

AFTER THE FALL

Chapter 1: Through the Sand

Kiera poked her head over the top of the dune. She could see the trailing edge of the column less than a hundred yards ahead. She scanned to see if there were any patrols lingering behind before crouching back down. There usually weren't. *Better safe than sorry*, she thought to herself. She looked back towards the hatch she had climbed out of. She could barely make out the top of Pock's head though the swirling sand. She needed to give the all clear while she could still see him. She didn't want to get stuck out there by herself. That would be a death sentence. She stuck her head back over the dune. Two or three of the soldiers had separated from the column and were gazing back in the direction from which they had come. Her direction. She flattened and waited. *Patience is a virtue*. In a few minutes she looked up again. There was no sign of the trailing soldiers. She scanned for patrols once more, and then waved at Pock. He waved back and then disappeared down the hole.

In a few seconds Pock climbed back out of the hatch followed by the rest of the group: Rat, Chunk, and the new guy. *Probably should call him "Scar,"* she thought, remembering the cut that ran from the corner of his eye to his chin. *But Rat'll decide*. Rat was their leader, if they had a leader. He told them what to do and they did it. No one else wanted to be in charge and he kept them safe. Mostly. They were five now, if you didn't count the runt. And you didn't. Losing Wheeze wasn't Rat's fault. He didn't tell Wheeze to cough while a patrol was going by. Chunk had said he shouldn't have been out there in the first place. But everyone had to do their part, if they wanted to stay in Rat's group. She wondered what they had done with him. *Probably ate him*, she thought. Although there wouldn't have been much of Wheeze to go around.

They carefully made their way over to the dune where Kiera was waiting. Chunk grinned at her.

"What took so long, Squirt?" Rat asked.

"Patrol."

"How far ahead they get?"

She crawled up to the top of the dune and looked. The wind was picking up and she could barely see the last stragglers.

"Not too far," she said.

"Well get going."

She glanced back at the hole and saw the runt poke her head out. She took some bread from her pack, held it up for the runt to see, and placed it on the side of the dune. Rat glared at her. He didn't like it but he wouldn't do anything about it. *It's my bread*, she thought. *Finders keepers*. That was the code, at least as long as you pulled your weight. Kiera wasn't good at much except scouting. She was really good at that. Mostly it was just being careful and quiet. But everyone else got seen or caught. So she did all the scouting now. She pulled the goggles down over eyes, scanned for patrols, and took off after the army. She'd found the goggles in the Bell Township. They didn't fit and glass was cracked on one side. But they kept the sand out of her eyes and made it easier to see when the wind was up. She wasn't going to let anyone take them from her, even if the new guy wanted them for himself. *Finders keepers*, she thought again.

When Kiera got to within about a hundred yards of the army again she crouched behind a rise in the sand. *Too small to be a dune*, she thought, repeating something Chunk had said to her, something that didn't quite make sense. Chunk never made sense. Well almost never. She had been following the army for three months now. "The Underway Liberation Army" she'd heard them call themselves once, when she'd crept up close to a patrol. One of the soldiers called them "Hogg's Army." Everyone got quiet when he said that. Kiera didn't know who Hogg was but she didn't want to meet him. She looked over the rise and scanned for patrols again. Nothing. She waved for the group to follow, and then gave the "keep low" gesture Chunk had taught her.

"It's just like petting a dog," Chunk had said.

Kiera didn't know what a dog was. But she hadn't asked.

The group scrambled after her and, in a couple of minutes, joined her at the rise. Rat looked at Pock and gave the "water" sign. Pock pulled the waterskin off his shoulder and poured a little into everyone's canteen. Rat was careful about the water when they were in the sand. You never knew how long you were going to be out there. Kiera looked back and saw the runt looking in their direction from the top of the previous dune. She waved but the runt gave no sign of having seen her. The runt never did. She drank her water and looked back over the rise. When Hogg's Army had gotten far enough ahead, she took off after them again.

They followed the same pattern for the rest of the day: waiting behind a dune until the last soldiers in the column were barely in sight; Kiera sneaking up close again behind another dune; Rat and the rest coming and joining her when she waved that the coast was clear; the runt always trailing one dune behind. Once or twice a patrol swept back beyond the rear of the column. *Looking for what?* Kiera wondered. *Us?* Then she had to wait until the army was completely out of sight and follow the patrol instead. And be extra careful. She had to crawl up the sides of dunes, hide her footprints if the wind wasn't blowing, and double check before she gave the all clear.

“Triple check,” Chunk told her, although she wasn’t sure what difference that would make.

And she couldn’t pee before waving for the group to follow, like Rat told her to. She had to hold it in. *Lucky I don’t need to pee*, she thought. When the wind picked up she had to stay closer to the army to keep from losing them. The goggles helped. And it also made it harder for them to see her.

This was her third time crossing the sand since Pock had found her hiding in the catacombs beneath the Boone Colony. “The Boone Outhouse,” Chunk had called her hiding place. It’s in not out, she had thought, puzzled. The first time she had come only reluctantly. It was the only home she remembered. And she had never seen the sun, the wind, or the sand before and they terrified her. And blinded her.

“There’s nothing for you here anymore,” Rat had said.

That time she had mostly stuck close to Rat, and sometimes Wheeze. Pock and Chunk had done most of the scouting. Chunk kept losing the column. Once it took nearly a day to find them again.

“We’re gonna die out here,” Wheeze had sobbed.

So Rat made Pock do it. Pock never lost sight of the army. He just kept getting spotted by patrols instead. He led them in the direction of another group of scavengers trailing Hogg’s Army, like Rat had told him, and then circled back to rejoin the group. Rat had taken over most of the scouting from then on.

“Do I have to do everything myself?” he complained.

Nobody said anything. Chunk had looked like he might chirp up for a moment. But a glare from Rat silenced him.

“Keep an eye on Squirt,” Rat said to Wheeze before setting out.

Wheeze had taken his charge seriously. Too seriously, she might have thought had she felt his eyes upon her.

Kiera came across the first body just before dark. *Camping soon*, she thought. She searched the body for anything useful. There was a piece of bread tucked away in one of the socks, and a small blade hidden inside the sole of a shoe. Not much else. He was probably a slave the army had picked up in the Bell Township; probably used the blade to cut his bonds and escape. She put both items in her pack. *Finders keepers*. The second body was a woman. Her hands were still tied. *Must have lots of food*, she thought, *or they would have eaten her*. She searched the woman’s body as well but didn’t find anything she could use. She did take a ring off one of the fingers.

She was tempted to put it on her own finger but hid it in the pack instead. Last time Rat had gotten mad and thrown it away.

In another hour, the army made camp. There was a big fire in the middle with a ring of tents on the outside. The slaves were tied together near the fire. They consisted of the remaining inhabitants of the Bell Township. Those who hadn't been killed during the attack, and hadn't escaped into the sand or the under way. *And hadn't been eaten yet*, thought Kiera. The army had spent over a month in the township before setting off through the sand again. They had eaten their way through the township's food reserves before turning to the captives.

"Why don't they just take one over and run it themselves?" Pock asked no one in particular, surveying the destruction the Underway Liberation Army had left behind.

"Where'd be the fun in that?" Chunk had rejoined.

They posted sentries around the outside of the camp, more to keep the slaves from escaping than to protect against any outside threat. There was nothing out there. Groups of soldiers also periodically patrolled the perimeter throughout the night just in case any townspeople who might have gotten away and survived tried to be heroes. And any scavengers got too close. Kiera watched to see how far from camp the patrols went. Then she crept back to the dune where Rat and the rest were waiting.

They couldn't risk a fire so they curled up together in the sand to stay warm. They took turns standing guard. Since Kiera did all the scouting she didn't have to take a turn.

"Can't risk having her doze off out there," Rat had said, forestalling any complaint that might arise.

Sometimes the runt would snuggle up next to her in the middle of the night. But in the morning she was always gone. *Maybe I dreamed it*, Kiera sometimes thought. Rat usually slept on one side of her with his arm loosely around her shoulders. But not too close. Before he had coughed while on patrol, Wheeze had slept next to her a lot too. And he always held her close. Too close. It was hard to sleep with his grunting and grinding.

"Too tight!" she had once whispered sharply.

But he only laughed and grabbed her again. She didn't miss sleeping next to Wheeze.

The next morning they waited behind the dune where they had slept until the army packed up and started off. When the army got far enough ahead Kiera carefully followed after them. The rest of the group searched through the remains of the

campsite for anything useful. Kiera glanced back and saw Pock looking in her direction, waiting for the all clear. She also saw four figures waiting at the top of the dune they had just vacated.

“They’ve been trailing us since we left Bell,” Rat had said that morning when Pock pointed them out.

“Safer than trailing the liberationists,” Chunk responded.

“Make sure you leave something for them. Don’t pick it clean,” Rat replied, ignoring Chuck’s quip.

Rat and the new guy, *Scar*, kept their eyes on them and their hands on their weapons just in case, while Chunk did most of the scavenging. That was what Chunk was good at. *Finding gems among the rubbish*, thought Kiera, remembering something she’d heard a long time ago.

Before Hogg’s Army had come, Kiera had lived in the Boone Outhouse for as long as she could remember. She had flashes of other places – of a room with a crib, a warm light, a woman she didn’t recognize being pulled away from her, crying – but they were just flashes. Probably dreamed it, she thought. And continued to think. Her mom in her fancy uniform had taken her there, had shown her where to hide. She brought her food and water every few days, and taught her how to fend herself when she couldn’t come. She gave her lessons when she could. Better safe than sorry, Kiera recalled. A penny saved is a penny earned. Although Kiera didn’t know what a penny was or why she would want to earn one. But the most important lesson was when you heard anyone coming you hid and you didn’t make a sound. That’s what saved her. Soldiers from Hogg’s Army were in and out of the catacombs for a week, searching. But she never came out, not even once. When Chunk finally found her, she was barely alive.

“A regular scarecrow,” he laughed, warmly.

She had looked for her mother but couldn’t find any sign of her. She would have looked longer but Rat was in a hurry to leave. And she didn’t know her way around the Boone Colony anyway.

Rat’s group followed the army through the sand for several days, sleeping just outside the patrol perimeter every night and scavenging the abandoned campsite every morning. And the other group followed them, waiting until they left before picking through the leftovers. As the days went on, supplies become increasingly meager. Water was the main problem. Rat’s water extraction unit could suck the moisture out of anything. But the soldiers kept leaving less and less behind with any moisture in it.

“They must be running out of supplies too,” Pock declared.

“I hope they know where they’re going,” Chunk added.

The other group stopped waiting for Chunk to finish before they entered the army’s campsite. Kiera looked back and saw Rat and Scar pull out their weapons to hold them off. Rat had a gun so they stayed back. Chunk had to hurry but he still found the best of what the army had left behind.

That night Kiera woke with a start. The runt was pulling at her shirt and pointing back in the direction from which they had come. As soon as she sat up, the runt disappeared. She looked up the dune they were camped on, in the direction of the army. Chunk was supposed to be on watch. She saw him lying on his stomach with his head poking over the top. *Probably sleeping*, she thought. She looked back in the direction the runt had pointed and saw something moving in the shadows. She gave Rat a light shove. When he opened his eyes she pointed.

“Shh, “ he whispered, his finger to his mouth.

He rolled over and gently shook the new guy, his finger still to his mouth, and nodded towards the shadows. Scar rolled over and woke Pock. They all pulled out their knives. Rat wouldn’t use the gun unless he had to. That would bring the army down on them. He grabbed and shook Chunk’s foot.

“Whaa?” Chunk said, startled.

“Protect the water and the extractor!” he whispered sharply. “And keep an eye out for patrols!”

Kiera moved next to Chunk and drew her own knife from pack, the one Rat had given her after he caught her with Wheeze, not the one she’d found on the slave’s body.

“More a sewing needle than a knife,” Chunk had said.

Rat had glared so angrily at him that he had been quiet the rest of the day.

The four scavengers rushed suddenly out of the darkness. They didn’t seem surprised to find Rat and the rest awake, or at least their resolve wasn’t shaken. Two of them made directly for Rat, Scar, and Pock while the other two skirted around either side of the main skirmish and rushed towards Kiera and Chunk. And the extractor. Only one of the two going for the supplies carried a blade. *Must be desperate*, thought Kiera. She and Chunk each turned to face one of their attackers. Kiera lunged at the one closest to her, the one without a blade. He dodged her knife and knocked her to ground with a cuff to the head. Rat was on him in a flash, and stuck a knife in his side even before he reached the supplies. He landed on him as he fell and held his hand over his mouth as he stabbed him twice more in the gut. *To keep him quiet*, Kiera thought.

Rat had been ahead scouting and she had snuck behind a dune to take a pee. When she was done she had looked up to see Wheeze at the top of the dune staring down at her, smiling. That night while he was lying next to her he opened his pants.

"Suck it," he whispered, "or I'll tell."

"Tell what?" she asked.

"That you're a girl," he replied.

She didn't understand why it was important, only that it was. So she sucked it. That was what she had been doing in the Wind Moon Colony when Rat had caught them. He had been furious.

"She's just a kid!" he yelled, as he shoved Wheeze fiercely backwards.

It had looked for a second like Wheeze was going to pull his knife. But he didn't. He just did up his pants and stomped away. Kiera thought that Rat was going to yell at her too. But he just looked at her sadly. Afterwards he gave her the knife and told her to pee only when no one else was looking. And sent Wheeze out scouting, she recalled.

When he stopped moving, Rat pulled his knife out of the scavenger's belly. He looked quickly over at Kiera.

"You okay, Squirt?"

She nodded and gestured towards Chunk. He was lying on the ground, clutching his leg. The scavenger who had stabbed him looked over at Rat, grabbed the waterskin, and fled.

"Get the extractor!" Rat ordered, and raced after him.

Kiera climbed to the top of the dune and peaked over. It was still dark but she could see a patrol coming in their direction. A big one. *Must've heard us*, she thought. She looked back down the hill. One of the scavengers who had attacked Pock and Scar lay on the ground, unmoving. The other one was running in the general direction of his comrade, with Scar in pursuit. She gave the "patrol" sign to Pock who was looking up at her. The two of them scrambled to collect the water extractor and the rest of the supplies, and then forced Chunk to his feet. He groaned.

"Leave me," he said.

"Let's get behind that rise," Pock said to Kiera, ignoring Chunk. "I'll bring Chunk, you hide our tracks."

Pock half-supported, half-dragged him to a small dune about fifty feet away and pushed him over the top. Kiera followed, brushing away their footprints with a hand broom she kept in her pack for that purpose. Kiera watched for the patrol as Pock started digging in the sand. As soon as the hole was deep enough he buried the supplies. Except for the extractor. *Can't lose that*, Kiera thought. Then Pock started on a second hole. For Chunk. He rolled Chunk into the hole, face up, stuck a piece of plastic tubing into his mouth, and covered him with sand. *Just like Rat said*, thought Kiera. Then they waited.

In a few minutes the patrol cleared the top of the dune they had been sleeping – and fighting – on. Despite the darkness, Kiera had covered herself with sand to keep from being seen. Only her goggles were visible, and only if you were looking carefully. There were eight of them, three carrying torches, the rest with guns. *They don't care if anyone hears* she thought. They saw the dead scavengers right away.

“Drag'em back to camp,” one of the soldiers ordered, after performing a cursory search of the bodies.

A large soldier stuck his torch in the ground, slung one of the bodies over his shoulder, and headed awkwardly back over the dune towards the encampment. Two others grabbed the second body and followed. The remaining soldiers searched the area, holding their torches near the sand.

“Footprints!” one of them shouted, after a few minutes.

“Follow 'em. Quickly.” The leader replied. “And don't get lost. The general won't wait. Stick, you're with me.”

Three of the soldiers hurried in the direction Rat and Scar had chased the scavengers, two of them carrying torches. The leader and one other stayed behind. They continued searching the site of the skirmish, quietly talking together.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” the leader said suddenly and started heading in the direction of the rise they were hiding behind.

Pock tapped Kiera's foot and she slid carefully back down the dune. *Time to go*, Kiera thought. He pointed at her, the extractor, and at another rise about a hundred feet behind them and to the left in succession. Then he pointed at himself and at a rise to the right, in the direction that Rat and Scar had gone.

“Me first,” he whispered very quietly. “Wait until you count to ten.” He gave her the “keep low” sign and started counting down with his fingers from five.

Before Pock finished they heard a groan and some sobbing. It sounded like it was coming from the opposite direction than Rat and Scar had gone. Kiera looked at Pock, puzzled. He just shrugged his shoulders. Kiera crawled back up the rise and carefully looked over. The two soldiers had turned and were heading quickly towards the source of the sound. In a few moments, she heard the sobbing again only this time it was further away. She watched the two soldiers trailing it until she couldn't see them any more. After a few minutes she thought she heard the sobbing again. But it was so faint she couldn't be sure. She watched for another hour, until the sun began to rise. Then she gave Pock the all clear.

Kiera had found the runt in the Bell Township. Or rather the runt had found her. After the army had stormed down the shafts into main complex, Rat told the group to keep their eyes peeled. Sure enough, in half an hour a dozen people climbed out of a shaft about a quarter mile away from the rest. They waited until dark to make their way to the escape shaft, skirting the perimeter of the army's mostly empty encampment. Rat had gone in first, followed closely by Chunk, Kiera, and Pock. The shaft opened into a small room at the top of the building. When their eyes had adjusted to the dim light, they saw two people cowering in the corner.

"Is there any other way in except the underway?" Rat asked.

One of them shook his head no.

"Is there anyone else here?"

The same Bell citizen nodded.

"Is it safe?" he then asked.

"It's dark," Rat replied, "and they're not watching."

They started up the shaft as Rat and the rest made their way inside.

There hadn't been much to eat or drink in the building so they had had to go down to the underway. Kiera had never been there before. Even Rat seemed nervous. She had gotten separated from the rest when a patrol spotted them. She had hidden while the others ran. Lost, she thought. When she emerged from her hiding place, the runt was staring at her. A dirty little girl alone in the underway. Just like me.

"Hi," she said, and waved cautiously.

The runt looked at her quizzically and said nothing. She pulled some wrapped bread out of her pack and held out it towards her.

"Food?" she asked.

The runt looked interested but didn't move closer. Kiera tossed it towards her and the runt caught it before it hit the ground. She opened it, smelled it, and devoured it ravenously.

"My friends?" Kiera asked.

The runt gestured for Kiera to follow and she had. Hope she's no vamp, Kiera thought. She had been warned but had never seen one. The runt led her through a twisting series of tunnels. She lost all sense of time and direction. After awhile she heard voices.

"We have to go back for her."

"There's no point. We'll never find her down here."

When she went around the next corner she saw Rat, Pock, and Chunk crouching in an alcove. She looked back but the runt was gone.

Kiera watched as the army packed up and got ready to go, the water extractor under her arm. Pock and Chunk waited at the bottom of the dune, looking up at her. Pock had cleaned and bandaged Chunk's wound with some supplies. Chunk had found himself at Wind Moon.

"They're going," she whispered.

"There's no other choice," Pock said. "Otherwise we'll be lost out here."

Kiera nodded. And when the army was nearly out of sight she followed after them. *Rat'll find us*, she thought to herself. Scouting was hard, carrying the extractor. It was heavy and bulky. Pock couldn't take it because he had to carry everything else, including Chunk. *Besides*, she thought, *Rat told me to*. They had used it to suck the moisture out of everything they could find at the abandoned encampment, which wasn't much. Especially since Chunk could barely walk let alone search it. They hadn't seen any other scavengers this time. Pock had told her to drink her pee, but she said she didn't need to go. When she was ahead scouting, she hid behind a dune and peed in her cup. It wasn't very much, but she drank it anyway.

It was a very hard day. Kiera struggled to keep up with the army. And Pock and Chunk struggled to keep up with Kiera.

"Could you ask them to march slower, Squirt?" Chunk asked.

They were so far behind when the army stopped for their midday break that Pock and Chunk didn't catch up with Kiera until they'd broken camp again. Chunk found a body half-buried in the sand that hadn't been entirely sucked dry. As a result, they were able to use the extractor to get at least something to drink. But the time it took

left them as far behind as they had been before. And there were more patrols sweeping behind the army than usual. Kiera found it hard to be as careful as she normally was, being so tired and thirsty. Once she thought she had been seen and had buried the extractor. But it was a false alarm. *Better safe than sorry*. By the time they stopped for the night, they were so exhausted they didn't even bother keeping guard.

Before they had left the Bell Township, they had voted about whether to follow the army though the sand again. They almost hadn't made it from Wind Moon to Bell. And they'd lost Wheeze. Pock suggested staying where they were.

"It's been picked clean," Rat said. "And we'd have to fight any of the runners who survived out there for what's left."

"What about the underway?" Pock asked.

"I don't want to be vamp food," the new guy said.

"What a choice: dusty death or demon dessert," Chunk quipped.

Kiera thought that the new guy started for an instant. In the end, the vote was unanimous.

In the middle of the night Kiera awoke to the sound of voices. She looked up and saw Pock talking to someone at the bottom of the dune. When her eyes got used to the dark she saw it was Rat. She was so relieved that she almost ran over and hugged him. But she stopped herself. *Only girls hug*, she thought. Rat smiled when he saw her. He showed her the half full waterskin and filled up her cup when she brought it over. She gulped it down.

"Go back to sleep, Squirt," he said. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

"Where's Scar?" she asked, quickly looking around.

"Who?" asked Rat.

"The new guy," she replied.

"Good name," he said. "No sign so far."

Kiera went back and lay down on the side of the dune. In a few minutes, Rat came and lay down next to her. *Not too close*, she thought and fell asleep.

When she awoke the next morning, Kiera was stiff and sore. But when she remembered Rat was back, she felt better. Even Chunk seemed more like himself.

"I hope this doesn't mean smaller portions," he quipped.

The day was a lot easier than the previous had been. Kiera didn't have to carry the extractor. There was more to eat and drink. Chunk's leg was a little better. There even seemed to be fewer patrols. Kiera saw the runt for the first time since she had warned them of the attack. She held up her canteen, placed it in the sand, and backed several steps away. The runt approached cautiously, picked it up and drained it, then dropped the empty canteen and quickly disappeared between the dunes. *Must be thirsty*, Kiera thought. That night, before she fell asleep, she saw a solitary figure approaching from the direction they had just come. She watched him get closer and closer until she could make out his face. It was Scar.

The runt had started following Kiera whenever they entered the underways beneath the Bell Township.

"Who's the runt?" Chunk asked.

And the name stuck. When she had extra, Kiera would toss her some food.

"She can do what she likes with her share," Pock said when Rat objected.

"But at this rate she'll starve," Rat rejoined.

It's mine, she thought angrily, and Rat relented when he saw the look in her eyes. They entered the underways through the basement of the building they'd been staying in. The building the Bell citizens had used to run to the sand. They locked the door to the basement with a metal bar when they were inside, but left it propped open when they were out scavenging.

"She must have a lair around here somewhere," Chunk said when the runt appeared again just after they went out.

But even Chunk had been unable to find it.

They had been scavenging the underways for about a couple of weeks without any problems. Aside from that one patrol. They had encountered a few small groups of runners from Bell, but they had kept their distance.

"We don't want them leading any patrols back to us," Rat said.

Chunk had even found a way into the main township. A way that was unguarded. The runt was trailing behind them like usual, when suddenly she froze. She gestured for Kiera to follow her and then dashed down a small alley off the main tunnel they had been following. In a few seconds, five people appeared around a bend up ahead, running at top speed. They were pursued by almost a dozen others, dressed in rags and howling.

"Vamps!" Rat yelled. "Follow the runt!"

Chunk and Pock headed quickly into the alley into which she had fled. Kiera stood frozen, watching, for a moment. She saw the runner at the back of the group pulled down, screaming, by two of the vamps. When one of the others paused just for an instant, as if he were going to help, he was pulled down as well. Rat grabbed her by the arm and pulled her quickly into the alley. As Kiera looked back, she saw that one of the fleeing runners had followed them. And two of the vamps had followed him.

They sprinted through a twisting maze of alleys. All Kiera could see was the odd glimpse of Chunk's shirt in the darkness up ahead. All she could hear was the howling behind her. At first it sounded as though they were right behind them, but it eventually seemed as if the howling was getting fainter. Maybe they got him, she thought. But they kept running as fast as they could. Just when she thought she couldn't go any further, she saw Chunk and Pock stopped ahead, looking through a small passageway into their basement. A passageway none of them had noticed before. Pock held a finger to his lips and pointed at three figures wandering aimlessly off to the left.

"More vamps," Pock whispered.

"Where's the runt?" Rat asked quietly.

Pock pointed at a small figure crouching behind a pillar near the vamps. They watched as she threw a rock down the main passage through which they normally entered and left the basement. The vamps ambled slowly in that direction. The runt then pointed in the direction of the door that led into the building. They crept carefully in that direction with Pock in the lead and Rat taking up the rear. When they were about halfway there, a man had burst out of the passageway.

"They're right behind me!" he yelled.

"Run!" Rat shouted.

They all sprinted for the door. The two vamps emerged from the passageway, howling. Their howls were almost immediately echoed from up the main passageway. Pock reached the door first, swung it open, and grabbed the bar they used as a lock. Kiera ran in next followed by Rat and then Chunk.

"Close it, Pock!" Rat yelled.

"Wait for her!" Kiera cried.

Pock glanced at Rat and waited, until the man being chased by the vamps, and then the runt, ran through the doorway and collapsed. Pock slammed the door closed just as the first vamp reached it. Rat and Chunk helped hold it firm as Pock slid the bar into

place. The vamps banged against the door and howled angrily. Hungrily, Kiera thought.

"Thanks," said the stranger, panting.

"Anyone bit?" asked Rat, eyeing the long scar on the stranger's face.

Everyone shook their heads. The runt picked herself up off the ground, looked around warily, and fled down the hallway.

The next day the army made camp early, just after midday. The patrol perimeter was wider than usual so Kiera couldn't get a good look at what they were doing. After she gave the all clear, the rest of the group joined her at the crest of the dune she was watching the Hogg's Army from.

"I guess we're here," said Chunk. "I wonder where here is."

"Wherever it is, it's big," said Pock. "I count ten arrays of solar panels."

"It's the capital," said Rat.

Kiera tapped Rat on the shoulder when she saw what looked like a head poking out of the ground. He looked through his binoculars in the direction she was pointing. After a few minutes he passed them to her and slid back down the dune. Kiera saw a man in tan robes talking to a group of soldiers. One of the soldiers was looking at an unrolled scroll and asking questions. The man was pointing in response. In a few moments, Kiera saw some soldiers start digging in the direction he had pointed. She looked back at Rat. He was talking quietly with Pock.

"They got a spy, dressed as a priest," Rat said. "And a map."

"A spy, or a traitor?" Chunk chimed in, without his normal grin.

Rat looked at Chunk for a moment, and then gestured for Kiera to come and join them.

"We have to keep an eye out for a way in. It's big, so we'll have to divide up. Squirt, find us another lookout," he said, pointing to the right of the encampment.

Kiera started carefully off in the direction Rat had pointed. When she looked she saw the runt trailing her.

Kiera had taken over the scouting after they left Wind Moon. After Wheeze coughed, she thought.

"She couldn't be worse than you two," Rat had said, when Pock and Chunk objected.

"Don't lose 'em and don't get caught," he told her. "Get going."

Before she left, Pock pulled her over.

"Just be quiet and careful," he said quietly. "Make sure you can always see the army and us."

The first day had been the worst. The wind was blowing and she could barely see anything. She didn't notice the patrol until it was almost on top of her. She was only able to half bury herself in the sand before they passed; it was only a matter of luck that they didn't see her. And twice she lost sight of the group. She had to back track to find them the first time. The second time Pock found her.

After the first day, things got better. At least the scouting did. There was another group of scavengers following the army. A bigger group, too big for Rat and Pock to hold off. So they had to make do with what the others left behind. Which wasn't much. After the others got caught, Chunk had put the waterskin down without tightening the top. Nearly half the water was gone before Rat had noticed. The scar on Chunk's forehead turned pink as Rat glowered at him. From then on only Pock was allowed to handle the waterskin. Kiera had never felt so thirsty before. At least not since she had hidden from Hogg's Army in Boone's outhouse. And then they got caught in a windstorm. They curled up as a group between two dunes. The pelting sand burned her skin raw even through her clothes. She clenched her eyes and mouth closed and sobbed.

Kiera scanned the encampment above the capital from the second lookout. Pock and Chunk were there with her. She looked back at the first lookout and saw Rat and Scar behind the dune talking intensely. *What're they saying*, she wondered. Just before dark about twenty soldiers had followed the spy – or traitor – back down the shaft he had emerged from. They had taken shifts watching throughout the night but nothing else had happened. Rat had let Kiera keep his binoculars. Or at least he hadn't taken them back. She looked at the hatch the soldiers had gone through. Then she looked at the other hatches that the soldiers had uncovered. Then she looked over the sand on either side of the encampment. When she looked back at the first hatch she saw someone climb out – the spy, or traitor – and walk into a nearby tent. A soldier emerged and yelled something she couldn't make out. Other soldiers started forming up around the various hatches. She quickly slid down the dune and woke Pock.

"It's starting," she said.

Pock nodded and tried to signal Rat. But he wasn't looking.

"Could you run over and tell him, Squirt?" Pock asked.

She had just started on her way when she was knocked to the ground by a series of explosions. *Under the sand*, she thought. She climbed back to the top of the dune and looked over. The soldiers had started streaming down the shafts.