One depicted a humanoid wolf. Another, a weeping man scratching his belly with a rake.

“We should be safe holding our gatherings here,” Masua said. “The soldiers are either asleep or having drunken parties. The alcohol is the one thing that’s improved over the decades this city’s been neglected, or so I hear. As for the vampires, they can see in the dark and most of them are nocturnal, but they’re usually busy hunting or raiding or on some other errand of the Supreme Ruler’s inscrutable will. Here, take my hand.”

Phaki gripped Masua’s right hand and Gippen took her left. Klend held Phaki’s other hand.

“Don’t let go,” said Klend, giving her a squeeze. “You’ll get lost.”

“What? Where are we going?” Phaki asked, bewildered.

Masua laughed. “Don’t worry, it’s not as bad as he makes it sound.” She led the way forward into the mansion, through the doorway long since divested of its door. The shadows of the night cast eerie shapes across the floor. Masua knelt down, momentarily releasing Phaki in order to open a trapdoor in the floor. The opening revealed a staircase descending into utter blackness.

“This is why we need to hold hands,” Masua explained.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe. I have no fear of darkness!” Klend leapt past the trapdoor and onto the stairway, dragging Phaki behind him. Masua snagged Phaki’s hand again and followed along with Gippen.

Inside the basement the only light came from a single candle by which the faint outline of Kazjad’s face was visible. Klend guided the train of people to the far wall, where they sat down.

“Oh sorry, Renwa, was that you?” Masua asked as she bumped into a pitch-black figure. “Oh, no it wasn’t Renwa? Oh well, sorry then, whoever you are.”

“What is this meaning for?” Phaki asked.

“Do you think we’d keep those books to ourselves? We have perhaps the only books left in Zjwazimar, since the vampires destroyed the rest. One of them is the first part of *The Ayädiad*, probably the oldest book in the world, which tells the story of the creation of humankind and the Creator’s plan for them.”

“So it’s a meeting for telling stories?”

“True stories. So we don’t forget our past. Remembering that there’s a world beyond vampires and servitude can be difficult at times.”

Kazjad began to speak. He was reading a story about some ancient hero, a merin who fought against the forces of evil despite the apparent futility of his struggle. He managed to win anyway through a series of providential occurrences. With the story resolved, Kazjad shut the book and looked out over the invisible crowd.

“My friends, the end is near for us,” he said. “This city’s resources are nearly drained. The discarded lumber around it has been harvested, either used to build the army’s wagon or to heat them during winter nights. Nothing new has been built for decades, but for weapons, and that which was already here has not been maintained. The Supreme Ruler no longer can derive any benefit from it. His armies are nearly prepared. Soon he will begin the war. When that day comes, we will become irrelevant. His promise to release us cannot be trusted. We must take action before his bloodfencers come to utterly destroy us. It is time to consider another revolution.”

A wave of gasps rose into the air.

“I am not saying we need to storm the Supreme Ruler’s palace immediately,” said Kazjad. “To do so would only hasten our deaths. But we must begin to plan. My daughter has told me that one of the newcomers brought news that the kings of fire have returned to the outside world. If so, it may be a sign that the reign of terror inflicted by the vampires is coming to an end. You know that the Creator loves good and hates evil. And we are living under a clear manifestation of evil. If we rose up against it, we could not be doing wrong. We may earn our deaths, but those are coming anyway. But there is a chance, however slight, that we will be victorious, like the merin the story, and we will vanquish evil and win our freedom. Please, consider what I am saying. We will discuss it more at the next meeting.”

Chapter 6

Darkmaw took surprisingly little time to gather the evidence needed to attain the Supreme Ruler's permission for the execution of Masua.

The day of reckoning turned out to be the second one since the meeting in the basement. Phaki, Gippen and Klend, working together, had been able to complete enough pointless labour to fulfill Masua's quota. This inflicted great consternation upon Lord Darkmaw, who counted the pile of stones three times before screaming something about 'deadlines' and 'the Merchant', then flying off towards the Supreme Ruler's palace. That night they had spoken in hushed yet excited tones about the prospect of revolution. Gippen insisted they should simply steal the soldier's wagons and flee, since the powers granted to the vampires through the Supreme Ruler's dark magic made them nearly impossible to defeat in battle. Certainly this was true when the battle was against an untrained, unarmed rabble of slaves. Phaki sympathized with Gippen, but remembered that Deathfang had flown fast enough to bring her all the way from the outskirts of Dustubria in just one day. The vampires would surely catch up with slow-moving wagons and destroy them. Kazjad reassured them that he and any other potential leaders he could find would think through all the options as thoroughly as possible before settling on any one course of action.

Phaki felt sure they had more time to do so, since Gippen and Klend reported that all of the soldiers who were supposed to be watching them either didn't know or didn't care that they were sneaking off to help Masua. So they should be able to simply repeat this little charade until whatever grudge Darkmaw had against Masua faded away. At least, that was what she believed until Darkmaw shot out of the sky on the fourth day of her internment in Zjwazimar, bearing a written order signed by the Supreme Ruler himself.

"Let it be known that the slave known as Masua has been charged with subversion of the Supreme Ruler's authority and sowing the seeds of rebellion," read Darkmaw in an imperious tone. He'd brought several other bloodfencers along with him, as if he needed witnesses to the execution. "Upon incontrovertible evidence, she has been found guilty and sentenced to death. Now."

Masua looked up from the stone she was extracting from the ground, fear and shock on her face. Klend leapt to his feet, hands clenched into fists.

"What evidence? I don't see any evidence," he said.

"The testimony of one who's been watching her very closely of late," said Darkmaw, raising an eyebrow. "And I believe this openly defiant streak in one of her acolytes proves his point. Masua is clearly a dangerous influence. She even has her underlings call her, a mere slave, by titles such as... 'princess'"

Klend sputtered and gasped, unable to answer the charge.

"Anyway," said Darkmaw with a wave of his hand. "I must thank the man who provided us with this information, a slave by the name of Vlark. He tells us she has minions who go so far as to say they'd, quote: 'do anything for her'."

Vlark stood up, anger evident on his face, as the rest of the gathered crowd of slaves shifted their fearful glances to him. "You bastard, I was supposed to be anonymous!"

“Oh, it doesn’t really matter,” said Darkmaw. “You see, this order also says, and this really is one of my favorite parts, that Vlark is a traitor, so I get to kill him too.”

Vlark’s features paled. He turned and ran, only to be pursued and struck down by Darkmaw within a few minutes. Darkmaw held out his palm, summoning blood from the fatal wound in Vlark’s chest in order to power his own dark magic. He continued to read the script on the sheet of paper.

“Klend,” Phaki whispered. “Go find Kazjad. Now. He’ll know what to do.”

Kazjad had been summoned to the engineering department for the fourth consecutive day that morning. Masua had commented on the strangeness of there being so many problems that he was needed to fix, but couldn’t think of an explanation.

“But what about Masua?” Klend asked.

“I’ll distract him. Just go - and remember to tell him to save my life too, ok? And Gippen and Tatchka’s, just in case,” Phaki said. Klend nodded briefly and took off running in the direction of the Supreme Ruler’s palace.

“No,” Masua said.

“If you die, who will take care of Tatchka?” Phaki asked. She had planned out what she’d do in this situation yesterday while she worked, although she hadn’t dreamed she’d have to put her plan into action so soon. If she was lucky, Darkmaw wouldn’t catch her and kill her. She was extremely glad, now, that she hadn’t obeyed Hileo’s overprotective advice to stay in the apartment all day long. If it weren’t for her days spent dashing frenetically about Dustubria, trying to keep up with a ruthless Trant, she’d never have developed the skills needed to evade Darkmaw long enough to Kazjad to do something.

Phaki took a deep breath and selected a moderately sized stone. Darkmaw flew nonchalantly over to where Masua remained, kneeling, seemingly frozen in place and resigned to her fate. Phaki lifted the rock in over head and hurled it with all her might at Darkmaw. The projectile struck him square in the chest, knocking back a few inches through the air. The vampire sputtered indignantly for a moment before he found the source of the attack.

“So you want to die as well? Have your way, then.” Darkmaw summoned his bloodblade and charged at Phaki. “I should have thought earlier to ask the Supreme Ruler for permission to kill her precious children as well. It seems a fitting lesson for all who are watching. As I spill your blood on the streets, it will serve as a sign that authority of Deathfang in this city has come to an end. It is Darkmaw who is most favored of the Supreme Ruler.”

Phaki darted down an alleyway. This was different than being chased by irritated fruit merchants or vigilante enforcers. Darkmaw could fly, and he had other powers as well, the exact capabilities of which she didn’t comprehend. Plus, she was unfamiliar with the terrain, and she couldn’t lose Darkmaw. If she did, he’d just go back and kill Masua, unless she’d replaced her bleak resolve to take Darkmaw’s wrath on herself with enough common sense to hide somewhere.

A wall confronted her. Her hands flew to it, fingers inserting themselves into handholds as if by instinct. She scaled the obstacle and landed on the roof of a single story house, where she could Darkmaw flying towards her like a bullet. She ran, jumping across the gaps between houses. The next house had a balcony. As Darkmaw drew near, she leapt off it, landing and rolling with acquired alacrity. She darted underneath the balcony. Darkmaw descended from the

sky with the strength of a thunderbolt, but failed to change his direction. He crashed directly into the balcony, rattling its support with the strength of his impact.

He can fly fast, but not change direction quickly, Phaki thought as Darkmaw rose back into the air, looking dazed. He glanced at the cohort of bloodfencers accompanying him, who followed at a much slower pace.

“Well? Why aren’t you helping capture her already?” Darkmaw demanded.

One of the bloodfencers in the lead snickered. “Is this the great Lord Darkmaw admitting he can’t even defeat a little girl without help? Maybe we’d be better off with Lord Deathfang back in charge after all.”

“Never mind, you’re an idiot and misunderstood me, that’s all,” said Darkmaw. “I AM PERFECTLY CAPABLE OF HUNTING DOWN AND ANNIHILATING ANYONE WHO OPPOSES ME! JUST WATCH!”

His bloodblade appearing in his hand, Darkmaw cut the balcony free of the wall. It fell to the alleyway below, splintering with a resounding crash. But Phaki had already made her way to another building ten yards in the distance. She waved at Darkmaw and whistled cheerily.

Phaki’s momentary celebration ended as Darkmaw turned on her, murderous rage exuding from every pore in his body. She darted away, sprinting across rooftops and weaving between buildings. She led Darkmaw on this merry (if deadly) chase for the next ten minutes, careful to never let him lose sight of her for too long. At one point she sprung through a shattered window, over a countertop, and out another window to grab onto the gutter and pull herself onto the roof. From there she grabbed a loose roofing tile and hurled it at Darkmaw’s back while the vampire was slashing at the top of another building. The angrier she could make, the better, so she made sure to laugh mischievously when he spotted her.

Finally, Phaki raced past a neighborhood that had once been packed with tenements and came abruptly to the end of the city. Before her were two giant circles in the sand marked off with rope. She pressed her back against a wall and glanced around. No sign of Darkmaw. Had she lost him? She hoped Kazjad had arrived in time. This whole plan would fail if Masua’s fear of him doing ‘something’ terrible were unfounded. Phaki didn’t think there could be anything much more terrible to him than losing his only child.

Only the slightest flutter of a cape alerted her of Darkmaw’s attack as he shot down from the sky. A brief glance at the sky, and Phaki saw the dark shape descending upon her at unfathomable speeds. She leapt aside a split second before he crashed into the ground where she’d been standing, the force of his impact shattering the cobblestones to bits.

Darkmaw rose to his feet, his head on sideways. He soon got it straightened out, however, and looked at Phaki. A jolt of fear spiked through Phaki’s heart as she ducked under a swing of his bloodblade. The weapon still singed the top of her head. She made a frantic dash away from Darkmaw, out across the circle in the sand. A few minutes earlier, she’d been enjoying humiliating Darkmaw. But with her death so imminent, she felt only raw terror.

Phaki stumbled as she scrambled backward and fell on the sand. Darkmaw came upon her and prepared to strike. A long, high-pitched sound hummed through the air, somewhere between a whistle and a screech, as if a wounded beast was playing a dirge on a broken flute. The sands upon which Phaki lay began to shift. Something rumbled in the earth beneath her.

A colossal shape burst from the ground, slamming into Phaki's back and sending her flying into the air. She landed awkwardly on the sand beyond the rope circle. Darkmaw screamed as he slammed bodily into the iridescent-scaled beast that now stood between him and Phaki, halfway buried beneath the sand. Phaki beheld the creature with wonder. The portion of it that was visible was three times her height, with long ears that fell halfway down its back. Its whole body shone, scales reflecting the sunlight in a cacophony of colors. It had a pointed nose sprouting silvery whiskers, and fearsome fangs adorned its mouth. Short forearms batted at Darkmaw as he tumbled through the air, trying to fly away. The beast opened its jaws, exposing rows of sharp teeth, and let loose a monstrous roar, the sheer force of which seemed to fling Darkmaw backwards.

Cursing, the bloodfencer fled. He flew back into the city, the beast showing no interest in pursuing him. Phaki edged her away around the circle - the creature had emerged from the center of the area marked off with rope - and towards the building. The beast sunk back into the sand until only its head was visible, its great brown eye observing Phaki as she made her escape.

"Phaki!" It was Gippen, standing at the edge of the tenements, beckoning to her. "Don't go near the warbeast pits alone. She'll be angry now, that she hasn't been fed."

Phaki nodded, casting another glance over her shoulder at the majestic creature. The warbeast snarled, its fangs bared. Phaki's heart rabbited and she hastened away from it, joining Gippen.

"Lord Darkmaw will go after Masua now," said Gippen. "Follow me. I know the quickest way back."

Gippen sprinted through the city, Phaki straining to keep up. Her heart was still pounding in exhilaration, but her limbs grew leaden. She didn't usually need to run over long distances, but then, she'd never been pursued by a flying vampire before.

They arrived just in time to see Darkmaw grab Masua by the arm and throw her to the ground. She'd made some attempt to flee, it seemed, but to no avail. Phaki and Gippen skidded to a stop at the torn-up section of street, frozen in horror as Tatchka wept.

"STOP!" Klend screamed.

"YOU HAVE NEW ORDERS FROM YOUR MASTER!" Kazjad bellowed, sprinting behind Klend. "YOUR PERMISSION TO HURT MY DAUGHTER IS REVOKED, EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY!"

Darkmaw glanced at them in surprise. "It's too late for that. I won't stand for any more tricks!"

"I'm afraid it's true, Darkmaw," came a new voice. Darkmaw gasped in fear. His bloodblade vanished, as if being reabsorbed into his hand.

A figure clad in rich, purple robes descended from the sky, legs casually crossed. He flew as if he were a bloodfencer, but lacked fangs or claws. His head was adorned with a crown of metal, from which three red gems burned forth. In his right hand he held an all-metal spear, glinting in the sun. He leveled it at Darkmaw, who retched, as if physically repulsed by the weapon's presence.

"Su-supreme Ruler!" Darkmaw exclaimed, stumbling backwards.

"I admire your enthusiasm, but I must command you to channel towards some other end," said the Supreme Ruler. "Kazjad has just made me an offer I couldn't possibly refuse. I would

hate to traumatize him by letting his daughter die before we even got to start on our new project together.”

Kazjad bowed his head, arms clasped behind his back.

“Father, what have you done?” Masua whispered.

The Supreme Ruler laughed. “Merely agreed to help usher in the future. You see, my vampires, while useful, have one key limitation.” He tossed the spear to his other hand and swung it around, gently tapping Darkmaw with its blunt end. Darkmaw recoiled and pushed himself away, then retched again.

“And any human engineers I’ve found to help me have proved to be utterly incompetent.” The Supreme Ruler threw the spear in the air, flipping it and catching it upright in his other hand. “The only exception is Kazjad, who has the both the innovation and experience I need.” He turned to Kazjad. “Come with me at once. We’ll want to get started soon if we’re to finish our preliminary designs before the Merchant arrives. You too, Darkmaw. I have other tasks for you. As for the rest of you, you’re dismissed. Go home, rest, spend whatever time you can with your families. No quotas for today - a sign of my pleasure.”

A cheer rose up from the slaves - all except for Masua, who looked more burdened down than ever as she rose to her feet, picked up and quieted Tatchka, and began the long walk back to Barrack Nine. Her, and Phaki, whose eyes were transfixed to the Supreme Ruler’s retreating form. The three incarnadine gems had burned themselves into her mind. She could still feel their presence. She remembered seeing them before, or at least an illustration of them, in the storyteller’s book. The storyteller’s voice echoed in her mind, relating a story about the one who wielded those gems.

The Supreme Ruler was Kotor, last of the dark alyän to remain free, an ancient being of an immortal race incomprehensible to mankind. It was him and his kind who, long ago, had forced the last remnants of humanity to flee the Elder World, overwhelming any who remained in an unstoppable tide of darkness. Phaki slowly recovered from the horror that had struck her heart and aided Masua as she returned to the barracks.

Chapter 7

“So, you know, what’s it like in the vampire city?” Hileo asked. It had been two fairly uneventful days since the battle against the rogues. The scenery hadn’t changed much as the journey across the desert continued. The lack of major landmarks meant Hileo wasn’t sure he’d be able to find his way home without a guide, or at least a map. But that would come later. He’d have to rescue Phaki first, and to do that he’d need information about the vampire city. Despite the wild tales he told back in the tavern, Robiroto had been close-lipped about any specifics, such as the where the slaves were kept. So Hileo planned to supersede and attempt to gain information from someone who had lived his whole life, as far as Hileo knew, in their destination.

Deathfang looked down, his face a mask of scorn. He always flew a few feet ahead of the wagon, never landing except to receive jabbits Nind and Hileo had captured. The arrangement worked out nicely - Deathfang drank the creatures’ blood but left the meat for the humans to eat. From what Hileo understood, eating was optional for vampires, as long as they had sufficient blood supply.

“Why should I tell you? Unless, of course, you’re thinking of moving there permanently,” said Deathfang.

“No, I think I’ll just stop by for a visit,” said Hileo. “But it’s nice to learn about, um, other cultures and such.”

Deathfang’s laughed. “I’ve a proposal for you, weak one. Humans barter for they what they want, including information. I saw your friend doing it with the slave you’re bringing the Supreme Ruler. Now, I’ll answer one of your questions if you swear to answer one of mine. Understand?”

Hileo nodded. “Understood.”

“Go ahead. Ask me anything.”

“What the general arrangement of the city - by that I mean, where do the different classes of, um, inhabitants, live?”

“Master bloodfencers such as myself live in the Supreme Ruler’s palace. Lower-ranked vampires create their own nests scattered throughout the city. The soldiers are quartered to the north along with their armorers, wagons, and warbeasts. Slaves are supposed to stay in one of ten barracks near their normal working location.”

“Oh, really, you keep human slaves?” Hileo asked, feigning a mild surprise. “What kind of work do you need them to do?”

“Two questions? I don’t recall making that deal. I believe it is my turn to ask now.”

Hileo’s mind scrambled for an answer should Deathfang ask him why he was coming to the vampire city. Would saying he was merely in it for the money be a passable lie, or did Deathfang know from Robiroto that he wasn’t being paid?

“Where did you meet your friend?”

“What?” Hileo asked.

“You know of whom I speak. The one with the black beard, who was wielding the dwalmium sword when I arrived to escort the Merchant. When we first encountered each other he came to save you.”

That was Deathfang? Hileo thought, recalling the vampire who had attacked him the day before Phaki had been taken. He hadn't paid much attention to his face. Why did he want to know about Nind?

"That was the first time I met him," replied Hileo. "I don't know much about him."

"LIES!" Deathfang screamed. "How could he be in that well at exactly the right time? The odds are too great to be a coincidence."

"It's true," Hileo said, gripping the steering shaft of his skiff tightly. He might need to get away from Deathfang very quickly.

"No, it can't be... but then, he has knowledge, knowledge he shouldn't have." Deathfang muttered. "Knowledge he can't have. How... nobody could tell him. NOBODY!" He glanced at Hileo. "Why are you still here? Our deal is over. Leave!"

Hileo turned his skiff sharply and propelled it to the other side of the wagon. The last two days of traveling hadn't been as grueling as the first one. The winds were good, and he could ride in the wagon while towing his skiff behind it if he got tired. He'd slept nearly half the day after the battle. The prisoner - he'd refused to tell anyone his name - had been the only other occupant of the wagon at that time, and tied up and gagged, he presented no problem. Hileo reminded himself not to get comfortable there, though. His trust in Robiroto had never been high, and had eroded to nearly nothing after that stunt with enslaving the newcomer. Hileo planned to find a map of the vampire city and vanish shortly after their arrival, hopefully before Robiroto could do the same to him.

With the knowledge of how to hunt jabbits, all he needed was a good water supply in case the rain didn't come for several days. With Phaki, he could escape on his sand skiff and make his way back to Dustubria - no, not Dustubria. There would never be a home for him there again, not while the Thief Lord held any power. He hoped to be presumed dead so that after he escaped Zjwazimar he could start a new life in another country without fear of the Thief Lord's assassins coming after him.

Their progress was temporarily halted by a flurry of rainfall that afternoon. As soon as the roiling, black clouds materialized overhead, Hileo hastened to take shelter beneath the roof of the covered wagon. He'd been surprised by the rain once before, when he was out on a dust smuggling run. He'd had to flip over his skiff and improvise a shelter using its sail as a covering. It had been a miserable experience, huddled in a ball for hours, holding the makeshift tarp over his head as rainwater began to seep through and sting his fingers. He didn't look forward to repeating it.

Robiroto reigned the chammals to a halt and loosened their ties to the wagon, not so much that they could escape, but enough to allow them to burrow under the sand for protection from the rain. Nind set out an empty barrel to collect the rainwater. A drop of rain fell from the sky and hit his hand. He hissed and withdrew back into the wagon. Hileo's back was pressed up against stacks of crates full of what were presumably attracters. With four people in the wagon, space was tight, although Deathfang was nowhere to be seen.

"Put me out in the rain," said the prisoner. He was tied to one of the pole holding the wagon's roof up, the ropes wrapped around his entire body.

Robiroto snorted. "What, so you can die a slow, painful death as the rain burns away at your skin? If you want to die, we could just feed you to Deathfang. That would at least be more useful."

“Put me out in the rain,” the prisoner repeated.

“Why?” Hileo asked.

“My reasons are my own.”

“Well, you’re the prisoner around here, so that you do what I say,” said Robiroto. “And I’m telling you to just stay put and bide your time until we can hand you over to the Supreme Ruler.”

“You’re a loathsome, despicable, traitorous worm of a man,” spat the prisoner.

“And shut up,” replied Robiroto.

“Kronzar’s discontentment is understandable,” said Nind. “After all, of all the many cultures I’ve visited, I’ve never encountered one where good hospitality is equated with selling one’s guests into slavery.”

“Kronzar?” Hileo asked.

“He told me his name,” Nind said.

“Because I wanted to know what was in that blasted sword,” growled Kronzar.

“Well, if he’s stupid enough to go this deep into the desert without an escort, he deserves to be a slave,” Robiroto retorted. “And I’m not selling him. I’m *giving* him into slavery. A gift of my own free will to the Supreme Ruler.”

Nind raised an eyebrow. “In some ways that’s worse.”

Hileo looked at Kronzar. “Which sword?”

“You were there, weren’t you?” Kronzar appeared to try to point at Nind, but succeeded only in moving his shoulder a little bit. “The one he was using. Ordinary swords can’t block bloodblades. They shatter immediately under the blow. That’s why even though Aithrenar has some of the best-trained swordsmen in the world, they can still lose when a bloodfencer shows up on a raid.”

“And I explained that the sword was forged from dwalmium,” Nind said.

“The same metal used to build attracters,” Hileo said. “Why should that matter?”

“You ever notice that vampires can’t touch attracters?” Nind asked.

Hileo pondered for a moment. The dustsand wells were hidden so that vampires wouldn’t destroy the attracters. When they found a well, they always destroyed it, never stole the attracters or even any of the dustsand. That seemed strange, considering that for some reason they were willing to pay for attracters from Robiroto. Hileo had assumed they wanted to build their own dustsand wells so they could be armed with hydropistols. If they couldn’t touch the attracters, that could explain what the vampires needed human slaves for.

“The reason for that has to do with the dwalmium within them,” said Nind. “The metal repels vampires, makes them sick if they stay near it, and can kill them if it pierces their skin. So naturally, a sword made out of nearly pure dwalmium is a very useful thing to have if you might be attacked by vampires. I won’t be using it again, though. I traded it to Robiroto in exchange for passage to the vampire city. Too bad I didn’t know your trick, Hileo. I could have saved myself the trouble and kept my sword.”

Hileo didn’t know how much raw dwalmium cost, but he knew that not much was required to create an efficient attracter. Based on the cost of attracters, the price of the dwalmium required to forge an entire sword must be astronomical. Maybe that was what Nind had

squandered his money he was supposed to use to pay the tuition at a university. The idea was amusing, despite providing no explanation for Nind motive's in doing so.

Once the rain stopped, Robioto pulled the chammals out from under the sand and whipped them into action. They traveled for several more hours, Deathfang lurking in the distance. With him escorting them, they could travel by night and day, especially since, as Robioto informed him, there were less Rogues in the area now that they were nearing the vampire city.

Hileo was peacefully piloting his skiff, easily keeping pace with the chammals, when Deathfang abruptly changed direction and swooped towards him. The vampire landed on the skiff's sail, rocking the frail vessel.

Hileo's hand instinctively went to the hilt of his hydropistol. "Back off, bloodfencer. You heard Robioto say I was under the Merchant's protection."

"Fool," spat Deathfang. He levitated a few inches the air, removing his weight from the skiff and allowing Hileo to regain control of it. "I'm only here to talk. You want more information about our destination?"

"Yes, that would be nice." Hileo eyed Deathfang warily. "What do you want in exchange?"

"Same as earlier today. Information. About the one you call Nind."

"I've already told you all I know."

"Then find out more! Engage him in conversation. Make him think you're his friend. Get him drunk or something. Find a pretty young women and make him fall in love with her."

Hileo laughed. "Let me know if you see any pretty young women in the desert. He seems like a pretty talkative fellow, though. I'll do what I can to get the information you need. In return, you answer my questions about Zjwazimar. Deal?"

Deathfang nodded.

"One question before we start. Why are you so interested in Nind?"

"There is something seriously not right with that man," Deathfang replied. "I cannot detect his mind."

"What? You read minds?"

Now Deathfang laughed. "No, master bloodfencers do not read minds. We rip them to shreds. There, I've answered two of your questions. I expect you to find answers to two of mine. Do not think you can cheat on our arrangement. I have many ways of causing you pain that will fall just short of killing you."

They stopped that evening to hunt and cook some rabbits and to take a brief rest. Nind rolled the barrel of rainwater he'd collected out of the wagon. Hileo dowsed some of it on the firewood Robioto had brought before taking one of his matches and igniting the pile. Since the rain had only recently fallen, the gas was still combined with the water. In its pure form, such as when it was trapped in hydropistol ammunition, the gas exploded violently, but when bonded with the rainwater it burned slowly instead. Unless contained in a sphere of dustsand glass, the

gas in the rainwater he didn't burn would vanish entirely within couple days, leaving behind safe, clean water for drinking.

"Hileo," said Nind. "Did you use up all of your ammunition in the battle a couple of nights ago?"

"I still have a few rounds left," Hileo replied. "Why?"

"You brought a bag of dustsand. Now that we have plenty of rainwater, why don't we make some more?"

"You know how to do that?"

"No, but I brought a mold." Nind extracted a device of black metal from his coat pocket. Two handles allowed the two halves of the crucible to be separated, revealing a spherical hollow interior. "Just pour the dustsand in here, add the rainwater, heat it in the fire until the sand melts, let it cool, and you have sphere of ammunition ready to be fired."

Hileo inspected the crucible. "Why does the dustsand form into a sphere instead of mixing with the rainwater?"

"Same principle that governs attracters," said Nind. "The interior is lined with dwalmium, configured in such a way that it pulls the dustsand towards it. So the dustsand and the rainwater form distinct layers instead of mixing together."

"Why don't the glassmakers in Dustubria use this method?"

Nind chuckled. "They do, but they think it's a trade secret. I believe each of the merchants has independently developed this technology, but all of them keep it hidden from their competitors."

He has access to secret technology, Hileo noted, wishing he'd brought a notebook and a pencil to write down any information he collected about Nind. He fetched his bag of dustsand from the back of the wagon. He'd hardly thought about it since the trip began.

"So, what brings you on this trip?" Hileo asked as Nind added the dustsand and rainwater to the crucible, then knelt by the fire.

Nind was silent for a moment. He closed the crucible, inserted it into the flames, and answered, "A long time ago I made a promise, and broke it. I'm here to try my best to fulfill it, although I can't be sure I'll succeed. I fear I have already heedlessly surrendered my best opportunity."

"Really?" Hileo said. "It's strange, then. You could say I'm here for the exact same reason. A promise - for someone I love."

Nind nodded thoughtfully, turning the crucible over. "I made my vow to many people I loved."

Past tense. Was that significant, or merely a slip of the tongue? "Are those people... glad that you've changed your mind and want to keep your promise?"

"I suppose you could say they probably would be. But as for whether or not they *are* - you'll have to ask God, seeing as they're all dead." Nind removed the crucible from the fire and set it aside to cool. After several minutes he opened it, handing a warm round of hydropistol ammunition to Hileo. "Take all the spheres you can get. If my suspicions are correct, you're going to need a lot more firepower to fulfill that vow of yours."

"Do you expect me to fight the vampires?"

"If you're lucky, you'll find something worth fighting for."

It was evening of the next day when Hileo crested a sand dune and beheld the ghost of a city. The ruins of a civilization had begun to break up the dull monotony of the journey through the barren desert. A town here, a farmhouse there, although what could have been farmed there was a mystery. Most common, though, were the trees, or what remained of them. The ground in between Hileo and the ominous line of buildings looming on the horizon was littered with stumps and fragments of branches, as if all the trees of the forest had been struck with a mighty blow and shattered.

“This is Zjwazimar?” Hileo asked, looking past the forest’s grave and to the city at its edge. The buildings varied widely in shape and size, from square, one-roomed houses to towering, elaborate mansions sprouting more wings than any bird could ever have right to. They all shared the same gloomy pallor, an old, sad look accentuated by decay.

“What did you expect? It’s been mostly abandoned for nearly a hundred years,” Robiroto snorted. “Nine-tenths of the population died or fled during the Apocalypse.”

“I’ve heard this was the seat of the Bazatense emperor’s power,” said Nind. “It has fallen far from its days of glory.”

“What it was doesn’t matter,” said Robiroto. “As for what it is, you’ll see soon enough. Power has not left the palace of the emperor.” He pointed to the largest of the buildings, an immense walled structure dominated by a spiraling tower. “Merely been... purified. I look forward to seeing it again.”

“Power is not always a good thing, Robiroto,” said Nind.

Robiroto shrugged and adjusted his stained tie. In many ways he was a reflection of the city itself. Old and decaying on the outside, but on the inside something still lived, something cunning. And dangerous. Hileo observed him as he looked upon the city, back straight, a gleam in his eye. Robiroto had changed over the past few days. He’d shed the ‘crazy’ part of the moniker as they traveled deeper into the desert. Not that he was a normal person now, but he was confident, a man who knew what he wanted and how he was going to get it, even if what he wanted, exactly, was obscure and eccentric.

“Maybe,” said Robiroto. “But then, maybe good isn’t always good either. After all, good and evil change depending on your point. But power - that stays the same. Morality wavers. Power is dependable. To seek one’s own good is the only moral law that stands the test of time, the only one followed since the beginning, and that will be followed until the end.”

It was all an act, Hileo realized. The insanity, the conspiracy theories - they were all masks to disguise him while he was in Dustubria. Here, so close to his ally’s seat of power, the real Robiroto emerged. Hileo wasn’t sure he liked it.

“Of course,” Nind replied. “But as you said, you’re not sure what good is. Perhaps what you believe benefits you is actually harmful.”

“Shall we find out, then?” Robiroto pointed towards the city and cracked whip. “Onward! To our destinies!”

They descended from the top of the sand dune and crossed the ruined forest. As the border of the city grew closer, Hileo became aware of a startling emptiness. He had expected to

see vampires everywhere, lurking in the shadows, driving slaves ruthlessly. Instead he found nothing. Zjwazimar was a ghost town.

They approached a line of metal in the ground, studded with occasional squares of glass. From what Hileo could see, it wrapped around the city, bending to accommodate the irregularly scattered buildings on the outskirts. As Robiroto halted the chammals just before it, Hileo knelt to inspect the border. Was that... dustsand glass? A closer look confirmed his initial guess. The glass squares that appeared periodically in the metal ring were forged from dustsand. If this continued all the way around the city, the effects could be potentially significant. Hypothetically, a serious deluge of rainwater could transform the entire city into one giant sphere of hydropistol ammunition. A single spark would be enough to make the whole thing explode.

Deathfang swooped down from the sky, coming back from the tower. "I have informed the Supreme Ruler of your arrival. He is pleased. Proceed to the palace courtyard."

Robiroto urged his chammals forward, Nind walking alongside them. Hileo stayed behind, beckoning to Deathfang. "What is this metal in the ground for?"

"Another question?" Deathfang folded his arm, hovering several feet above Hileo's head. "I believe you still owe me. Two answers, to be exact."

"Nind has a device used for the crafting of hydropistol ammunition, one that's supposed to be secret, but he wasn't afraid of sharing it with me."

"And the other?"

"He was trained at a university in Nolinwik."

"What is Nolinwik?"

"A country to the north of here. They have some of the most prestigious schools in the world. There, that's three pieces of information. Now you have to answer one of my questions."

Deathfang grunted. "That barrier is a relic from the old days, for keeping the Rogues out. It's mostly irrelevant now, since I've hunted down and killed all the Rogues."

Hileo nodded, being careful not to ask Deathfang another question before he had some more information on Nind ready to trade. He stepped over the barrier.

The city was not as empty as it seemed.

The moment Hileo crossed that line, he felt something, a presence of some sort. Invisible, but undeniably there, it watched him, sending prickles down his spine. Hileo ran to catch up with Robiroto's wagon as it rolled down the cracked cobblestone streets. The feeling of being watched intensified. The presence wasn't watching him, Hileo realized. Its focus was Robiroto - more specifically, the cargo he carried.

Deathfang flew high as he crossed the barrier, then swooped down to take his place in front of the wagon. Hileo spotted a few other vampires circling over the wagon, like vultures over a carcass. They turned down another street, this one dirt, with stones piled on either side. After ten minutes, they arrived at the palace. Its gates were thrown open - not that closing them would have done any good against a determined invader. Once proud and oaken, they were now rotted and lowly, hanging loosely on their hinges like corpses on the gallows.

Another bloodfencer watched over the entrance to the palace, flying with his long dark cloak flowing beneath him. "Good day, Lord Deathfang. I'm glad to see you're back."

"Cut the blather, Darkmaw," snapped Deathfang. "How much of my authority did you usurp while I was away?"

Darkmaw looked taken aback. “Well, to tell the truth... nearly all of it. I’m sorry, my old friend. You were alright about six years ago, but you’ve been on the decline ever since the revolution. The Supreme Ruler has a new favorite.”

“Tread carefully, Darkmaw, or you’ll find this old adder still has fangs left.”

“Oh, it’s not your age that’s the problem, at least not directly,” said Darkmaw. “But you’ve gone soft. Treating the slaves gently, lowering their quotas... we both have power, Deathfang. But the difference between us is I’m not afraid to use it. That is the quality the Supreme Ruler admires.”

Uproarious laughter sounded. An unusually fat bloodfencer flew around the corner, holding a half-eaten jabbit corpse. “Power, huh? Tell that to the girl.”

Darkmaw shot the newcomer a murderous glance.

“Oh, Deathfang, you’re back!” The other vampire swallowed a bite of raw jabbit. “You have to hear this. Darkmaw got his butt kicked - by a little girl! HAHHAHAHA!!!”

Hileo head shot towards the speaker. Was he talking about Phaki?

“Lies,” growled Darkmaw. “I would’ve killed her, but for the fact that the Supreme Ruler intervened. I was only obeying the will of our glorious leader.”

“That’s not what I heard. I heard she had you so confused you were chasing your own tail before the Supreme Ruler showed up!”

That didn’t *sound* like Phaki. Admittedly, Hileo didn’t know very well, probably not as well as he should considering he’d taken it upon himself to raise her. But he felt confident in saying her skills were decidedly lacking in the whole vampire-butt-kicking department.

Darkmaw scowled. “Come on. The Supreme Ruler’s waiting.”

“You’ll have to tell me the whole story later, Voidsoul,” Deathfang said. “It sounds fascinating.”

Voidsoul chuckled and ripped another chunk off his jabbit. Robiroto drove his wagon through the gates and into the palace courtyard. A defunct fountain adorned its center. Bloodfencers hovered about the edges of the courtyard or stood on its ramparts. A row of men, women and children in ragged clothing stood in line, hemmed in by more men wielding armor and spears. Hileo scanned the ranks of the slaves. His heart skipped a beat when he found what he was looking for.

Phaki. She stood between a pale, thin young woman and a boy about her own age, looking at the ground. She glanced up and met Hileo’s eyes, starting. A look of shock crossed her face. Poor girl. She’d probably given up all hope of being rescued.

Hileo gave her a brief nod. That was all he could do at the moment, surrounded as they were by vampires. His chance to free her and escape would come later.

“Supreme Ruler!” Robiroto called. He stood on the roof of the wagon, flag of his allegiance fluttering over his head. His poise was straight and controlled, except for his beard fluttering in the wind. Despite his filthy closing, he managed to look somewhat regal.

He paled in comparison to his buyer. The window to the room at the top of the highest tower to the palace burst open, and the Supreme Ruler came forth. He came down from the tower, slowly, in a sitting position, as if upon a throne of air. His majestic purple robes lent an air of dignity and grace to his figure, and the spear in his hand conveyed power. He held it over the

inhabitants of the courtyard, and the vampires bowed. The soldiers bowed next, prodding the slaves to do the same. Robiroto also bowed, and Hileo supposed he should follow suit.

“You may rise, my humble servants,” said the Supreme Ruler, sweeping his spear in a broad gesture. Hileo straightened and caught a glimpse of the Supreme Ruler’s crown. Forged from a cold, hard metal arranged in three spikes, like a mountain range, its most striking features were the glowing red gems, each one imprisoned in one of those spikes. Hileo looked upon them, and knew that this was the presence he had felt, the same presence that had watched him from the black-and-red flag flying over Robiroto’s wagon, the same one that had oppressed his spirit the night Phaki had been taken. The Supreme Ruler had been watching him all along.

“O great and mighty Supreme Ruler!” Robiroto said. “I have finished my annual pilgrimage to your city this seventh year, bringing with me the resources you desire.”

“You had a rather bold request last time, I recall,” said the Supreme Ruler.

“One I believe is in your best interest to fulfill, O powerful one,” replied Robiroto.

“Arrangements can be made to grant your request, providing what you deliver proves sufficient,” said the Supreme Ruler. “Who are these people you have brought with you?”

“Idiots,” said Robiroto with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Who insisted on coming with me. They brought you something to trade. I believe they may be useful to you.”

The Supreme Ruler swooped down from his aerial throne and landed in front of Hileo, musing thoughtfully to himself. He wasn’t a vampire, Hileo realized with surprise, but had the form of a man, a young man with curly brown hair poking out from underneath his crown. He looked into Hileo’s eyes. The stones in his crown began glow brighter, boring into Hileo’s mind. Their presence cast a hideous shadow over Hileo’s soul, yet at the same time their was something about them that pulled him closer.

Hileo felt his will collapsing, as if assaulted by a mighty foe. The Supreme Ruler continued to stare at him. Hileo was suddenly made aware that the being before him was old, far older than he appeared, a being who had walked for eons in the ancient world. And hated for nearly as long. The weight of that hatred seemed to take physical form, strangling Hileo. It was too powerful - the Supreme Ruler was too powerful. He would never be defeated.

“This one has potential,” remarked the Supreme Ruler, before going to inspect Nind in a similar manner. Hileo heaved in a breath of air, collapsing again the side of the wagon. Nind and the Supreme Ruler stared at each other, locked in a silent battle.

Finally the Supreme Ruler broke off, flying back into the air. “This one... I am not so sure. I will have to think about it. What of the third person you have brought, the one in your wagon?”

“He is a gift to you, a slave,” said Robiroto.

“Very well. Bring him out and put him the others.”

Robiroto pushed Kronzar out of the wagon. One of the bloodfencers picked him and carried him to where the other slaves stood in a line, then severed the bonds on his wrists.

The Supreme Ruler turned to the slaves. “Take the cargo out and load it into the tower. Be careful. Anyone who damages the Merchant’s shipment will face my wrath personally.”

The slaves obeyed, prodded towards the wagon by the soldiers. They removed crates of various shapes and sizes and carried them towards the tower. Phaki carried a long, wooden box with the help of a slave boy, who held the other end.

Hileo didn't go to her. He should have gone, should have given her some word of encouragement, a promise that he would find a way to rescue her. But he didn't dare. He couldn't risk revealing his true intentions in the presence of so many foes. He'd have to be sneaky, and fast. The Supreme Ruler was too strong to fight, so Hileo wouldn't fight. He'd steal Phaki away from right under the vampires' noses.

Get Phaki. Get out.

That was his plan. That was all that mattered now.

Chapter 8

Phaki sat on the bench in the courtyard of barrack nine, swinging her legs and staring out over the languid mass of slaves picking at the evening stew. Her face twisted in confusion. She glanced down at the ground and tried to make sense of what she'd just seen.

Hileo was here.

Rainfire.

She'd already given up all hope of being rescued and accepted that she'd have to find her own way of escape from the vampires. Her, and Masua, and Klend, and Gippen... she wouldn't leave without them. Now Hileo showed up and changed everything. Phaki wasn't sure what he was planning. She'd thought she'd understood him fairly well, but that understanding had predicted she'd never see him again.

Well, Trant, looks like you don't know everything after all.

Masua and Kazjad sat beside her, discussing in hushed tones their plans for a revolution. She hadn't mentioned Hileo to them yet.

"Father... what have you been doing for the Supreme Ruler?" Masua asked.

"Nothing," Kazjad replied. "Just some basic work."

"He could have gotten one of the other engineers to do that."

"It will be alright, dear," said Kazjad. He gently kissed Masua on the forehead. "I'm just keeping us safe until we can get out of here. There's an entire world beyond this city, and one day we're going to see it, alright?"

"No," said Masua. "All the plans we've conceived end with the rebels storming the Supreme Ruler's palace and all dying - heroically, yes, but dead nonetheless."

"What if we didn't try to fight the Supreme Ruler directly?" Phaki suggested. "We could escape out into the desert."

"No, that wouldn't work," said Kazjad. "There are no resources out there - a large group wouldn't be able to survive long enough to make the trek by foot to the border. And the bloodfencers would hunt us down and destroy us easily."

Phaki nodded, melancholy. She knew how fast the vampires could fly. Deathfang had brought her to Zwjazimar in only a day, after all.

"What if we used the warbeasts?" Gippen asked.

Masua started and turned to see Gippen standing behind them, back brushing against some thorny bushes. "Gippen! It's not polite to eavesdrop on people."

Gippen shrugged. "Sorry. I thought you noticed I was there."

"What do you mean, use the warbeasts?" Kazjad asked. "We can't ride them - they're too wild, and even if we could they couldn't carry more than a few of us."

"What if we stole some of the soldiers' wagons and hitched the warbeasts to them?"

"It would be great, if it were possible," Kazjad replied. "But I don't see any way of controlling the beasts. They're bred to be wild and spread as much chaos as possible when they're let loose."

Gippen shrugged again and looked away.

"We should go somewhere else if we're going to have conversations like this," Masua said. "You never know who's listening."

“Wait, who’s that?” Phaki asked, pointing to the gates. A figure, dressed in clothing that was dirty but much better kept than the ragged garments of the slaves, strode through the entrance to the courtyard. He was muscular, with a black beard and hydropistol worn openly at his side. Even though he had shed his flowing cloak and showed no sign of the immense book he had carried under one arm, Phaki still recognized him.

The storyteller. She’d seen him earlier as well, she realized, with Hileo, but hadn’t gotten a good look at his face.

The storyteller knelt to speak with the nearest slave, who was sitting hunched over a bowl of a stew. A few words conversation yielded a finger pointed in Kazjad’s direction. The storyteller rose and approached Kazjad.

“Are you the leader of the slaves here?” he asked.

Kazjad cocked his head, suspicion evident on his face. “I suppose you could say that.”

The storyteller bowed. “I have a proposition for you. I believe we have a common enemy in the one you know as the Supreme Ruler.”

“So? What of it?”

“I want to face the Supreme Ruler in combat. You, presumably, want your freedom. These goals are not mutually exclusive. In short, I want to help you stage a revolution.”

Gippen gasped. “Are you a *king of fire*?”

The storyteller chuckled. “No, I am not. But I can help you - provide weapons, help coordinate your efforts, and so on.”

Kazjad stood up. “You’re crazy! You’ll get us killed.”

“Maybe. But inaction will surely get you killed. You look like a wise man. Have you predicted what will happen when you are no longer useful to the Supreme Ruler?”

“Perhaps. What have you predicted?”

“He will kill you, sacrifice you to his vampires to stoke their thirst for blood just before he bursts forth from this city he has restrained himself to for the past hundred years and wreaks havoc upon the world.”

“How do we know we can trust you?”

“You can’t. But I’ll do what I can to indicate my good intentions.” The storyteller unclipped the hydropistol from his belt and handed it to Kazjad. “A gift. Whether or not you decide to ally with me, you may keep it.”

Masua stood up and put her hand on Kazjad’s shoulder. “Father, except his offer. If he is a spy for the Supreme Ruler, we’re no more dead than we are with one of our other plans.”

“That’s what I was going to do,” said Kazjad. “I was just testing him.”

“So, allies?” The storyteller held out his hand.

Kazjad shook it. “We’re now officially in alliance for the purpose of defeating the Supreme Ruler and escaping here alive. But before we make any plans, what shall we call you, ally?”

“Call me Nind,” replied the storyteller. “For now, start gathering the slaves with the greatest desire for liberty, the ones who will fight more cause most passionately.”

Kazjad glanced at Masua. “Do you know who was willing to attend our last meeting?”

Masua shook her head. “I thought I saw Renwa, but I can’t be sure. The meetings are held in the dark to preserve anonymity, after all.”

Kazjad mused thoughtfully. "Renwa's a good man. If we can get him to join, most of the slaves in the barrack ten will follow him. I'll talk to him about it."

"What about him?" Nind asked, pointing at scowling man leaning against the far wall with his arms crossed.

"The new guy?" Kazjad asked. "I haven't heard a word from him since the soldiers dragged him into the line with us."

"I traveled with him. He seems quite unhappy with his condition, and he's a good fighter. He'd be a valuable asset to our revolution."

Nind walked several steps across the courtyard and beckoned to the newcomer. "Hey, Kronzar, over here!"

Kronzar rose and stomped to where Nind stood. The two held a brief whispered conversation, the conclusion of which resulted in Kronzar's sour disposition lightening slightly. He joined Kazjad by the bench.

"I'm going to get out of this place with or without you," he said. "I have a job to do, and no time to waste. But it gladdens my heart to know that there are some still willing to fight in this hellhole. If you're going to fight vampires, you can count on me to help. When is the next rainfall?"

Kazjad looked puzzled. "Rainfall? We had one yesterday, but how do expect know when it will come again?"

"Oh, right," said Kronzar. "Isolated for decades. You don't have the latest methods of meteorology."

"Where did you hear the story of the kings of fire?" Phaki asked, gaining Nind's attention.

Nind glanced at her, pausing a moment before recognition registered on his face. "You! You're one of the girls from the city. Why are you here?"

"Kidnapped," Phaki said.

Nind nodded sagely. "Ah, yes, I see. As for your question, I have heard many stories from a great deal of places. Why do you ask?"

"We've been hoping that one of the kings of fire would be sent to free us from the vampires," Gippen interjected.

"I read the children the story of Thaddeus and some of the others from his time," Masua said. "And since the kings of fire always appeared to fight the vampires, we hoped..."

"The kings of fire have already returned," said Kronzar. "In Aithrenar most prominently, but there are others, scattered across the world. Some still think they're just ordinary people. You could even have one in this very courtyard. I wouldn't give up hope of seeing one before this is over."

I should ask him about Hileo, Phaki thought, glancing at Nind. But what would she ask him? Why had Hileo come? Did he love her? Did that mean she should love him in return? What was love, anyway?

She'd admitted to herself over the past few days that Trant's philosophy of life wasn't exactly right - she'd be a hypocrite if she hadn't, after that stunt with Darkmaw - but it *was* simpler. She needed some time to think about this.

Phaki slipped away from the conversation and made her way through the crowd. Klend met her by the gate, coming from the direction of barrack ten.

“Phaki!” Klend exclaimed. “Gippen told me what you did to save Masua the other day. That was so brave! And amazing!”

Phaki blushed and averted her eyes. “All I did was run. Anyone could run.”

“Yes, but you saved the princess’s life!”

Phaki put her hand against the wall and regarded the ground passively. “You did too. If you hadn’t gotten Kazjad in time...”

“Well, alright, but what you did took more courage. Darkmaw could’ve killed you!”

“Yeah. They’re planning the revolution over there. You might want to chime in.”

Klend sprinted towards the small gathering of rebels, but paused as Phaki remained by the gate. “Are you coming?”

“No, I think I want to be alone for a while.”

Klend looked concerned but left her alone. Phaki walked out the gate and into the empty streets of Zjwazimar. She’d spent most of her life alone, especially after Trant had left her. But ever since arriving in the vampire city, she’d been almost constantly in the company of the other slaves. That was a good thing, but now she needed solitude for a moment to think.

She wandered along the ghostly roads, so different from the busy, dirt ones of Dustubria, and thought back on when she’d first met Hileo. She must have been a pitiful sight back then, sick and hungry, shivering despite the desert’s heat. Her memory of those first few days was faint - she’d been separated from Trant for some reason, and Hileo had nursed her back to health. Trant had found her later and cautioned her against becoming too attached to her rescuer.

I’ve seen that man around town, half-drunk, gambling away what little savings he has left. He’s wasting his life and he knows it. He thinks caring for you is something he can do to earn redemption. For now you’re fulfilling a need in his life - the need for a purpose, a sense of higher calling. We all suffer from delusions like that from time to time. But that need will fade as his true nature reasserts itself.

Trant wasn’t a hypocrite. He practiced what he preached, even when it left his little sister who’d been lying to herself heartbroken.

Life would be simpler if she never allowed to get attached to anyone. Less painful as well. But then - Phaki knelt down and drew a picture in the torn-up dirt street with her finger - would it even be life, really? Trant wouldn’t know. He’d never even tried loving someone in his life, as far as she knew.

Phaki stood up and surveyed her drawing. It depicted a dream, an ideal state, in stick figures. Masua, Hileo, Gippen, Klend, Kazjad, and her, all together, holding hands. A family. Masua and Hileo could even marry - then she’d have a mother and a father. No more need to make up silly stories about falling from the sky.

She sighed wistfully. There was a long, hard path between her and this dream. They probably wouldn’t all survive the revolution - rainfire, *none* of them were likely to survive the revolution - and after that they had to get across the desert and find a new home. Plus the fact that Hileo and Masua hadn’t even met yet, so playing matchmaker with them would be tricky.

Phaki should have been paying more attention to her surroundings, she realized later. She never would have been so lax in Dustubria, where both thieves and loosely organized law

enforcement posed a threat to orphans and vagabonds. But in hindsight, it wouldn't have mattered. Darkmaw was too close by the time she saw him and going way too fast.

A clawed hand clamped over her mouth before she could utter a word, and she was knocked off her feet and dragged roughly down several blocks. Darkmaw slammed her up against the wall of an abandoned building.

"Did you think our little chase was over when the Supreme Ruler showed up?" he hissed. "I swore I would kill you, and I have a reputation to keep up, you know." He lifted her up again and threw her onto the ground. Tears sprang to her eyes as her nose crashed into the merciless stone and cracked.

"No bargaining can save you now," said Darkmaw, stretching out his hand towards her. "I brought you here where nobody can hear you scream - nobody who cares, anyway."

A bolt of red light streaked from his hand and hit Phaki. Phaki screamed in agony. The pain wasn't physical, but went directly to her mind. She couldn't think, only feel her mind breaking under the strain of the malicious light penetrating it. Thoughts were ripped from her head and flung out into the space around her. She could hear them, as if someone else nearby was whispering them. They formed a chaotic cacophony, swirling around her as if whipped by the wind. Above it all came the sound of Darkmaw laughing. Through the grey mist that covered her eyes she could see him summon his bloodblade and prepare to strike.

There were three spare rooms in the tower of the Supreme Ruler's palace, each on a different level. The Supreme Ruler had his vampires lead Hileo, Nind and Robiroto to their own rooms. Hileo's was highest. It was fairly small, with a dusty wardrobe in the corner and bed whose sheets had long since been decimated by whatever army of mice or insects that lurked within the walls. A single window, looking out of the dusk-shadowed city, seemed to in good working order, an exception to the ubiquitous decay in Zjwazimar.

Night fell, and Hileo was unable to sleep. He lay on the bed, breathing dust-filled air and staring at the mirror that for some reason was in the roof. He got up and looked out the window. Night seemed like the intuitive time to sneak out of the tower and make an escape with Phaki. But the vampires could see in the dark. How many of them were out there? He knew almost nothing about this city. He wished he'd dug more information out of Deathfang, but the former escort was nowhere to be seen.

Hileo eased the doors to the wardrobe open. Despite his best efforts to remain silent, the rusted hinges still groaned under the strain. His own clothes were the color of sand, good for blending into the desert, but not so much for the stone of the city. He ruffled through the rotting clothes until he found something useful: a mottled gray cloak, long enough to wrap around his whole body and with only a few holes. He donned the musty garment and slid the window open. If he was caught, he could say he was just looking to get a drink of clean water from the barrels they'd left in the wagon.

Waiting until daylight would be no use. He didn't know what Robiroto was planning, but he doubted the merchant planned to return to Dustubria the way he came. After the slaves had finished unloading the crates full of stolen attracters, the Supreme Ruler had ordered some of his soldiers to take the chammals and 'sacrifice them to the mighty warbeasts'. The door to Hileo's

room was locked. Robiroto could be negotiating with the Supreme Ruler to deliver him and Nind to be slaves or fed to the vampires. If he stayed here, he would be at the mercy of whatever twisted deal the merchant was forging with that ancient, malevolent being.

Facing the Supreme Ruler earlier that day had unnerved Hileo. Although the presence he'd felt when he first entered the city had left, he had no intention of repeating that experience. He didn't trust Robiroto in the slightest. As for Nind... he didn't know what to think about Nind.

Get Phaki. Get out.

Hileo climbed over the ledge and dropped onto the tower's wall. The stone was cracked and had many imperfections he could stick his extremities into. The Supreme Ruler, or whoever had decided to lock the door to his room, had probably expected the height to deter him from making an escape. But Hileo had climbed over a wall nearly every day for years. He could handle this tower.

He'd stashed his sand skiff in a house just outside the city border. The difficult part was finding Phaki. He hadn't managed to steal a map and had only a vague idea of where the slave quarters were. But once he'd rescued her, it would be simple to flee the city and vanish into the desert before any of the vampire slave drivers realized she was missing. He'd head toward Aithrenar, to the west. Its border was nearest to Zjwazimar, and Hileo couldn't risk returning to Dustubria with the Thief Lord's due unpaid.

Get Phaki. Get out. That was the reason he had come, and the only goal he needed to accomplish.

Hileo hit the ground with a flutter of his cape. He made his way around to the tower and to the shadow of the courtyard's wall. A quick glance at the sky revealed no vampires, but Hileo did his best to conceal himself. One could appear at any moment. He crept out the palace gates and into the streets of the city, following the same path he had glimpsed the soldiers leading the slaves along after Robiroto's shipment had been unloaded. He was no expert at tracking, but he could barely make out the impression of footprints on the dirt streets.

A high-pitched scream cut through the night air - a girl's scream.

Phaki!

Hileo took off running, throwing secrecy to the wind, his cloak bellowing behind him. He drew his hydropistol as he veered sharply and neared the source of the scream. It was Phaki, prostrate on the ground before a vampire with an incarnadine sword raised over her head. Hileo charged, doing his best to steady his firearm as he did so. He'd seen a single shot kill a vampire before.

Hileo fired. The bullet slammed into the vampire's chest, pushing him backward. The sword slammed into ground beside Phaki, cutting a long gash in the wall behind her. Phaki pushed herself up, gasping, and rolled over. The vampire glanced at Hileo. Hileo recognized him - the one called Darkmaw. The bullet wound in Darkmaw's chest stopped bleeding and sealed over.

Darkmaw let out an inarticulate cry of rage and lunged at Phaki. His claws raked her arm as she leapt away. There was no time for Hileo to reload - he threw his pistol at Darkmaw's face. The weapon bounced off without doing any noticeable harm, but seemed to distract the bloodfencer for a moment. Phaki stumbled forward, cradling her wounded arm.

A black shape rocketed out of the sky and slammed into Darkmaw as he made another leap at Phaki. Darkmaw was pushed back several yards, clawing and biting at his attacker. The two shadowed figures brawled for a minute before the newcomer threw Darkmaw off of himself and summoned his bloodblade.

“What is going on here?” Deathfang asked, holding his weapon at Darkmaw’s throat. “Show me your permission slip.”

Darkmaw gnashed his teeth. “It’s true, I knew it all along, but now I have proof. The once-great Lord Deathfang has lost his edge, protecting puny, disgusting humans-”

“Where is your permission slip to kill this girl?”

“Come on, where is the old Deathfang? The one I’ve heard about. You were terrifying, the older bloodfencers say, a master of death, ruthless and cunning. You weren’t-”

“PERMISSION SLIP!”

“I don’t have one,” Darkmaw snarled. “And I shouldn’t need one. I’m a *master bloodfencer*, for the Supreme Ruler’s sake! It is my right, my duty to drink the blood of the weak. How do think the Supreme Ruler plans to take over the world? With pity and compassion? No, but with *power*, power that is the only law a savage world.”

Deathfang was silent, floating slightly in the air as he continued to pin down Darkmaw.

“Don’t you feel it in your veins? Don’t you wish we could return to the night of the revolution? I was young then, but I remember it. Glorious. We were let loose for one night. For one night only we achieved our true potential. Don’t you wish you could feel it again?”

“GET OUT!” Deathfang screamed, sweeping his bloodblade away and kicking Darkmaw. “I AM STILL THE SENIOR BLOODFENCER HERE, AND YOU WILL OBEY ME! DO NOT COME NEAR THE SLAVES AGAIN UNLESS YOU HAVE DIRECT PERMISSION FROM THE SUPREME RULER! YOU ARE HEREBY RELIEVED OF YOUR POST IN DIRECTING THE SLAVES’ WORK DUTIES!”

“The Supreme Ruler will hear about this,” said Darkmaw as he slipped away. “And he’ll know you are no longer suited for your job.”

Deathfang’s bloodblade vanished. He turned towards Phaki and Hileo. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. I’m doing my best to-” hatred flashed in his eyes, and he snarled suddenly. As soon as it had come, the moment passed, and Deathfang launched himself back into the air.

Phaki leaned against a wall, shaking. Hileo ran to her and embraced her, careful not to further injure her arm.

“Phaki, Phaki, it’s ok, I’m here now,” Hileo said, gently cradling her head on his chest. The exhilaration of the battle faded, leaving peace in his heart. He had succeeded. Phaki was safe, and his life was not utterly destitute of meaning or purpose. “I’m here to rescue you. We can go home now.”

“Home?”

“Well, not home exactly, but a new home. My sand skiff is ready for us - do you remember riding in it? It’ll be a long journey, but you’ll be safe, I promise.”

“Alone?”

Hileo frowned. “Why, yes, of course we’ll be going alone-”

Phaki pushed herself away from him. “No.”

Chapter 9

Hileo's heart froze, his inner peace tainted by anxiety. "What do you mean?"

"No, I won't go." Phaki shook her head, a tear running down her face. "I won't run away, not alone."

Hileo held out his hand. "Are you scared? Because you don't need to be. I'm sorry about letting you get kidnapped in the first place, but I promise, with the strongest vow I can make, to keep you safe now."

"It's not about me!" Phaki snapped. She threw out her arm, pointing to some vague location deeper into the city. "What about them?"

"Them?"

"The other slaves, Masua, Klend - you don't know them, but they're going to die. Die!"

"What are you talking about, Phaki?"

"I can't just abandon them, Hileo," Phaki gasped. Her face was laced with desperation. "I would've, once, but not anymore. Trant - he was wrong, *I* was wrong- Hileo, we need to save them."

Hileo dropped down on one knee and spread his arms. "You don't understand, Phaki. We have to get out now. We may never have another chance. I don't know what Robiroto and the Supreme Ruler are planning, but it can't be good. Come with me."

"The other slaves won't have any chance!" Phaki wept, her voice edging into hysteria.

"Phaki, come here," said Hileo, his voice stern. She was still young and couldn't understand everything going on here. Sometimes children had to be denied what they wanted for their own good. She'd understand when she grew older.

"No."

"You don't understand. *We can't save everyone.* We'll only end up dead if we try. The best we can do is take care of ourselves. It's the only way."

Phaki's sobbing slowed to a stop. She stared at Hileo, face hardening to flint. When she spoke next it was in a whisper, quiet but cold as ice. "Trant was wrong about his view of life - but not about you, I think. You've been searching for a purpose your whole life, but you'll never find one, because you only ever think about yourself."

Indignation flared in Hileo's heart. "What are you talking about? I came here to find you. My purpose in life is you."

Phaki only shook her head mournfully and stepped backward. Hileo stumbled to his feet, lurching after her. He reached out to grab her arm, intending to drag her to the skiff by force if he had to. He *would* fulfill his oath, whatever the cost. Phaki jerked away, then turned and ran.

Hileo pursued her, yelling her name. She only ran faster. Ungrateful wretch. Didn't she know what he'd sacrificed to find her again? He chased her through the dark streets, struggling to keep sight of her slight frame as it vanished behind buildings. He could faintly hear her crying as she fled.

A loose stone sticking out of road caught Hileo's foot, and he fell. He crashed to the ground, catching himself with the palms of his hands. When he looked up, Phaki was gone. He slumped back down, lying prostrate for a moment. Rainfire. Why did it have to be this way? This was injustice. He couldn't possibly be expected to take up the burdens of every oppressed person

he happened to come near to. He had come here single-mindedly, with one purpose. Why couldn't he just be allowed to fulfill that one purpose, to do one good thing with his life?

Hileo stood up and brushed himself off. If Phaki didn't want to be rescued, maybe he'd simply let her have that wish. He'd never had any obligation to take her in the first place. He could escape alone, leave this whole mess behind him, and carve a new life in Aithrenar. He could say he'd done his best to rescue Phaki. What more could he reasonably be asked to do? Hileo turned his back on the direction Phaki had gone and began to walk out of the city.

You only ever think about yourself.

Hileo paused mid-step, wondering why she had said that. Didn't she realize that he wouldn't have come all the way to Zjwazimar if he didn't care about her? And who was Trant, anyway?

Wait.

Words from the past emerged to the front of his memory, becoming almost tangible in his mind. His own thoughts.

If I don't try to rescue Phaki, my life will be meaningless. I won't be able to face myself, knowing I failed in this one basic purpose.

I need to do something good before I die. I've been searching, trying to find something good to do for years. If I rescue Phaki, I'll be able to rest, to be content with the knowledge that I haven't wasted my life.

These, and others like them, rose from their shallow graves inside Hileo's head. They taunted him, breaking the foundation he had built his beliefs on. Hileo groaned in anguish. The truth flashed before him, suddenly clear.

He hadn't come because he cared about Phaki.

He'd come for himself. Because he had no other option, because he knew he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he didn't. Phaki was just a tool to him, a balm he used to salve his conscience. He'd never regarded her as more than that.

The revelation was so obvious now, but he'd never recognized it before, blinded as he was by his own selfishness. Hileo staggered forward, his limbs moving robotically. He managed to reach the tower without being spotted. He climbed back up, crawled through the window, and collapsed on the moth-eaten bed, the strength drained from him. There was no hiding from the truth. Phaki had never needed him, but he had needed her.

There was one recourse, albeit a temporary one. Hileo closed eyes, his grief covered for a time by the veil of sleep.

Phaki wept.

The tears came freely, now that she was truly alone. Her head throbbed along with the claw marks on her arm. But the pain in her heart overshadowed them both. Her latest encounter with Darkmaw had brought her previously glib assumption of the fact that they would probably all die before escaping into a terrifying new light. And Hileo... had she driven him away? He had come to save her, after all. If her emotions hadn't been flaring so high, would she have been able to convince to help Masua and the others? As it was, he was her enemy now. She'd alienated

him, not even given him a chance to change his mind, to learn to love. Once, she'd thought as Trant had thought, believed as Hileo believed. If Hileo saw what Masua was doing, the love between her and the children she cared for, would he change as well?

Stupid, foolish girl! She berated herself, for with the recognition of the reality of love came another revelation, one she was forced to admit to herself. She had often failed to love truly. In fact, nearly all her life had been spent in self-absorption. Most of it had been necessary, she told herself, for survival. But that didn't change the truth. Even as she'd wished Hileo would love her, she hadn't thought about reciprocating the sentiment.

Tonight... she hadn't even thanked him for trying to save her. Instead she'd jumped immediately to trying to get him to do what she wanted. Frantic, she'd demanded of him what he wasn't ready to give. Phaki laid her head against the corner of the walls of barrack nine and cried some more. The courtyard was empty; most of the slaves had gone to bed. Phaki supposed she should join them, since she'd need all her strength for moving stones tomorrow, and preparing for the doomed rebellion. But she shouldn't. She couldn't get a grip on her emotions. She'd only end up sobbing again and waking everyone else up.

A gentle touch on her shoulder forced to turn her attention away from her sorrow. She looked away from the wall and into Masua's eyes. Her face was haggard, strings of hair falling around dark eyes. But she smiled softly, a smile that calmed Phaki somehow just by being seen by her, and drew her into her embrace. Phaki lay her head on Masua's breast, resting there until she calmed down. Masua cradled her head and gently patted her back until her sobbing ceased.

“Phaki, come here, I need to show you something.”

Phaki glanced towards Gippen, who stood in the gateway, beckoning with one hand and holding a small leather pouch in the other. It was evening of the next day, and a burst of rain had allowed the slaves to stop working early. The rain had since ceased, but no soldiers had come to round up the slaves and get them back to work. They seemed laxer lately. Fewer soldiers supervised the slaves, and fewer vampires stopped by to check on them. Battle cries, accompanied by the clashing of steel, could be heard in the distance. The Supreme Ruler had his soldiers putting all their energy into training. They were preparing for something.

The war.

Nind had stopped by briefly to deliver another hydropistol and some knives, smuggled in under his coat. The weapons were stashed in rotting cupboards in the mansion, where there was no chance of them being discovered. Neither soldiers nor vampires bothered searching the ruins for contraband.

Kazjad was still at the engineering room, working on whatever enigmatic project the Supreme Ruler needed him for. He seemed worried about something. Phaki had spotted him speaking in barely restrained tones to Masua that morning, before the soldiers had come to rip him away.

Phaki joined Gippen. “What is it?”

“Just come, you’ll see.” Gippen took off down the streets, leading Phaki across the city. She recognized, vaguely, the part of town they were in. It was where she had led Darkmaw that chase that had made him swear to kill her. They passed the final line of buildings and came to two rope circles in the sand. The warbeast pits.

“Isn’t it dangerous to come here?” Phaki asked.

“Only if you’re not with me,” Gippen replied. He knelt by the edge of one of the pits and reached into his shirt. He withdrew a wooden instrument, somewhat like a flute that had been snapped in half. With the instrument set to his lips, he blew a few notes, creaky and hideous. She’d heard that sound before, Phaki realized. Right before the-

The warbeast burst of the pit, showering Gippen in sand. It let out a thunderous roar, beating its diminutive forearms in the air, until Gippen blew another note on the flute and it fell silent. The warbeast bent down in a submissive gesture, allowing Gippen to pat it on the head. Gippen reached into his pouch and removed a squirming miniature chammal. He held it in the flat of his hand and the warbeast licked it up with a contented purr.

“This is the secret project I’ve been working on,” Gippen said.

Phaki stared in disbelief. “You tamed the warbeast?”

“Her name is Jyl. She’s very friendly. Would you like to pet her?”

Phaki stepped forward and hesitantly reached out her hand. Jyl sniffed it. Phaki giggled as the silver whiskers tickled her hand, and she placed it on the warbeast’s snout. Jyl’s skin was hard and smooth, like a lizard she had once caught back in Dustubria. “This is amazing, Gippen.”

Gippen leaned against Jyl’s side, arms crossed. “She’s going to help us escape. We just have to steal a wagon and hitch her to it. I’m sure she can run faster than any chammal. The Supreme Ruler’s forces will never catch up in time.”

Hope sprung anew in Phaki’s heart. She rushed to Gippen and threw her arms around him. “We won’t all die in the revolution! We can escape! This is a miracle!”

Gippen beamed. “Well, I still need your help to steal a harness for her. And for the other one, as well. I don’t think we can fit everyone in one wagon.”

“You tamed two?”

“Not exactly.” Gippen walked to the other circle in the sand and blew another note on his flute. The sands churned, and a warbeast even bigger than Jyl burst out. Gippen leapt backward as it snarled at him before disappearing back beneath the sands.

“Ryl’s not as nice as Jyl,” Gippen explained. “But I think I’ll be able to control him once we get him hitched to a wagon. You see, he follows Jyl all the time. I think he wants to mate with her.”

“That makes sense.”

Gippen replaced his flute, picked up his bag of chammals, and scampered back towards the center of the city. “Come. Klend’s scouting ahead to find out where the wagons and the harnesses we need are.” He paused for a moment. “What’s it like, in the outside world?”

“There’s sand,” Phaki said as they crept along the alleys, ever so often checking the sky for signs of vampires. “And more sand, and buildings made out of sand, and streets made out of sand.”

“That’s what we have here,” Gippen said scornfully. “What about the people? Are they different?”

“Yes. They’re worse.”

“Oh.” Gippen bowed his head, arms hung limply at his sides.

“At least, in Dustubria, where I lived,” Phaki hastened to add. “Other places I’ve heard are different. They have grass, and trees, and even snow.”

“The princess told us the people in the rest of the world are the same kind of people as us - the same kind as the soldiers, too, and even the vampires.”

“I don’t why would she say that is. She’s not the same as people in the outside world. Masua - the princess - is different.”

“How so?”

“You haven’t noticed? She - she loves us.”

“Did nobody love you before you came here?”

Phaki nodded, her shoulders slumped. “I suppose I can’t really blame them. It’s human nature to care about yourself first. And- honestly, I was the same way. I didn’t give them much of a reason to love me.”

Rainfire - was that why Trant had left? Would Hileo have loved her if she had been somehow more lovable? What if she had told him the truth instead of concealing her true nature underneath a tightly woven veil of pretty lies?

“I think that’s ridiculous. You saved Princess Masua! You’re brave, and smart, and kind. I think there are plenty of reasons to love you.”

“Maybe.” Phaki’s eyes slid away from Gippen and focused on the ground. She couldn’t dwell on the past. Whatever wrong she may have done, she couldn’t make right by worrying about it. But she would do her best in the present.

As the sun set, Klend met them a few blocks away from the Supreme Ruler’s palace. “They’re here. All the wagons of the entire army, hitched up and ready to go. The war will begin any day now.”

Gippen climbed on top of a building to get a better view. He grabbed Phaki’s hand and pulled her up to join him. They could make out the silhouettes of over a dozen wagons, much larger than the one Hileo had arrived in and pulled by four giant chammals each. Soldiers milled around them, some yelling orders to others to filled the wagons with barrels of water.

Gippen pointed. “We need two of those harnesses, one for Jyl and one for Ryl.”

“Will the warbeasts fit in those harnesses? They’re much bigger than a chammal,” Phaki said.

“Not if we turn it around. We tie the end that connects to the wagon around the warbeast’s neck. The only problem then is connecting the four pieces that are supposed to connect to the chammals to the wagons. We can’t do it now - too many soldiers. But we’ll come back later, after they’re all asleep or carousing back in their own barracks.”

“Have you told Masua about the plan?”

“No, not yet. I wasn’t sure it was going to work when I first started calling to Jyl and feeding her chammals.”

“We should tell her, she’ll be so happy to hear it.”

“No, not yet,” Gippen said. “She loves us but... she loves us too much, if you understand what you mean. She’ll never let us take a risk like that. If we tell her, she’ll insist on stealing the harnesses herself.”

Phaki affirmed the statement and stared off towards the fiery orange ball setting on the horizon. The purity of the sunset contrasted sharply with the filth and decay in the city. Gippen joined her, and they gazed at the horizon for a moment before Klend whistled and beckoned them back down.

“Come on, soldiers, you can’t stay up, there you might be spotted,” Klend said. “We need to spy on the enemy stealthily. Like this.” With that he crept down the street towards the palace. He returned a few minutes later to tell them that the soldiers were beginning to dissipate.

“How long are they going to take?” Gippen asked. Along with Klend and Phaki, he peaked - stealthily, of course - through the window at the only two remaining soldiers, who had decided to play some sort of gambling game based off how fast a chammal could consume sand. They got into an argument and started hitting each other with their shields until a vampire swooped out of the sky and forcibly broke them up.

“Now?” Phaki asked as the vampire vanished back into the Supreme Ruler’s palace.

Klend nodded and swung himself over the ledge. Stealing the harness proved to be the easy part. It was heavy, but between the three of them they were able to haul it back to the warbeast pits. Gippen summoned Jyl out of the sand and she lay on her side submissively while Phaki and Klend lifted the harness and tied it around her neck.

The second warbeast, Ryl, proved to be a more difficult, although not insurmountable, challenge. The problem was resolved when Gippen dragged one of the giant chammals that had been let loose into his pit. Ryl promptly started devouring the creature, and while he was distracted the harness was fitted neatly around his neck.

“These circles in the sand are imbued with the Supreme Ruler’s magic,” Gippen explained. “In order to let the warbeast out, all I have to do is pull the stakes up. Jyl and Ryl will likely start to destroy everything in sight, until I calm them with my whistle. After that, all we have to do is get in the wagons, attach the harnesses to the wagons, and hold on tight.”

“What about making sure the warbeasts go in the right direction?” Phaki asked.

Gippen’s face fell. “I’m not sure I’ve figured out how to do that yet.”

Phaki chuckled. “That’s fine. Any place is better than here.”

Gippen patted Jyl’s head affectionately. “Good girl. Just stay here until I call you, ok? I have to leave now.”

When Phaki arrived back at barrack nine, Nind had already returned. To her surprise, he’d brought Hileo along with him.

“I’ve got good news,” Robiroto announced. “The negotiations have moved along faster than expected and are almost complete.”

Hileo sat across from him in a small dining room at the bottom of the tower, staring at the unappetizing bowl of stew one of the soldier’s had served him. Nind was with them. His face was furrowed in concentration as he pondered the merchant’s words.

“Tonight, in fact,” said Robiroto. “The Supreme Ruler will hold a special banquet in my honor. There you will all have the opportunity to join me in a glorious destiny. The Supreme Ruler is generous, you see, and has decided to extend his offer to you interlopers, even though

you did *nothing* for the past seven years I've been hard at work, bringing the Supreme Ruler his supplies."

The words barely registered with Hileo. He wanted to escape. Robiroto was insane, just not in the way he had presented himself back in the bar. Whatever glorious destiny he looked forward to, Hileo wanted no part in it.

He had to escape. His every instinct warned him of an ominous doom that awaited everyone who stayed in this city. But could he really leave without Phaki? It seemed that the only way she would voluntarily flee the city would be if all the other slaves escaped with her. An impossible task, even were it not for the insurmountable power of the Supreme Ruler and his vampires. Death awaited them all, including Hileo. Even if he deserted Zjwazimar and made his way to Aithrenar, he'd never be able to live his life, not really. He may want to rescue Phaki for selfish reasons, but not for trivial ones. He desperately needed a reason to feel good about himself. With his failure last night, he'd lost his last opportunity.

A grim chuckle burst forth from Hileo. He rose up abruptly and threw his bowl down on the floor, shattering it.

"That's what your destiny is," he said, pointing at the mess of the forlorn. "That's what all our destinies are. Broken."

Robiroto spat at him. "You defy the hospitality of the Supreme Ruler? You're an even bigger idiot than I thought."

Hileo spun around and strode out of the room. Water barrels lined the hallway outside, along with the remnants of slashed and dilapidated tapestry. Hileo grabbed one and wrenched its lid off. Black smoke poured into the air, resembling what was left behind by a dead vampire.

A soldier yelled and ran at him, striking with the butt of his spear. Hileo stumbled backward. The soldier struck again, pinning him to the ground.

"Don't touch anything without permission," he growled. "Now get back to your room."

Some more soldiers came and roughly marched Hileo back to the room he'd been put in, slamming the door behind him. They threw Hileo to the floor and engaged the lock.

Hileo stood back up, donned the gray cloak he'd found in the closet last night, and opened the window. If he wasn't going to find fulfillment in life, he might as well find it in death. He didn't throw himself crudely from the tower. That would defeat the purpose, making his life as meaningful as his death. Instead he was going to join a doomed rebellion. He'd find Phaki and the other slaves she'd mentioned. He'd get them to point him at whichever vampire they hated the most, whom he would then charge at and fight to the death - his death. Even he managed to kill one vampire, more would come to punish him. So, still pointless, as it wouldn't actually save anyone, but there was something attractive in the pathos of the thing.

He had already snuck out of the courtyard before he realized he didn't actually know where the slave barracks were. He should have paid more attention to where Phaki was going. Fortunately, he ran into Nind.

"Hello, Hileo, where are you going this fine afternoon?" Nind asked.

"I'm going to find a vampire to kill. What about you?"

"That's why you came here? To kill a vampire?"

"No, but you could say one killed me." That was true, after all. If Deathfang hadn't kidnapped Phaki that day, he'd still be living peacefully in Dustubria, working towards paying

off his debt - well, there would still be the matter of the missing attracter. But he could handle little things like that. One of the most powerful people in Dustubria wanting him dead seemed little, after all that had happened over the past few days. Losing his life's purpose was worse than losing his life.

"Huh," Nind said. "I'm going to help lead a revolution to free the slaves here from the vampires. We could use a person like you. You want to join?"

"Sure," Hileo replied. "Just point me the way."

"This is our plan," Nind said, indicating a series of crude drawings scratched into the discarded tabletop on the floor, the legs of which had long been chewed away by rodents. Hileo sat by it, inspecting the map along with the other leaders of the revolution: Kronzar, a gaunt young woman named Masua, and Renwa, a middle-aged man who identified as the second-in-command. Apparently Kazjad, the first-in-command was occupied at the moment.

"Um." Kronzar pointed to a triangular shape carved in the center of the table. "Is that a giant piece of cheese?"

"I think it's a spear," said Renwa.

"Actually, it's the tower of the Supreme Ruler's palace," Nind explained.

"Your proportions are all wrong." Renwa indicated two circles on the edge of the table. "If these represent the slave barracks, the tower should be about half that size."

"Here, you draw it, then." Nind handed a knife to Renwa, who started scratching several marks in the wood.

"Anyway, the plan is for me to attack the Supreme Ruler in his palace, thus drawing off the vampires while the rest of you steal the soldier's wagons and escape."

"Do you have a plan for actually making that work?" Hileo asked. "There are a *lot* of vampires in that palace."

"I know what I'm up against," Nind said. "I only need to get in one shot at the Supreme Ruler. It'll give you a chance to escape."

The door to the mansion creaked open, and Phaki stepped in, followed by two young boys. Hileo started when he saw her, and she gave him a nod.

"Oh, hello, Phaki, I've joined the revolution, as you can see," Hileo said.

Phaki glanced at Masua, then back at him, and smiled. The taller of her two companions marched to Masua and gave an exaggerated bow.

"Princess Masua," he announced. "We have important news."

"The problem is with the soldiers," Renwa said, lifting the knife from the table and plunging it into the ground beside him. "Our numbers have been dwindling for so long that there are only two barracks left where once there were ten. The soldiers currently outnumber the slaves at least three to one, maybe more."

Masua placed a finger to her lips. "Hush. Listen to what Klend has to say."

"Colonel Gippen, deliver your report."

The other boy, knelt by the table, took up the knife, and carved the likeness of an immense jabbit in the table next to Nind's depiction of the tower. "We can use the warbeasts to pull the wagons we need to escape in."

"Nah, it's impossible," Renwa said, shaking his head. "They can't be controlled. I remember when one of them got out accidentally, a few years back. Destroyed half of what used to be downtown before the vampires recaptured it."

"I can control the warbeasts," Gippen said. "I've been training them for the past year." Masua gasped.

"I'm sorry, Princess Masua, I didn't tell you because I didn't want to worry you--"

"There's no need to be sorry, Gippen," Masua said. "I'm just proud of you. You are growing into a brave young man."

Gippen looked up, his face flushed with pride. "I can let them out when we're ready to begin our revolution. They'll cause so much chaos that all the soldiers will be distracted, and once they are I can summon the warbeasts and hitch them to the wagons. Phaki and Klend already helped me put harnesses on them."

"That could work," Renwa commented.

"It's brilliant!" Nind exclaimed. "Three cheers for this intelligent and courageous young man!" He clapped heartily.

The door was flung open, nearly snapping off its hinges as a wild-eyed figure burst through. It was raining outside, Hileo realized, and the newcomer's skin was burned in places. He been in a hurry, rushing through the dangerous deluge with no regard for his own comfort or safety.

"Father!" Masua exclaimed, jumping to her feet. "What happened to you?"

"How soon can we trigger the revolution?" the man barked. "And get me a towel!"

Masua grabbed one of the slave's sleeping mats and used it to wipe the rainwater off her father's skin.

"Tomorrow morning, at the earliest, Commander Kazjad, sir," Renwa said with a salute.

"Do it!" Kazjad slumped down against the ruins of a counter. "Oh God... what have I done?"

"Good question. What *have* you done?" Klend asked.

"That's not a very sensitive way of putting it," said Masua.

"I might not have been completely honest with you about what the Supreme Ruler was having me do in the engineering room," Kazjad said. "He wanted me to forge a device from dwalmium, a device more complicated than any I'd ever seen before. It wasn't until a few moments ago that I realized what it was for. Rainfire, I'm still not sure what I just saw. But it's evil. The Supreme Ruler has channeled some sort of dark power and used it to create a weapon more terrifying than any other."

"He will never defeat us!" Klend yelled, thrusting his fist in the air. "Did you hear about Gippen's amazing plan?"

"Tell me about it later," Kazjad said. He indicated Nind and Hileo. "You two had better get back to the palace if you want to maintain your cover. The Supreme Ruler will hold his banquet soon, and you're expected to attend."

Nind grunted, then ripped a door of a cupboard. He handed it to Hileo. "Use this to block the rain. I'll join you in a few minutes. We'll need to in the palace if we're going to make our surprise attack the most effective."

Hileo took the board, held it over his head, and ventured out into the storm.

"Phaki," the storyteller said, kneeling by her.

"How do you know my name?" Phaki asked. She didn't recall giving it to him.

"I talked about you with Masua. She told you were brave, and good at climbing. Now, both those attributes will be critical to the success of the revolution tomorrow."

Phaki grunted.

"I have a gift for you," Nind said, withdrawing a metal box from the inside of his coat and handing it to Phaki. "Keep this with you. You'll find it useful."

Phaki inspected the strange gift. She undid the latch on the front and opened it. Inside three indentations were cut into the metal, each about twice the size of her thumb.

"As for the rest of you," Nind said, standing back up. "None of you will likely see me again. If you do, I hope you will see me kicking the Supreme Ruler's behind. But now, I must depart. Good-bye. The favor of Ayādar be upon you. Fight well against evil. Remember what you have learned - you especially, Phaki."

With those words he vanished. A rift opened in the air, and Nind slipped through it. A moment passed, and he was gone, leaving a few grayish wisps behind. The wisps swirled in the air like little insects. One flew into Phaki's head, and she heard a voice echoing in her mind.

The Dream Giver brings forth the Nine, children of abomination as desolate as herself.

The voice fell silent, as did the room. The revolutionaries stared in shock at the place where Nind had been.

"Huh," Kronzar said. "That's a piece of magic I've never seen before. Speaking of magic..."

He got up and stood in the doorway for a moment, windblown rain pelting his skin. He stepped out, stretching out his arms as if embracing the full fury of the incendiary droplets.

"What are you doing? Are you crazy?" Renwa asked.

"Relax, I just thought you would like to know this about me before the revolution tomorrow." Kronzar turned and held out his hand, palm facing upward. Phaki inspected him and realized the rain wasn't burning him. Instead, clear, pure drops of water were falling from his skin where the tainted rainwater hit.

"When I was young, I always knew there was something special about me." A small flame appeared in Kronzar's palm, burning without any visible fuel. "It wasn't until a man came and showed me what I could do that I realized what it was. The kings of fire have returned. They are scattered, mostly unrecognized, but they exist. And I am one of them."

“Back off, bloodfencer,” Hileo snapped. Deathfang’s hand was hovering uncomfortably close to his neck as he was escorted up the stairs.

“Do you have any information about Nind?”

“He’s partially insane,” Hileo said, taking the stairs two at a time. Deathfang continued to fly behind him. “But our deal’s over.”

“Stop talking, I’m trying to make a decision here!”

“You asked me a question!”

“Hey, Hileo! Am I too late?” Nind jogged up the stairs. Where had he come from?

“Depends,” Deathfang said. “If you’re here to eat food, yes. The Merchant has already started. He eats like a pig, especially when it comes to donuts. But if you’re here to answer my question...” Deathfang removed his hand from Hileo, spun around, and confronted Nind. His bloodblade materialized, and he slammed it into the wall just to Nind’s left. He reached out with this other hand and pushed Nind backward, pinning him against the worn stone. “Where did you hear the name of Kyatira?”

Nind looked him in the eyes. “Does it really matter? The decision before you is the same regardless.”

“Gah,” said Deathfang. His bloodblade dissipated, and he released his grip on the Nind. “Get to the banquet.”

They proceeded up the winding staircase until they came to an ancient, oaken door, warped and scarred with many gashes. In the center three red symbols had been drawn, faded to the color of rust. Towards the bottom lay a fourth symbol, freshly painted and bright as blood.

Hileo took a deep breath in a futile attempt to dispel the unease that overcame him, the same unease that he’d felt every other time he’d seen those markings. He placed a hand on the handle of the door and shoved it open.

The room was circular, with table in the middle. Robiroto lounged at it, shoving a donut into his face. Across the room, a throne cast a shadow over Robiroto’s meal. The Supreme Ruler sat in it, watching with an emotionless gaze. His head was bare, his crown resting upside-down in his lap. He was flanked by seventeen vampires, nine on the left side of his throne and eight on the right. Darkmaw was among their number. He shot Deathfang a hateful glare.

“Ah, Deathfang, our tardy guests have at last arrived,” the Supreme Ruler said. “Oh, well, better late than never. Bring them forward.”

Deathfang shoved Hileo and Nind across the room and onto the glass panes of a window that encompassed most of the floor. Hileo glanced down through it and saw an immense, spider-like contraption filling an uninhabited room below. The arms of the contraption gleamed like spears and were suspended in the air above an empty pedestal. Deathfang bowed to the Supreme Ruler and took his place at the right of the throne, making an even number of vampires on both sides.

“Oh, well, you missed the feast,” the Supreme Ruler. “But lucky you! You get to be here for the best part of the banquet, my announcement. In fact, I can truly say this is the best day of my entire life. You see, for decades I’ve been trying to make a special... something. But it wasn’t until recently that I realized I needed supplies I couldn’t get from my own city to do so. That’s where the Merchant comes in. He has been an invaluable supporter of my cause, and for that he will be rewarded.” The Supreme Ruler lifted the crown from his lap and placed it on his head.

But something was different about it. The three red stones glowed as ominously as when Hileo had last seen them, but a fourth had joined them. Together they cast an oppressive light over the room. Panic began to well in Hileo's chest as the malicious light penetrated his being.

"The three bloodstones were created by Varkös over two thousand years ago," the Supreme Ruler said. "They constitute the fountain of true power, and with them I have given birth to these mighty warriors you see." He spread his arms to indicate the vampires surrounding his throne. "It has been a long, difficult road, but I have managed to replicate the craft of Varkös. I have created a fourth bloodstone. With them I shall bring forth a kind of vampire never before seen, vampires with unimaginable power, and you, dear Merchant, will be the first of that indomitable race. Rise."

Robiroto stood up, wiping a bit of frosting off his face and straightening his tie. The bloodstones began to glow brighter. A stream of blood red light condensed in the Supreme Ruler's palm, and shot forth to strike Robiroto in the breast. He spread his arms wide, an exultant grin bursting forth upon his features. A brilliant flash of red light filled the room, and when it faded Robiroto de Toro was no more. In his place was a vampire, wearing the same dilapidated suit and with similar features, except for the hideous adornment of claws and fangs. The vampire inspected his limbs and nodded approvingly.

"How do you like your new form, Merchant?" the Supreme Ruler asked.

"It is wonderful. But I am no longer the weak, pitiful merchant. Nor am I Robiroto de Toro. I need a new name. I am... I am... BOB!"

The newly born Bob crossed his arms confidently over his chest for a moment, then picked up another donut and stuffed it in his face.

The Supreme Ruler chuckled. "Very well, Bob. Your first mission in my glorious service is coming soon. But first, I have a little present for you, for all my loyal bloodfencers in fact. I have ordered my soldiers to drug the stew of the slaves tomorrow morning. Once they are asleep and defenseless, you may attack, slaughter them all, and drink their blood. With the bloodlust still raging in your veins, you will fly to a city on the Aithreni border and conquer it, killing any who resist you. The soldiers will come in after you to enforce my laws while you move on to another city, and another, and another, until the whole world is conquered."

Hileo's fear burst into full-blown panic. He gasped and steadied himself against the table. He'd allowed himself some hope as they planned the revolution. The plan with the warbeasts could have worked. But now he knew all was lost. Phaki would die. He would fail - he had already failed, but now he would doubly fail. The whole world would fall under the dominion of the Supreme Ruler, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

"As for you, latecomers," the Supreme Ruler said, turning his gaze on Hileo and Nind. "Since I am gracious, I am offering you a choice. You may follow the path of Bob and join my conquest... or you may die. I think I know which one you will choose - you anyway." He pointed at Hileo. "I think I will start with you, the more pliable one."

The light brightened again, and another red beam streamed from the Supreme Ruler's hand and focused on Hileo. He felt an unbearable pressure on his soul. He knew he could just give in to the intoxicating red light, embrace the power of the bloodstones, and leave this life behind. He could forget Phaki, forget his failures, and be reborn to a life of incredible power.

“Don’t give in, Hileo,” Nind said. “You must resist!”

It was wrong, it was evil - he knew this intuitively, beyond doubt. But he didn’t see any other option.

“No,” he murmured desperately. He had no way of resisting the dark power other than the sheer stubbornness of his will, which had never been very strong in the first place. Should he resist for Phaki’s sake? She was dead no matter what.

The pressure dissipated. Hileo looked up, peace returning to his soul as he saw a golden stream of light shooting through the air and meeting the red light for the Supreme Ruler.

The Supreme Ruler looked at the golden light, shock registering on his face. “Gold... the color of a traitor to his race.”

“Once, maybe, but no longer,” Nind said. The light blocking the Supreme Ruler’s power came from his own hand. “I suppose there’s no point in continuing to maintain this illusion.”

A flash of brilliant white light momentarily blinded Hileo. When his sight returned, Nind was gone. In his place stood a man with radiant golden skin, accentuated by long silvery hair that flowed down his neck. His ears were pointed, and his eyes were a piercing purple hue.

Deathfang screamed.

“My name is Glixafar, son of Meriadrox, last of the merin,” said the being Hileo had thought was Nind. “And you are Kotor, last of the dark alyān to remain free. You will not escape this time. I have come to fulfill my oath, and I will cast the binding spell on you, regardless of the cost.”

Chapter 10

“Quick! Kill him!” screamed the Supreme Ruler, pointing at Glixafar.

“Who? Me?” Bob asked, looking up from his donut.

“Yes, of course you! What do you think I gave you all that power for? Kill the person who’s attacking me!”

Glixafar reached under his coat and drew his sword. Bob turned on him, slashing wildly with his bloodblade. The two swords met, red on silver, and Bob was flung backward. He crashed into the wall with a cry of rage, while Glixafar leveled his weapon at the Supreme Ruler and advanced. Hileo drew his hydropistol, but hesitated. He had no idea what the rules of this fight were, surrounded as he was by beings with powers beyond his comprehension.

“I knew there was something wrong with you the moment I set eyes on you,” muttered the Supreme Ruler. He leapt out of his throne, grabbing his spear from the wall beside him. “EVERYONE! KILL THE MERĪ!”

Eighteen vampires converged on Glixafar from all sides. Deathfang hung back, seeming uncertain. Glixafar laughed brazenly. He transferred his grip on the sword to one hand, swinging it in a series of graceful, yet deadly, strokes. Light began to stream out of his other hand and concentrate in a ball just above his palm. One of the vampires puffed to smoke. The others swerved and crashed into each other as the ball of light in Glixafar’s hand exploded, creating a brilliant flash that momentarily blinded everyone in the room.

Hileo’s hand flung over his eyes instinctively. He accidentally hit himself in the head with hydropistol in the process and stumbled backward, crashing into the far wall. As his vision returned, he saw Glixafar slam his sword into the Supreme Ruler’s chest. The blade cut through the robes, but bounced off with a clang.

“Armor. Dwalmium-forged, right?” Glixafar asked, dodging a thrust from the Supreme Ruler’s spear. “You’re more paranoid than the last time we met, Kotor!”

All over the room, dazed vampires picked themselves up and renewed their attack on Glixafar. But their foe far outmatched them in experience. Glixafar dodged under their swinging bloodblades with superhuman alacrity, popping up again to strike when they least expected it. Their numbers worked against them. In the confined space of the throne room, their uncoordinated attacks hit each other as often as they hit Glixafar.

But the vampires’ attack was not completely fruitless. Blood streamed from numerous wounds all over Glixafar’s body, and he seemed to be slowing down.

Hileo leveled his hydropistol at the back of one of the bloodfencers and stepped forward. It looked like he’d get exactly what he wanted. He’d die in ghostly city, far away from home, fighting against a vastly superior force of evil. That was the best thing that could happen to him at this point, really.

He fired. The bullet hit the bloodfencer in the center of his back, a wound that would have been fatal a human. As it was, the hole only caused the vampire to cease fighting a moment. The damage dealt by Hileo’s attack soon healed. The vampire turned around, snarled and flew through the air towards Hileo, claws outstretched. Darkmaw. He seemed particularly pleased with his chance to kill Hileo.

Deathfang broke from his frozen position he'd held as he watched the battle with conflicted eyes and slammed into Hileo's attacker. He grabbed Darkmaw, spun around, and defenestrated him.

"So, are you on our side now?" Hileo asked as the glass from the window fell to the courtyard below.

"Yeah, don't irritate me or I might decide to turn evil again," Deathfang said.

Hileo popped another sphere of ammunition into his hydropistol. Darkmaw flew back through the window and pounced on Deathfang, screeching triumphantly.

"DEATHFANG IS A TRAITOR! KILL HIM!" Darkmaw yelled, shredding Deathfang's face with his claws. The scratches didn't bleed, but rather healed almost as soon as they were inflicted. Darkmaw grumbled discontentedly. "We'll deplete your reserves of blood soon enough."

Glixafar decapitated another bloodfencer and glanced at Deathfang. The Supreme Ruler took advantage of his momentary distraction to stab him through the heart. Glixafar gasped, his sword stroke swinging wildly off target and crashing into the floor.

"You never stood a chance of killing me," the Supreme Ruler said, pulling his spear out. Blood poured from the gaping wound in Glixafar's chest.

"You should have paid more attention to what I said, Kotor. I never meant to kill you." Glixafar sank to one knee, breathing raggedly. The blood of his wound began to rise into the air, summoned by the powers of the bloodfencers around him. Glixafar thrust out his arm, holding his sword like the point of a compass. He shouted a word in a foreign language and released his grip on the hilt. The sword flew out the window. Glixafar continued speaking, his words incomprehensible to Hileo.

"ARGHHH! KILL HIM!" Kotor screamed. He stabbed Glixafar through the left eye. "JUST DIE ALREADY!"

"Too late," said Glixafar, toppling over, lying prone on the glass of the window in the floor. A beam of light emanated from his body and shot towards the Supreme Ruler. Kotor's hand shot up, ripping the spearhead from Glixafar's corpse. He screamed in rage and blocked Glixafar's final attack with his own beam of scarlet light. The two lights met and reacted violently. A glowing sphere formed at their meeting place and rapidly expanded, shaking the tower down to its very foundations. It slammed into the vampires, sending them flying into the air. Hileo felt it reach him, an intangible force pushing him backwards. The walls of the room collapsed before the dome of light, and Hileo was pushed off the tower. The last thing he felt was the sensation of falling, surrounded by a never-ending, raging sea of red and gold light.

When he woke up it was morning. He groaned and pushed himself off the ground, trying to take account of his surroundings. He soon realized he was in the courtyard at the base of the tower, alone. He looked up and saw that the entire top floor of the tower had been annihilated, smoke rising from its remains.

His heart skipped a beat as he remembered what he'd heard last night. Phaki! She was with the slaves in barrack nine, the day the vampires were going to massacre them all. The sun had already risen. It could have begun already. Was that why all the vampires were absent from the courtyard?

Hileo rushed out into the streets of Zwjazimar. It was a miracle he was even still alive. Now he had another chance. He'd gotten Phaki into this mess. It was his responsibility to get her out, using whatever means were necessary.

“Shhhh, it's ok, girl, you're going to have a big day, alright?” Gippen gently patted Jyl's snout. She snorted uneasily.

Gippen stepped back and began pulling up the stakes binding the rope circle to the sand. “I need you to just stay here for a little while, understand? Just wait until I call you. You're going to have new life - we all are. No more vampires bossing you around and telling you what to do all the time and trying to eat you every time you make one tiny mistake. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it?”

Jyl let out a nervous moan and buried her head back in the sand. Gippen pulled up the rest of the stakes and cast the rope aside. “Come on, Jyl, what are you scared of? You're weigh like, three thousands pounds and even the vampires are scared of you.”

The sand remained unmoving, showing no sign of the creature that lived below. Gippen sighed, pulled out his flute, and played a few notes. Jyl poked one ear out of the sand, turning it towards the source of the music. Gippen took hold of it and gave it a yank. A moment later he was knocked of his feet as Jyl erupted from her abode beneath the ground. She roared, then looked at Gippen. As if realizing who it was, she bowed her head penitently.

“That's better,” said Gippen. “Let me get Ryl out too. We'll have a proper wedding ceremony for you two once we're out of here.”

Ryl proved easier to get engaged. As soon as Gippen had finished pulling the stakes out of the ground, he played his flute. Ryl promptly burst forth, pulling his whole body out of the sand. He roared fiercely and propelled himself forward with a mighty leap. He crashed into the nearest building and began ripping it to pieces, as expected.

Gippen dodged a piece of stone that Ryl sent flying to the air and scratched his head, wondering how he was going to prevent the male warbeast from doing the same to their wagons. His dilemma was solved in hardly any time at all, as Jyl let out a low whistle. The notes he played on his snapped flute were only a crude replica of the call of a true warbeast. As soon as Ryl heard it, he paused, turned, and padded over to Jyl. He sniffed her, docile, and she batted her eyelashes at him.

Gippen laughed. “Good, Jyl, just keep him relaxed.” Ryl let out another whistle in reply. The warbeast mating call was a far more pleasant sound than that of a goat. Gippen left them alone and trotted back towards barrack nine. He'd left before breakfast that morning to prepare the warbeasts. They were the most important part of the revolution's endgame, after all.

It was the sound more than the smell that stopped Gippen, sending a niggles of fear into his heart. Or not the sound, but rather the lack of sound. Normally at this time in the morning he could the mooing of the Supreme Ruler's cows, demanding that some of the slaves be summoned to feed them their morning meal. Today there was only silence, a silence made unbearable by the presence of a hideous stench. The smell of blood. The smell of death.

Gippen moved towards the source of the smell, cautiously creeping around buildings. The silence was suddenly broken by laughter, maniacal and malicious. The laughter continued, occasionally broken by shouted declarations. Gippen poked his head around the corner of a building and looked across the street at where the cows had been kept lately, in the courtyard of another abandoned mansion, its gates crudely tied together.

They were all dead. Every single one of the bovines lay unmoving on the ground, their throat slit. From the wounds streams of blood rose into the air, pouring into one figure hovering several feet above the pile of corpses.

“BWAHAHAHA! Soon the whole world shall tremble! For I am Bob, and none can stand against me! BWAHAHAHAHA!!!”

Gippen stifled a scream. Masua’s worst fear had been realized. The beginning of the war had come upon them. He dashed away, heart pounding. He needed to warn the other slaves. The revolution couldn’t start soon enough.

“Just get her to eat the stew already! I don’t care if you have to pin her down and force it down her throat!”

Hileo snuck through the gates of barrack nine. Sleeping bodies were strewn haphazardly about the courtyard. A squadron of soldiers clustered in the corner, trapping a few slaves reluctant to eat the stew they now knew was drugged. Some of the sleeping slaves had drawn weapons. They were lay on the ground, useless.

Phaki was among those affected by the drug. She lay unconscious alongside Masua. Hileo put his arms under her and lifted her up.

Get Phaki. Get out.

His old mission had returned to him. So what if he was doing it for selfish reasons? He was doing the best he could. He had been given a serendipitous opportunity to escape with Phaki before all hell broke loose in the city. He had no choice but to take it. Phaki might be angry at him at first, but she’d understand as she matured.

We have to try to save them.

“I tried,” murmured Hileo, striding out the gates with Phaki in his arms. “I failed. We all failed. The Supreme Ruler had us all outmaneuvered from the beginning.”

A scream pierced the air behind him. Hileo shut his eyes and turned his head away. People would die because of his decision. He only hoped one less person would die than if he hadn’t made it.

Hileo’s eyes drifted back open. He glanced at the air above him to see a vampire descending from the sky. His heart rabbited and he took off at a jog. The vampire didn’t pursue him, instead landing in the courtyard of barrack nine.

The sand skiff wasn’t far. He might not be able to run as fast as he normally could, inhibited as he was by Phaki’s weight, but he could still make it.

Masua’s face flashed before his mind. He hardly knew her, but she seemed a kind and caring young woman. Phaki respected her.

Hileo glanced back down at the girl in his arms. How would she respond if she knew he'd left Masua, and Kazjad, and Klend - they all seemed to be friends she had made - to die?

Don't think about it! Hileo gritted his teeth. He'd deal with the ramifications of this disastrous journey later. Now he only had to focus on getting himself and Phaki out alive.

"Hileo."

His name, spoken by a voice he'd never expected to hear again, stopped Hileo in his tracks. A few feet in front of him a figure materialized out of thin air, translucent at first, but gradually becoming more solid. The figure held out his hand in a gesture of warning. He'd assumed the look he'd had when Hileo had known him.

Nind.

Deathfang slammed into the pot of stew, shattering it. He swung his bloodblade, carving it into chunks and scattering them across the courtyard of barrack nine. The stew leaked out and sunk into the ground.

Rainfire. It was no use. The drugged meal had already been served to the slaves. Most of them were sleeping. That abomination, Bob, was gathering the remaining loyal bloodfencers together. Soon they would slaughter these slaves, and then go on to do the same to unsuspecting villagers in Aithrenar to the east.

Deathfang had done the same many times, but he hadn't gone on a raid against humans for years. He feared adding to the cacophony of ghosts in his head, their voices accusing him, reminding him of his guilt. The night of the revolution six years ago had broken a dam holding them back. Deathfang may have changed, but the guilt hadn't abated. Showing leniency to Masua and Kazjad - he'd wronged other just as much as he had them, but they were the ones closest to him - had never been enough.

The soldiers stared at him in fear. They turned their attention away from the crying girl, the only slave who hadn't eaten the drugged stew yet.

"Don't interfere with me," Deathfang snarled. He had to awaken these slaves before his peers arrived. He couldn't afford to have the soldiers distracting him.

Deathfang thrust out his palm towards Masua, silently asking her forgiveness for using such extreme measures on her. He could feel the minds of the slaves around him, using a sense only master bloodfencers possessed. They were oppressed, pinned down by the effects of the drug.

A red bolt of lightning flew from his hand and hit Masua. It wasn't physical, but a depiction of something happening in the mental realm, an representation that helped him control his powers. The bolt gave her mind a violent jolt, freeing it from the effects of the drug. Grey wisps rose into the air above her head, dancing erratically. Masua's eyes flew open, and she sat up. She shuddered in pain, but it soon passed.

The little girl in the corner slipped between the legs of one of the soldiers and ran to Masua. She embraced her, sobbing.

"Tatchka? What happened?" Masua asked. "Why is everyone sleeping? And where's Phaki?"

Deathfang repeated the process with the other slaves, moving as quickly as possible. One by one the slaves awoke and began to reorient themselves.

“Hey! You’re undoing all our hard work!” one of the soldiers yelled.

“SLAVES! The revolution is still on! Arm yourselves and fight!” Deathfang screamed.

“What Darkmaw told us is true!” The commander of the soldiers pointed his spear at Deathfang. “Deathfang is a traitor! Kill him! The Supreme Ruler has promised great rewards to one who brings down the traitor bloodfencer!”

The soldiers fanned out across the courtyard, forming a semicircle of spears around the rebel bloodfencer.

“Rainfire,” said Deathfang. He awakened one more slave, Kazjad, the leader of the revolution. They’d need him if this was going to succeed. Deathfang dodged the spear thrust of a soldier and summoned his bloodblade.

“The slaves are in revolt! Kill them as well!” the commander ordered.

“Alright, now I have no qualms about killing you,” muttered Deathfang. He slashed his bloodblade across the soldier’s spear, then across his throat. The other soldiers let out a battle cry and charged him as one. Deathfang smiled as his battle instincts took over. The thrill of the fight rushed through his veins and he swerved, dodged, and ducked under the ever-shifting maze of spears. He drew blood from the wounds he inflicted, drawing it into his own bloodstream, fueling his own powers. He was unstoppable, a master bloodfencer with his true glory unveiled. There were over twenty soldiers in the courtyard - too many for a normal man, or even a normal bloodfencer, to defeat.

But Deathfang was no normal bloodfencer. A spear hit him in the chest - he’d made a mistake. He was a bit out of practice, but no big deal. He pulled it out and the wound healed. The soldier wielding the weapon realized his mistake too late. Fear possessed his face as Deathfang descended upon him. The battle continued. A red mist crept across Deathfang’s eyes. He hadn’t felt this good in a long time. Power raged throughout his entire body. The soldiers gave up fighting him - it made sense, he was an unstoppable force, after all - and turned to flee. But it was to no avail. Deathfang swooped through the air, hunting down and destroying each one of them in a few minutes. He searched for more foes.

There! Something was moving. He growled and leapt towards the figure, bloodblade outstretched. Through his clouded vision, he saw another figure step in, pushing his target aside. The newcomer took the bloodblade in his chest. He yelled in pain. Masua screamed in horror.

What?

The battle-rage covering Deathfang’s eyes vanished. Kazjad stood over Masua, bleeding from a fatal wound in his chest. The courtyard was littered with the bodies of the slain.

“Father... what have you done this time?” Masua asked.

Kazjad fell down to the ground. “I’m sorry. I did the best I could. Tell your mother... oh, never mind, I’ll tell her myself.”

His breathing slowed, and he closed his eyes. Deathfang fell out of the sky and hit the ground, staring in shock at the grim tableau before him. His bloodblade disappeared from his hand. Masua wept, her tears mingling with those of the girl at her side and falling on her father’s deathly pale face.

He’d been her before. Six years ago. The night everything had changed.

The slave's first revolution had failed. To punish them, the Supreme Ruler had given his bloodfencer free reign over the city for one night. Kill any you find, he'd told them. Deathfang had relished the opportunity, like a normal vampire. He'd joined the fray with eagerness, slaughtering and sucking up the blood of the weak. They'd run from him, caring only for their own preservation, sometimes pushing others of their kind in front of him to protect themselves.

Except for one.

Deathfang had pursued a girl, no more than thirteen years old, through the streets. He was about to deliver the killing blow when another woman rushed onto the scene, pushed the girl aside, and took Deathfang's stroke upon herself.

The woman had been named Kyatira, Kazjad's wife, Masua's mother. The girl she saved was Masua.

The display of sacrificial love had unnerved Deathfang. For the first time, he'd considered the possibility that there might be more to life than mere *power*. He'd never been quite the same since.

But he'd never really changed. He'd thought he had, hoped he had, but he hadn't. He was still a vampire, with only blood and death in his future.

"MASUA!" Gippen screamed, sprinting through the gate. "Kazjad! Everybody! The war is start- oh, rainfire, I'm too late."

Deathfang glanced at him, then back at Kazjad's body, then up at the sky. He screamed wordlessly and propelled himself upwards. There was only hope for him that he could see. The Supreme Ruler had transformed him into this violent, despicable being. Deathfang was determined to force him to reverse the process.

"What... how are you still alive?" Hileo asked.

Nind smiled. "My body was destroyed, but the ancient merin are not so easy to kill. My spirit still dwells in this universe, although only for a little while longer. Soon the last of my strength shall fade, and I will pass away, although because of any blow struck by Kotor. It was casting the binding spell on him that did me in."

"Well, what do you want with me, then?" Hileo asked,

"Don't make the same mistake I did."

"What?"

"Running away from responsibility. Doing a little good, telling yourself it's enough, and ignoring the larger problems. I tried that nearly a thousand years ago. As a result, Kotor has killed millions of people over the past few centuries."

"I'm doing my duty," Hileo snapped. "I'm saving Phaki. That's all I ever came here to do, anyway."

"Saving her for what, exactly? Do you really think she'll love you for what you're doing now? You may not know it, but the slaves back in that barrack - they've become her family. Her real family. How do think she'll respond when she finds out that you abandoned them to certain death?"

“I did what I had to do,” Hileo said. “Maybe it was different for you. You’re an ancient, mystical, powerful entity who had the power to actually do something about your problems. I’m just a weak, ignorant, selfish human being, who can’t change a thing about what is going to happen in this city. The Supreme Ruler is beyond my ability to handle. I can’t defeat him.”

“I already defeated him! What do you think I came here to do? I place the binding spell on Kotor, even though it drained my own life force to do so. He’s trapped, his power severely diminished. He’ll be reduced to commanding his forces from afar, unable to directly attack anyone. All you have to do is protect the slaves from being massacred long enough for them to escape. Recognizing your weaknesses is good, but stop using them as excuses.”

Hileo eyed Nind. “You’re dead. I’m only seeing an illusion. You can’t stop me from fleeing.”

“I wouldn’t want to even if I could. You must make this decision yourself, Hileo.”

“Fine.” Hileo indicated Phaki. “But what about her?”

“I can awaken her.” Nind approached Phaki and laid a hand on her head. His fingers passed through her without resistance. Nind’s face twisted in concentration for a moment before Phaki’s eyes flew open and she lashed out. Hileo dropped her.

“Ow,” she said. “Is the revolution started yet?”

“The revolution has begun,” said Nind. “And you still have an important part to play in. Do you have that box I gave you?”

Phaki reached into her pocket and withdrew a metal box with a latch in the front, nodding.

“Perfect,” Nind said. “You’re going to need that to vanquish the Supreme Ruler’s power forever. That, and a knife. Do you happen to have a knife, Hileo?”

Hileo frowned, but pulled his knife out the sheath on his belt and handed it to Phaki. “What are these for?”

Nind turned to Phaki and gave her a brief summary of what had happened last night. “The Supreme Ruler is bound, but the greatest part of his power, the power to create new vampires, is still with him. I need you to climb to the top of the tower, pry the bloodstones from the Supreme Ruler’s crown, and put them in that box. That will remove most of his ability to wage the war. As for you, Hileo, I stashed a hydropistol in that building over there, and my sword should have fallen somewhere in this area. The gun is loaded with dwalmium bullets - a single shot will kill even a master bloodfencer. I’m not sure about that Bob, though. He’s something new. I will depart from you now, and do what I can to awaken the slaves who remain under the influence of the drug. This will drain the last of my power, so you won’t see me again. Goodbye.”

Nind faded from sight. He disappeared, leaving Phaki and Hileo alone. Phaki turned to leave.

“Wait,” Hileo said. He took a deep breath. “Phaki, I know haven’t always been the best parent - well, technically, I’m not a parent at all, but you know what I mean. I want you to know that I’m sorry for what I’ve done. I’d wish I’d cared about you for your own sake, but in reality my love was based off my own selfish desires. I’ll try to do better, but I know you’ve found another family here and... I’d understand if you want to be with them instead of under my protection, once you’re out of her and you have new life.”

Phaki raised an eyebrow. "I don't see why I can't have both. After all, Masua is a beautiful, eligible young lady, and you've never married, so..."

"Phaki!" Hileo blushed. "I met her yesterday, and about three words passed between us."

Phaki shrugged. "Well, there's plenty of time to do more than that."

"I don't even know if I'll survive this battle!"

"I know." Phaki embraced him. "I'm sorry, as well."

"For what?"

"Well, I haven't always been the best adopted daughter. I hid some things from you back when we living in Dustubria. Ask me to tell you about Trant if we survive."

"Who's Trant? Wait... do you have a secret boyfriend?"

Phaki laughed. "No, silly, Trant is my brother! It's a long story. How do you think I learned to climb so well if was cooped up in that tiny tenement all day?"

"I'm afraid I wasn't paying enough attention to notice." Hileo patted her head. "But we'll talk about it later. For now, we have a revolution to fight and a dark lord to overthrow."

Phaki broke from his embrace and sprinted off.

"Phaki!" Hileo called as she departed. "I love you!"

Phaki paused and looked back. She cocked her head. "You know, I think that's the first time you've told me that."

"Good, because I mean it."

"That's great. I love you too."

Hileo and Phaki split up and ran across the city, Phaki to the Supreme Ruler's palace, Hileo to the interior of the house Nind had pointed out. He found the hydropistol easily, along with the sword, whose tip was conspicuously buried in the sand. He hefted the sword in the air, let out a battle cry, and charged back towards barrack nine.

Chapter 11

Phaki clenched the knife between her teeth, put the box in her pocket, and looked up at the tower before her. It was higher than anything she had ever climbed before, but not insurmountable. The same skills she'd used when darting over the ruins of Zwjazimar with Darkmaw in hot pursuit were applicable to this challenge. She merely needed to extend them over a longer period of time.

She set her fingers in a crack between the stones and pulled herself up, finding another indentation in which to put her feet. She repeated the process, making sure three of her limbs were secure before she reached out with the fourth one to find a new hand or foothold. The wind whipped her hair, but wasn't strong enough to threaten to blow her from her position. A faint ache had crept into her limbs when she pulled herself with relief over the edge of the tower, but the adrenaline pumping through her veins easily overpowered it.

The top of the tower was circular, with a rectangular window set into the floor. At the far end of the window was a statue of the Supreme Ruler, holding his spear upright. The four bloodstones glowed in his crown. Four? But there were only three spaces in the box Nind had given her.

Phaki looked down from her elevated position at the city. She could see slaves filling the wagons left by the soldiers in front of the palace. Renwa was directing them, urging them to move faster. In the distance, she heard screams. Vampires circled in the air, focused on a pillar of smoke rising from below. Something was burning. Was that Kronzar?

She removed the knife from her mouth, opened the box, and strode the stone apparition. But a voice pierced through the still air that stopped her in her tracks. It was one she'd never thought she'd hear again.

"Come on, Phaki, I thought you knew better than this," said Trant's voice.

Phaki slowly looked over her shoulder, heart racing in apprehension. Trant stood behind her, arms crossed in a confident gesture. He grinned cockily.

"What are you doing here?" Phaki demanded.

"Come on, I know it's been a while, but is that any way to greet your brother? Especially after all I taught you. Don't be deluded, Phaki."

"I'm not. The Supreme Ruler is evil, and I am going to take away his power." She took another step towards the statue.

"Why? Why are you on this mission?"

"The storyteller gave it to me."

"Why should you do what he says? He doesn't care about you. No one does. No matter what they tell you, it's a lie, designed to manipulate you to their own ends. The only one who cares about you is you, Phaki. The storyteller only wants you to shut up the bloodstones in that box so he can reclaim them later in order to further his own power."

"He's dead." Phaki took the knife and plunged it into the gap between the metal of the crown and bloodstone. She pried the stone loose, and it fell into her hand. She stared at the glowing stone, momentarily entranced by its beauty. A dark, hideous beauty, but beauty nonetheless.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it?” Trant asked, leaning over her shoulder. “Why should you deliver it to someone else? Take it, Phaki, take it for you. With the power of the bloodstones, no one will ever be able to hurt you again. You’ll be entirely self-sufficient, dependent on the so-called love of no one. Love yourself, Phaki. No one else does.”

Phaki grunted and closed her fist around the bloodstone. Still its ominous, seductive red light leaked through the gaps between her fingers. Would it really be a bad thing to keep one of the bloodstones for herself? There were only three slots in the box, after all, and four bloodstones.

She dropped the stone into the box and slammed it shut. Immediately its spell over her faded, and she could think clearly. She turned to Trant.

“You are a hypocrite,” she said. “If I’m the only one who cares about me, why are you even here? You don’t care about me, by your own admission. If you were really Trant, you’d be off minding your own business, or else trying to steal the bloodstones for yourself.”

She punched Trant in the face. Her fist went right through him without leaving a mark. “Whoever you are, you’re also wrong. Masua loves me, and Hileo loves me, and Gippen and Klend too, and... and I think the storyteller does too, even though he’s dead, and he hardly even knew me, but he’s a rather remarkable fellow and if anyone could love someone they didn’t know, it would be him.”

Trant hissed. His form dissolved, then reformed into the shape of the Supreme Ruler. The bloodstones were in the illusion’s crown, but they didn’t glow like the real ones did.

“Glixafar is dead, and you soon will be too. It doesn’t matter who loves you, because none of them can help you. Look, my minion comes now to dispatch you.”

Phaki followed the Supreme Ruler’s finger as he pointed to the horizon. Deathfang flew towards the tower. He landed, panting heavily. His eyes frantically glanced to and fro before fastening on the image of the Supreme Ruler.

“Release me,” he demanded, pointing his bloodblade at the illusion.

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. The bloodlust. It’s what you use to control us all it. Release me from it. Turn me back into a human if you have to.”

The Supreme Ruler laughed. “Deathfang, Deathfang, you have gotten quite rebellious, haven’t you? It’s time you learned that there’s no going back for your kind. Your destiny is to obey me. You cannot escape from it.”

“I must have been human once,” Deathfang said. “Who was I?”

“Who you were is gone,” said the Supreme Ruler. “Only Deathfang, my servant, remains.”

The remaining three bloodstones in the statue’s crown glowed brightly. A ray of incarnadine light emitted from each one, then joined with the others to form a concentrated beam that pointed at Deathfang.

“Now,” said the Supreme Ruler. “Obey me.”

“No,” Deathfang said, face twisted in concentration.

“Obey me,” repeated the Supreme Ruler. “Kill the girl, and return the bloodstone she stole to my crown.”

A bead of sweat ran down Deathfang's face. He pointed his bloodblade at Phaki and took a step forward. Phaki slammed her knife into the hole in the crown containing the next bloodstone, prying frantically. Deathfang looked to be resisting, but he wouldn't hold out much longer.

Deathfang bellowed and leapt forward. Phaki let out a cry of fear and ducked under his bloodblade. The second bloodstone fell to glass in the floor of the tower. Phaki grabbed it and shoved it in the box.

Deathfang now stood between her and the statue with the remaining two bloodstones. Had taking another bloodstone from the crown weakened the Supreme Ruler's hold over him? Phaki slowly rose to her feet, keeping an eye on Deathfang, although if he decided to kill her, there wouldn't be much she could do about it.

"Kill the girl."

"No," said Deathfang. He swung his bloodblade, but not at Phaki. The weapon severed the arm of the statue, the one holding the spear. Deathfang dissolved his bloodblade and caught the spear as it fell. He screamed in agony, then clutched the spear to his chest and screamed again. His whole body convulsed, and he collapsed. More convulsions shook him. Phaki could see the faint outline of a reddish mass arising from his body. It had claws dug deep into Deathfang's back, but it was being forced out.

"So you have chosen death then," said the Supreme Ruler as the reddish mass vanished and Deathfang lay still. "Oh well. I have other minions who will do the job for me."

Phaki ran past Deathfang's body and back to the statue. She bent down, scooped the knife off the floor, and shoved it back into the crown.

"DARKMAW! GET OVER HERE!"

In the distance, a humanoid shape rose into the air and shot towards the tower with incredible speed.

"Yes, my lord?" Darkmaw asked, skidding across the roof to come to an abrupt stop in front of the Supreme Ruler.

"Kill that girl."

Darkmaw's eyes lit up. "With pleasure."

Phaki pushed with all her might against the hilt of the knife. The blade bent. Why was this bloodstone wedged in so tightly? She removed the knife, stuck it into one of the empty holes, and tried to push out the bloodstone from behind. She abandoned this effort within a few seconds as Darkmaw came after her. The vampire took hold of her and lifted her into the air.

"No escape now, disgusting girl," Darkmaw said. He wrapped his claws around her throat, drawing blood. Phaki struggled to take in air as Darkmaw tightened his grip, cackling sadistically.

An expression of pain and shock appeared on Darkmaw's face. A moment later, it vanished, as did the rest of Darkmaw, in a puff of black smoke. Phaki fell, nearly sliding off the edge of the tower, but managed to catch herself on a ruined section of the throne room's wall.

Deathfang rose up, the spear held in both hands, its tip penetrating the space where Darkmaw had been a moment ago. He had similar features as he had a few minutes ago, but his claws and fangs were gone, and he wore a triumphant smile of his face.

“What? No! It’s not possible!” the Supreme Ruler sputtered. “The transformation of the bloodstones cannot be reversed without certain death!”

Deathfang stabbed him. The illusion vanished.

“Deathfang? You’re a human?” Phaki asked. “How?”

“The spear’s made of dwalmium,” Deathfang replied. “It repels the dark magic that binds a vampire’s soul, mind and body together. Normally one would so dependent on that dark magic that death would result if it were forced out. But I was different, for some reason. I think it wasn’t killed I hadn’t killed a human in so many years, that the dark magic had already begun to lose its grip on me. By the way, I need a new name. I don’t have much experience with human cultures, but I suspect Deathfang is socially unacceptable.”

“How about Thaddeus?” Phaki suggested.

“Sounds great.”

The voice of the Supreme Ruler shattered the air, reverberating throughout the entire city. “MINIONS! HEARKEN TO MY CALL! GET TO MY THRONE ROOM IMMEDIATELY AND KILL EVERYONE IN IT!!!”

Phaki leapt to her feet and rushed back to the statue. She gave up on the tightly wedged bloodstone and tried for the other one. She was able to saw it out after a minute of concentrated effort. After snapping it in the box, she looked up to see vampires converging on the tower from all sides. She’d never be able to climb back down the way she’d come.

“You escape, I’ll hold them off,” Thaddeus said.

“How?”

Thaddeus lifted the spear and slammed its butt into the window in the floor. It shattered, dropping Phaki down into the room below. She cut her palm on a shard of broken glass, winced, and dropped the knife. She didn’t need it anymore.

“Take the stairs!” Thaddeus yelled, whipping his spear back into a battle position.

“You sure you don’t want to come?”

“I can’t. The bloodstones... they’re still tempting to me. The effects of being a vampire for so long are not easily forgotten. If I escaped with you, I’d become a danger to myself and everyone around me.”

Phaki nodded gravely. “Farewell, Thaddeus! I’ll tell everyone about how you died a hero!”

“JUST GO!” Thaddeus stabbed his spear at a shape just beyond Phaki’s field of vision. She made her way across the floor covered in shattered glass, ignoring the metallic device surrounding her, and opened the door. A spiral staircase led down and out of the tower.

Thaddeus leapt through the the hole in the roof and ran to the door. He gave Phaki a shove and slammed the door behind her.

Smoke rose in the distance. Hileo ran towards it, wondering what they burning. He found his answer soon enough: a person. Was that Kronzar? No, wait, Kronzar wasn’t *on* fire. He *was* the fire. Flames engulfed him without doing any harm, and let out a battle cry and sent them

flying in direction of an attacking vampire. The vampire dropped to the ground, rolling to put out the fire on his clothing.

“Hurry! Move while the fire-king is still covering for us!” It was Renwa, directing a group of escaping slaves towards the wagons.

“Have we got everyone?” a voice called.

Another joined in. “How are we going to escape? The wagons are too slow to outpace a bloodfencer!”

“Please just move,” Renwa pleaded. “Gippen has a plan to help us escape.”

“Gippen? Isn’t he like, a kid?”

A vampire swooped down and confronted the mass of escapees. Renwa’s breath caught in his throat. He pulled out a hydro pistol and fired. The vampire merely smiled and advanced.

Until Hileo shot him.

“Hileo! Where have you been? Did you and Nind attack the palace successfully?”

“Take your own advice! Just move! Get to the wagons! I’ll help Kronzar cover for you.”

Renwa nodded and obeyed. Hileo edged past the slaves to where Kronzar was fighting off three vampires simultaneously with bursts of fire.

“This is a lot harder than with the Rogues!” Kronzar yelled.

“Why weren’t you doing this back then?” Hileo asked.

“I was out of fuel!”

“Move aside, inferiors specimens,” Bob said. He hovered a few yards away, watching the battle with mild interest. “Let me handle this one.”

Bob flew forward as the other bloodfencers backed off. Hileo shot him. There was flash of red light, as if a shield phased into existence in front of Bob just long enough to block the bullet. Bob was pushed backward but otherwise appeared unharmed. He recovered from the blow within moments and shot forward, penetrating Kronzar’s flame and taking his opponent by neck. Kronzar was pushed to the ground, and Bob sat on top of him, seeming ignorant of the fact that he was on fire.

Hileo charged and slashed at Bob with sword. The same thing as with the bullet. Bob and the sword repelled each other, Bob flying off Kronzar, Hileo being flung backwards. Both regrouped and charged at each other. Bob swung his bloodblade and Hileo parried, with same results.

“We need to try something different with this one!” Hileo said.

“Yeah, I guessed that already. You got any ideas?”

“Just one. Hey, Bob, donuts!”

Bob looked around wildly. “What? Where are the donuts?”

In the distance, a monstrous, scaled beast rose up and came crashing down on top of an abandoned building. It seemed like a good opponent for Bob, so Hileo pointed at it. “There! That monster has a vast horde of donuts hidden in his secret lair! If you defeat it, they’re all yours!”

Bob’s eyes narrowed. “You’re lying. Why would you tell me the secret location of donuts? Why not just eat them yourself?”

Alright, he was definitely crazy. Crazy before the transformation, even more crazy afterwards.

“I think I’ll just kill you first, then go look for donuts,” Bob said.

“Rainfire,” said Hileo. “Oh, well, it was worth a try.”

“Do you have a wife? Or kids?” Kronzar asked. “Maybe they miss you. You should go back to them.”

“Robiroto de Toro had those things. But he is gone, and I... am... BOB!”

Bob stabbed with his bloodblade. Kronzar grabbed it with a flame-wreathed hand and tossed the mad bloodfencer aside. Hileo pressed the advantage, following up with mighty blow. This time the sword was ripped from his hand and flew backwards.

“MINIONS! HEARKEN TO MY CALL! GET TO MY THRONE ROOM IMMEDIATELY AND KILL EVERYONE IN IT!!!”

Bob looked around in shock. He flew into the air and departed. Hileo could see vampires all over the city doing the same.

“Well, that was convenient,” said Kronzar. “Why don’t we join the escape in the wagons? You just go first, and I’ll follow behind you, to guard your back and such.”

“Wait,” Hileo said. He heard the faint sound of crying. “We need to make sure everyone got out of the barracks.”

He rushed into the courtyard of barrack nine. It had been transformed into a graveyard, and only two living beings remained: Masua and a small girl of about seven years old. They knelt by the one of the bodies. Hileo ran to them, then stopped in his tracks as he recognized the corpse. Kazjad.

“Er, I’m very sorry for your loss, Masua,” he said awkwardly. He had no experience comforting people in these types of situations. Especially pretty young ladies whom Phaki wanted him to fall in love with.

Don’t think about that right now. “Please, we have to leave. It’s your only chance to escape.”

Masua nodded slowly, her tears drying on her cheeks. “You’re right. Come on, Tatchka, I should have gone sooner. How could I have put you in danger because of my own grief?”

“I’m sad too, Masua,” Tatchka said.

Masua smiled. “You’re talking again? Ever since your mother died, I’d thought you were so traumatized you’d never speak again!”

Tatchka nodded. Hileo offered Masua his hand and pulled her to her feet. They made their way to the wagons in front of the palace, which were loaded with slaves.

“We’ll never escape,” someone said. “These wagons don’t even have chammals to pull them!”

Gippen stood at the front of one of the wagons and blew on a broken flute.

“That’s horrible music, and it doesn’t do anything to save us anyway!”

“Please just shut up and remember it’s a miracle you still have breath to complain with,” Renwa said.

A minute passed, and Gippen looked worried. He blew another note on the flute. The ground in front of the wagons churned and bubbled, and one of the immense beasts Hileo had spotted destroying the city burst from beneath it. It bent docilely beneath Gippen’s hand and allowed him to take hold of the harness tied around its neck.

Gippen must have attached the harness to the wagon next, but Hileo wasn't paying attention because he was staring at the tower. Vampires were pouring into it through a hole in the roof. They were stopped, somehow, a river blocked by a dam.

Phaki was in the tower. Hileo's heart raced, as did he, running towards the base of the tower. Phaki threw open the door and ran to meet him, holding Nind's box in her hand.

"I did it," she gasped. "I got the bloodstones. Thaddeus, I mean Deathfang, is holding off the vampires. They're all in the top few floors of the tower."

"Wait," Hileo said. "All the vampires are in the tower?"

Phaki nodded. "I think so. The Supreme Ruler called every vampire in the city to try and get the bloodstones back."

Hileo gazed towards the top of the tower. A few vampires swirled around its top, like vultures. A plan appeared in his mind.

"Go, get in the wagon, and escape," he said. "Don't wait for me."

Phaki caught his arm. "You're not coming?"

"Not until there are no vampires left to pursue you," Hileo replied. "Trust me. Go."

Pain spread across Phaki's face, but she obeyed, climbing in the back of the second wagon as Gippen summoned another warbeast.

"Kronzar! I need your help!" Hileo bellowed. Kronzar jogged up to his side.

"What's the matter? We're almost ready to go!"

"Those vampires are still going to pursue us, and if they don't catch us, they'll find other innocent people to kill," Hileo said. "I'm going to prevent that."

"Bold. What exactly is your plan?"

"I'm going to blow up the tower. All I need you to do is light it on fire on my command."

Gippen attached the second warbeast harness and shouted a command. The beast took off, jerking the wagon behind it, and the other one followed.

Hileo raised Nind's sword into the air and rushed into the tower. He easily located the water barrels stored next to the dining room. He smashed the sword into them, breaking them open. Water seeped into the floor, and explosive gas billowed into the air. Was it the same as that left behind by the deceased vampires? No time to think about, or why the Supreme Ruler had put his entire city under an invisible, dustsand-generated dome. It would lead to his ultimate demise no matter his motivation. Hileo finished smashing open the remaining barrels, kicking them around in an attempt to spread the gas throughout the foundational floor of the tower. When he was satisfied, he ran through the smoke, choking as he inhaled it. He stumbled free from the black cloud and glanced back up at the summit. The vampires were still there.

"Kronzar! Light it up!" Hileo yelled, running away from the tower. Twins streams of fire burst from Kronzar's hands, shooting past Hileo on either side of him. They hit the gas leaking out of the room.

The tower exploded.

Immense chunks of stone were torn up and flung through the air as if they were toys. A vast cloud of dust and smoke emanated from the site of the explosion. Hileo coughed, straining his eyes to make out the wall of the courtyard. Shortly afterward, that wall was destroyed by a flying boulder. More stone broke, falling in little pieces around Hileo as he stumbled forward.

One hit him on the back, and he fell to his knees. He plunged the sword deep into the earth and lay down. It had been a very stressful few days, and he hadn't had much rest.

When the smoke cleared, Hileo groaned and rose to his feet. He was bruised, but didn't appear to be seriously injured. He looked behind him to survey his handiwork. The tower had ceased to exist. In its place was a massive pile of rubble without a single vampire anywhere to be seen. Hileo grinned, then beamed, then pumped his fist excitedly in the air.

A pop sounded. Hileo glanced in the direction it came from and saw Kronzar putting a sphere of ammunition into his hydropistol. He aimed at Hileo's head, his finger on the trigger.

"The Thief Lord sends his regards, Hileo," he said. "So sorry I have to kill you after our little adventure together this morning, but I can't afford to spoil my perfect assassination record."

Chapter 12

“I suppose reminding you that I saved your life a few minutes ago won’t incline you to change your mind?” Hileo asked. He should have known the Thief Lord would send an assassin after him. It had been lucky for him Robiroto had been such a bastard. If Kronzar hadn’t been tied up in the wagon, he would have killed Hileo and been off long ago.

“Sorry, it’s nothing personal,” Kronzar said. “I’m just doing to job. Of course, if you had an attracter to give me, we might be able to work out a deal. Or maybe not. You already owe more than an attracter to the Thief Lord, and you’re going to owe more, after all the trouble you put his best assassin to, chasing you halfway across the desert.”

“I wasn’t the one who stole the attracter,” Hileo said. He glared at Kronzar. He’d suspected his debt to the Thief Lord would come back to bite him someday, but did it really have to be now? Phaki would never know that he’d survived destroying the tower. “Robiroto did it. That was what was in his shipment to the Supreme Ruler, stolen attracters, lots of them. They’re all stored in the tower-”

“Which you just blew up.”

“Wait,” said Hileo, searching his mind for ways to persuade the assassin from his course. “I have something else that will make the Thief Lord happy. The sword. This is the sword Nind was using. Pure dwalmium, remember?”

Kronzar raised an eyebrow and lowered his pistol. “Hmmm... that could work.”

“You could make a hundred attracters from the dwalmium in this thing,” Hileo said, pulling the sword out of the ground.

“Drop your weapon!” Kronzar commanded, raising his gun again.

“Here, catch,” Hileo said. He tossed the sword to Kronzar’s feet.

Kronzar knelt down and picked it up, admiring the sheen of the blade. He pulled a sphere of hydropistol ammunition out of a bag at his side and pressed it against the sword’s tip. The dustsand glass dissolved, disappearing as if sucked into the blade. The explosive gas did the same, leaving the water glistening on the metal. “It’s true dwalmium.”

“So, are you not going to kill me?” Hileo stepped away.

Kronzar mused to himself thoughtfully for a moment. “It does seem a little unfair to kill you right after you just saved the world from another Vampire Apocalypse, doesn’t it?”

Hileo sighed in relief and walked away. Kronzar whipped out his hydropistol in a flash and fired. Hileo jumped as the bullet clanged against a pile of stone to his left.

“There, I’ve killed you,” Kronzar said. “Now get out of here, and don’t ever come back to Dustubria ever again. As far as Thief Lord knows, you’re dead.”

“I was never planning to return,” Hileo replied. “So, we go our separate ways, parting as friends?”

“If by ‘friends’ you mean ‘acquaintances who are going to try and kill each other if they ever meet again’, then yes, we depart as friends.”

Hileo chuckled and set off a jog towards his sand skiff. Once outside the city, he could follow the tracks made by the warbeasts easily. He’d catch up with them if they ever slowed down.

The wind pummeled Phaki, threatening to send her flying from the wagon. She gripped its edge, her knuckles turning white. Packed in around her were about forty ex-slaves, all doing the same, most of them kneeling and covering their faces to avoid the sand being thrown up by the warbeast's hind legs. They were creating a miniature sandstorm here, making the sands come alive simply by moving. Hileo probably would have loved to see it. Phaki glanced over her shoulder. Where was he?

Klend bent down by Phaki's ear, shouting to be heard over the wind and the ever-loudening whistle of the two warbeasts as they called to each other. Was that their mating call?

"We did it!" Klend yelled, laughing. "Where are we going?"

"Away!" Phaki shouted. Gippen was in the other wagon, steering the warbeast pulling it. Phaki wasn't sure if he knew where they were going or was simply aiming for the horizon, but Aithrenar was a pretty big country. They shouldn't have much trouble hitting it. "I've always wanted to go to Aithrenar!"

"What's it like?" Klend asked.

"I've heard there's grass, and trees. It's not in the desert. They don't have any sand!"

"Good. I'm sick of sand anyway."

Phaki looked behind her. The city was already a small dot in the distance. Was Hileo coming? They should slow down and wait for him.

They did slow down, eventually. The warbeasts could only sprint at top speed for so long before they got tired. Gippen stopped the wagons to allow them to rest, then hopped out to discuss their plans with Renwa. Arguments broke out among the refugees. Masua did her best to calm them, but they began to sink into despair as they realized there was no hope of getting food out in the desert.

"Calm down! We have enough water to make it to more fertile lands," Masua said. "Um, Phaki, how far away are fertile lands?"

"I have no idea," Phaki said. "I only know that if we keep going that direction, we're bound to come to the edge of the desert sooner or later. If Hileo were here he could help."

"Where is Hileo, anyway?"

"He should come soon," Phaki said, looking out over the horizon. Only empty sand, as far as the eye could see. "I hope so, at least."

"Is that him?" Masua asked, pointing to a faint shadow moving in the distance.

Phaki strained her eyes and thought she could make out the silhouette of a sail. "Yes! Gippen, don't start the wagons again, we need to wait."

"I don't think you'll need to worry about that for a while," Gippen said. He pointed to Ryl, who was on top of Jyl. "And we're going to have more beasts to pull them, in case we end up stranded out in the desert."

Phaki shaded her eyes with her hand and watched as the shadow grew closer. It was a sand skiff, and Hileo was steering it. He brought his vehicle to a stop near the wagons and jumped out. Phaki ran to him and hugged him. She grabbed his hand and drew him back over to where Renwa and Gippen stood.

Renwa glanced at him “Do you happen to know how to get food in the desert?”

Hileo explained how to hunt for jabbits. Renwa organized the refugees into groups, some of them capturing the jabbits, other skinning them with the knives Nind had provided, others cooking them over a fire started from boards pulled off the wagon. They’d cannibalize their own wagons if they kept doing this until they got to Aithrenar, but Hileo informed them they’d be able to find an ample supply of wood once there. Assuming, of course, they could find a village willing to take in eighty or so refugees from a country believed to be inhabited only by vicious monsters.

Phaki insisted that Hileo join Masua, eating jabbit legs by a small fire that night. Klend suggested Masua read them a story.

“Oh no!” Masua exclaimed. “I forgot the books!”

“Don’t worry,” Hileo said. “I’m sure we can find a printing press once we get settled in our new home. There are lots of books in the outside world.”

Phaki eyed them with a sly smile. Those two had lots of time to fall in love, especially if she occasionally nudged them in the right direction. She could recruit Klend and Gippen to help her matchmaking efforts once they found a new home.

“How about this,” Hileo said. “I’ll tell you a story. Phaki told me the first part of this one. It’s very old, but the second part is very new. It’s called the Tale of Glixafar and Kotor: Completed Version.”

“You’ll need my help,” Phaki said. “I was there for parts of it you weren’t.”

Hileo nodded approvingly. Phaki smiled again, a real smile that filled her whole being.

The End

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