

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 subconscious reordered the events of the past couple ideas. 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 point 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 reigns. 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, Robiroto, - 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, Robiroto, 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-”

Robiroto 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 Robiroto de Toro.”

The rest of the day gave Hileo reason to doubt Robiroto’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 Robiroto 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 Robiroto. “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.” Robiroto 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. Robiroto 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 Robiroto’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 jabbit - 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, 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 on 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."