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## THE DUST MOTHER

To be a young orphan on Veile is a pitiful thing. Denied their birthright and their sense of direction in life, only the strongest and most talented of them may find life as an artisan's apprentice or a vassal to a kind Merchant Prince. Most of them are quickly picked up by House Gularo and are sold into slavery, filling the coffers of that most unpleasant of Houses in the process.

Cassius Fatis was one such orphan. The smallest Aurumel boy among the last remaining lowest-priced slaves in a shipment bound for Haark, Cassius had the remarkable fortune to be sold into the servitude of a turbaned woman called Madame Kiki. She being the low-rent innkeeper of an establishment known simply as The Chimes, her establishment was centrally located in a rather unsavory part of Haark. The young women and boys who worked the kitchens and rooms of The Chimes made the majority of their money selling the secrets gained from whispered talk muttered by the inn's clientele, often delegates and merchants from off-shard, passing through on some errand. The place was named after the great sculpture in a nearby market square, a stone and steel fountain with delicate chimes tickled by the babbling of the water through its artfully carved stone pipes.

Fate caught up with Madame Kiki when word got back to an aggrieved Pyroi Volcano priest that rumors of his infidelities had originated

from some staff at The Chimes. Scoured by a parched hot wind with the breath of Khar-Ulan behind it, The Chimes was buffeted by a powerful sandstorm, something never seen on that part of Haark before or since. Though Madame Kiki was killed in the ensuing onslaught by righteous Pryoi warrior-priests, it was not before she provided the majority of her young wards a means of escape. The building which formerly housed The Chimes is now a dilapidated structure, haunted by strange winds and the ghosts of the customers and workers who died there.

In the cycles since, the square has become a desolate place, with sandy paths underfoot, and while commerce still occurs there, it is often gray market at best. Cassius, for his part, has taken up the mantle of the closest thing he had to a mother, and with a face and head wrapped in heavy cloth to protect against the stinging sands of the area, now prefers to be addressed as Madame Kiki. For in the Aurumel tradition, that tall and thin robed form is Madame Kiki.

The remaining children formed the first generation of the street urchins-for-hire that are all under the protection of the new Madame Kiki. Remarkably, the stone and steel fountain still bubbles, and folk of the area know that coins tossed in its waters can be used to employ the light-fingered youngsters. Even the more hardened criminals of Haark will allow the money to remain in the fountain for Madame Kiki to collect, the waters undisturbed by any but her hand.