

LEGENDS OF VERDEN: THE SHATTERED REFLECTION

Chapter 30

The attack would commence at dawn.

After having their dinner, telling their story, being shown what armaments were available, and giving the just-crowned *Losning's* new crew a couple hours to explore her inner workings, it was already night. Not that one could tell, up here, except things were a bit darker, and the intense ball of fire that was the sun wasn't in the sky. The lack of blue sky was a little jarring for Frolli, but having spent time in Jordisk it didn't take long for him to get used to the idea.

Since the Kakkerlak were sensitive to light, flying in with the sunrise was going to be the Inderlings' best bet. With the dawn's rays at their back, they'd be all but invisible. And certainly nobody, not even Nadelas, not even Avskander, would expect a fleet to come bearing down on the advancing army.

Waiting until morning would give Akarot's army more time, give them more ground, but the price had to be paid. The Inderlings were making their final preparations for battle, and in the few hours they had left they caught some last moments of rest. The outsiders had been tasked with offering last-minute instructions on fighting the Kakkerlak, but with Kavalrist planning the attack alongside the Grand Reader and the Riders

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acclimating to their new skip, the duty fell mostly to Frolli. The others helped, of course, but the farmboy found himself alone before several dozen of the top-ranking Inderling warriors, and he knew that his tutelage might mean the difference between life and death for many of them, and maybe even the difference between victory and defeat.

He was nervous.

He explained every detail that he could recall, regaled them with every encounter he'd had with the Kakkerlak. He drew pictures and found himself in the awkward position of trying to get them to understand just how alien the things were. They seemed to want to imagine misshapen Rottan, but that description could not be further from the reality. For them, the Kakkerlak were still just old legends: though the Inderlings knew they'd been real, the insects had been extinct so long that the memory of them was mere hearsay, passed down from generation to generation.

It didn't help matters that halfway through his instruction the siblings Seffren and Seffjern came to listen. Not all of those who would be fighting were present; Frolli's words would be conveyed through the ranks by these heads of various assemblies, so he hadn't expected to see either of them. And for that matter he still felt a little thrown by the knowledge that they were going to join the fray anyway. Of course, he'd be fighting, too, or at least, he thought he would, once Sorvirret brought back his cavalry of Riders, so there shouldn't have been anything stopping them either, but it still felt off. Frolli was part of this fight out of necessity, but really he was still a boy who until recently had lived on a farm and gotten into occasional but ultimately harmless trouble. The Grand Reader's children had already been committing themselves to this war for seasons, and there had never been any question

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as to whether they'd be on the battlefield when the time came.

They arrived decked in plated armor made, Frolli thought, of some sort of white plastic. Their ornate robes fit perfectly beneath; the custom-made armor seemed only like an extension of their outfits. Seffjern wielded a sleek longboomer, designed seemingly by the same architects who'd built the temple's structures: the silhouette was forked where he gripped it so that his forearm was covered by smooth whiteness, the inner workings hidden from direct view, and the underside was much the same, with a thin blade running its length for close combat. All Inderling constructs seemed to share that uniformity, a sort of organic elegance that was not at all like the cobbled-together look of what most Rottan were used to. The weapon had a thin tube, like a tail, extending back to a cylinder hitched onto his back. Frolli couldn't help but wonder what it did when fired.

Seffren's weapon of choice was a collapsible sword that rested now on the back of her plates like something crouched and hungry. Its haft was grey, glistening metal, with an oddly serrated edge all the way around. At its full length the flat, wide blade wouldn't have seemed out-of-place in Kavalrist's Gammel's iron grip, but Seffren was only barely smaller than Frolli; he wondered how she would ever wield the thing properly.

Per the outsiders' descriptions a few hastily-built practice targets had been fabricated to represent the Kakkerlak. There wasn't time to go through several iterations to get the detail right, but they would do well enough. When Frolli's lessons were complete it was time to give the red-eyed Rottan some rehearsal training. And his wonderings regarding the brother and sister duo were put quickly to rest.

Frolli watched, mesmerized, as they and the other Inderlings went to work applying his advice. They exhibited highly coordinated teamwork, combining their

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forces to dismantle the targets with ease. Seffjern covered his sister at range, flanking as she closed the gap. When he pulled the unseen trigger the pressurized gas in the cylinder on his back shot the rifle's projectiles with as much force as any boomer Frolli had seen, and much faster, too: it required only a tug on the ejection handle to prime another round, which Frolli would later see was drawn up from a reloadable cylinder that fit inside the gun's frame. That in itself was a marvel, as most boomers were single-shot breechloaders; only the larger ones, mounted on skips or in defense towers, could fire multiple projectiles, and even then Frolli thought those were all belt-fed.

Seffjern had more in store, too, for after he drew near to a target he demonstrated his firearm's secondary function, which was to spew the compressed gas out, up to a distance of four or five taillengths. This wouldn't have been terribly impressive if the fuel wasn't flammable, and if as it exited the gun's muzzle it didn't pass a spark that then ignited it, creating an arc of roaring flame that incinerated anything in its path. But it was very flammable, and it did exactly that, which was startling enough to send Frolli ducking for cover, thinking some horrible malfunction had caused an explosion.

Seffren, not to be outdone by her brother, showed off her sword with a similar gusto. She loosed it and was swinging in a single swiping motion; the rend uncurled in her hands like something yawning. Her back-and-forth dance cut between targets like flowing water; not one curve or twirl was wasted as she dipped and dodged. The display was impressive to be sure, but if that had been the extent of it Frolli would have given the nod to Seffjern in a competition of grandeur.

But of course that wasn't the extent of it. Seffren impaled one of the targets with her blade, one of the smallish serrations catching on the armor plating. Frolli

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was ready to discount it as a mistake – the Kakkerlak would shrug off such glancing blows, and he had been worried from the start that the seemingly unnecessary notches along the sword’s blade would be easily snagged – but then she depressed a handle on the long hilt and the dagger-like protrusions sprung to life, sliding along the edge in a track. The whirring mechanization dug through the target hungrily, and with a good tug Seffren had cleaved it clean in two.

Frolli didn’t know who won that bout.

He looked at Dolkverd in its simple sheath. At his Kakkerlak-carapace buckler. He felt very much like he didn’t belong after seeing what the Inderlings could do. Their advanced technology was sensible and even basic in theory, but in practice their constructions had been honed to a fine edge that had to be seen to be believed. They had built the *Losning*, they had harnessed the power of the sun for energy, they had manufactured weapons capable of leveling the field against even the mighty Kakkerlak, without even knowing what the creatures were. They had created Kavalrist Gammel’s robotic arm. They had surpassed limitations that defined other Rottan, and they’d done it with apparent ease.

Redemption, indeed. Avskander wasn’t going to know what hit him.

Once the Inderlings had demonstrated their aptitude at handling the upcoming fight, Frolli wandered around the temple in an attempt to make sure he wasn’t dreaming all of what he was seeing. As he watched them all go to work, he felt suddenly sulky, as though he’d been left out. It was selfish, he knew, and silly, too, but he couldn’t help but feel entirely outclassed. Frolli was quite alone; even Mynt had found her way into Madig’s favor: she was exploring the *Losning* along with the rest, like a true crewmember. But Frolli didn’t belong.

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He wondered if that had to do with Derli. Probably it did, he decided. He must have been feeling guilty, but also jealous, because in all of this conflict Frolli had only ever been a bystander. Everybody else seemed to find their place, seemed to matter. Who was Frolli Helter in the war against Akarot Avskander and his army of ancient Kakkerlak?

Eventually, somebody found him.

It was Seffren. Her voice came out soft but purposeful, in command. "You're feeling a bit overwhelmed, are you?"

He jumped. He'd been watching munitions being loaded onto the luftskips down in the dock, waiting for the sky to lighten. He had asked if he could be of help, but the workers said he'd just be in the way. He figured they were right, the organized way they moved.

Frolli whirled and said nervously, "Oh! I'm sorry, I wasn't... Ah, I didn't see you there." Then, he added, "How did you know?"

"We don't get many outsiders. They often are, and you have that look."

"Oh. I see. I'm sorry."

"It wasn't a complaint. Nor a jape. Are you ready for the morning?"

"Ready?" Frolli laughed, still uneasy. "How could I be ready?"

She shrugged. "Fair enough. But you'd do well to be as ready as you can be. Anything less, and you might not live to see tomorrow night."

Frolli sighed exasperatedly. "Just a few weeks ago the worst thing that could have ever happened to me was getting caught up to trouble and having a lashing from the Fieldmaster and my Pap in the same day. Now it's like the whole world could come to an end."

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"No," she corrected him. "The whole world was in as much danger a few weeks ago as it is today. You just didn't know it."

"But you Inderlings did," he said, his tone laced with spite, as though the almost certain demise he was about to meet was somehow her fault.

"We suspected," she explained. "And we prepared. But you ought not be nervous or worried. You'll either die or you won't, same as everybody else. If you die, you won't be around to lament it, and if you live, you won't have anything to lament."

There was sense in her words, and somewhere in them he found some comfort, but he didn't know how to tell her that. Instead, he said as though unconvinced, "This isn't my first eve of battle. I can think of lots of reasons to be worried."

"This isn't your first eve of battle, so you know what to expect," she pointed out. "You're not worried about what'll happen to you. You never have been. You enjoy not knowing what'll happen to you. It's your sister and your friend, Derli, you're worried about."

"H-how..." he started, perplexed. "How do you know that?"

She giggled. "You're a lot easier to read than the stars, Frolli. You're braver and stronger than you give yourself credit for, though. I like that."

"Well, no, but," he stammered, "I meant it as: how do you know about Derli?"

"Maybe not too smart, though," she remarked. "I listened to your whole story, remember?"

Of course he remembered: he had been unable to keep from staring at her the whole time. But speaking with her now was getting his thoughts all jumbled, making his stomach feel light inside him. He found difficulty in even thinking straight, and he had to admit to himself that he must be smitten.

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"Right, right. Yes. Of course," he replied, trying for nonchalance, but with the impression he'd made so far he wasn't too sure he was succeeding.

"Thing is, Frolli," she confided, drawing in close, so that he felt an involuntary bout of bruxing try to squirm its way out of his mouth, "Mynt and everybody else could sit it out if they wanted. Nothing says they've got to go. They've made their choices, though. They want to be here. They're ready to fight, and they're willing to accept the consequences. Willing to face the risks. You just have to be willing to let them. And if anybody does get hurt, or if this all fails and we lose, you can't go blaming yourself. And as for Derli," she added, "he chose, too. He did what he thought was right, just like you did. Whatever might happen to him as a result isn't on your shoulders, understand?"

Frolli cast his eyes downward. "And Rikka?" he asked quietly. "Have you got an answer for him? Because he sure didn't choose. He never wanted to come along. And I let him die."

Seffren looked him in the eye. Put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "He saved Mynt's life, the way I understand it. If he hadn't been there, he'd only have lived to see the Kakkerlak invade your town, and then she'd be dead too. Besides, that's all in the past. Once something's happened, there isn't any use dwelling on what might have happened differently, because nothing you can do will change it. You can't go back, Frolli. Only forward."

He nodded, maybe not wholly convinced, but placated some. He felt suddenly tired. In the quiet wake of her words Frolli thought something ought to be said, but he had nothing more on that subject, so he grabbed at a different topic. "So, you're really going to fight, too?" he asked, thinking to perhaps prompt a discussion on her impressive combat skills.

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"I am. And don't think you're responsible for me, either. Same as you can't change the past, you surely can't change my mind," she said, seeing right through his shift in subject.

Frolli feigned ignorance. "What makes you think I'd be invested in what happens to you? We only just met."

She glared at him incredulously as though to say, "Don't make me laugh." What she actually said was, "No, not too smart at all."

The *Losning* was even more impressive than Frolli had initially thought. Once he saw it come to life, he was positively blown away.

It was pre-dawn, very nearly time to begin. All the training and practice and resting and loading and preparation and steeling of nerves that could be done had been. Now all that was left was to go. Frolli made his way to the *Losning's* hangar, freshly supplied and ready for combat. His comrades were already on-site, themselves having been given upgrades to their gear. The Inderlings had supplied armor for all: not the white plate pieces most of them wore, but thick, durable sectionals meant for general fighting. Greaves and pauldrons, rubberized and ablative, would give them an extra edge without sacrificing mobility. They wouldn't stop boomer rounds, but they were better than cloth weaves.

Frolli wore his now over the same ragged, gaudy cloak Lerra Venn had bequeathed unto him back in Gordby. It was quite comfortable, he had to admit, on his bare flesh, and he'd grown rather attached to it. He had asked Seffren about the seemingly flimsy plastic

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mail she and the other Inderlings wore, assuming metal of almost any kind would have been more desirable, but she explained that these plates were ceramic: a little bulky but not nearly as much as traditional platemail, and lighter and stronger to boot.

One of the Inderlings had graciously gifted Frolli with a few snap grenades: flammable powder and flint shards rolled up in thin white paper. Swung or thrown with enough force, the rocks inside would detonate the powder, creating a disorienting bang. They were Mennesk artifacts and exceedingly rare, but the fellow, whom Frolli had trained, as it were, offered them in thanks only with the caveat that he hoped the farmboy wouldn't actually have need of them.

Frolli's shipmates wore also their new equipment except for Kavalrist and Sorvirret. Gammel's mechanical arm had been fixed entirely, restored to its full strength, but other than that he remained unchanged: even his Folkslayer was the same; he had declined to have its pockmarked rend patched or soldered. Frybitter, as always, was decked in his baroque vest, eschewing anything heavier to protect himself.

The lot of them were loaded onto the skip already except for Frolli; when the farmboy arrived, Mynt, standing up on deck, called down to him to climb aboard. He nodded and headed for the ramp to the hold, and as he passed by the docking braces he realized something he had not before: they were not mere pedestals on which the ship was resting, they were legs, and very much a part of the vessel itself. There were three on each side, and they extended down to allow the luftskip to dock directly on land. He saw that they would retract up into the hull once airborne, and the exposed bays in which they belonged were the ribbed cores he'd seen earlier.

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But that was far from the only surprise the *Losning* had in store.

The skip's interior was similar to its exterior, with symmetrical architecture all over: long, curving lines gave the impression of a sort of endlessness, with no clear beginning or end to features and protrusion. Loading bays and clamps and lifting straps all emerged or protruded from mounded hatches embedded in the walls and floors and ceilings, disappearing when not in use. Portals to other rooms were natural-looking and rounded, and hallways were like connecting tubes tunneled through the foreign-looking surfaces. Rather than metal many of the skip's constructs were fabricated from plastic or ceramic, and everything was striated in black and white, with red-bulbed lights to illuminate it. The *Losning* felt alive; it was as if Frolli had been eaten by something giant and hungry.

Seg Bandie was stowing a few things away in the hold when Frolli arrived; as soon as he saw the boy he manipulated a console on one wall and said simply, "He's aboard. Ready to dust off." It was a communication device, like the tubes on the *Lysval*, but nobody had to shout. Frolli only realized he was staring in puzzlement when Bandie said, "Like that, eh? Apparently, it turns your voice into electricity, runs it through wires, then spits it out the other end through a speaker. I have no idea how it works. Anyway, welcome aboard, fella. You ready to see what she can do?"

Frolli nodded, and in a few moments he heard and felt the engines come alive. But unlike the low, throaty rumble of other luftskips, including the *Lysval*, the *Losning's* engine thrummed quietly, but powerfully, reverberating gently throughout the hull and disseminating into the superstructure. It sounded like livewire, like raw electricity crackling, and it left a light, static-filled buzz in the air. Frolli noticed it immediately and found it to be quite intrusive, but then after only a

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moment it leveled off and seemed to disappear entirely. He couldn't tell if it had faded or if his body immediately got used to it.

He peered out the back of the cargo hold, toward the overhanging spindles under the stern deck. "Is that the engine bay?" he asked.

"Basically, yeah," Seg nodded.

Frolli caught the incredulousness and followed up with, "How does everything fit? The engines and the ballasts I mean."

"This gal don't use traditional luft engines, the way most do. There's just a compressor up there. It converts air to luft to keep her afloat, though don't ask me how in the world it does, and what's left gets pressurized into those contraptions back there. Vents nozzle it out to get her moving."

"And that can lift this entire skip?"

Bandie chuckled, brow raised, just as unconvinced as Frolli. "Apparently."

"But if the air's too thin up here, how's luft even supposed to get us off the ground? Those other skips have to drop out of the hangar; we're just sitting on top of the mountain."

Bandie shook his head. "I guess we're about to find out."

No sooner had he said it than there was a metallic creaking sound, accompanied by a robotic chittering that filled the entire hold, and indeed the entire skip, bursting out into the hangar beyond. The Inderling engineers who'd built the thing stood well clear of the stern as the clicking rose in volume and frequency; it reminded Frolli of the *Kakkerlak*, which was even more unnerving considering how the *Losning's* body appeared to have multiple appendages and chitinous plating. This vessel really was unlike anything ever before built or even seen, Frolli was certain.

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Then, before his eyes, the bulges at the rear cracked apart, the gaps between them widening until each of the six became its own independent limb. Their undersides, in keeping with the rest of the boat's design, were black and sleek, with the silver outer plating like armor. They were like unfolding tendrils, elongating as the sections of hull split apart at seams Frolli hadn't even noticed before, leaving black stalks visible underneath. They angled different directions, and Frolli saw tubing connecting them to the main engine core which had been housed in their center. It was a giant nozzle, probably to direct thrust, and along the inner surfaces of the lengthening arms there were similar vents for minute adjustments. The tentacle-like appendages made the *Losning's* already significant length grow by half, stretching until she could barely fit in the hangar.

Then the cargo door levered closed on unseen hinges, sealing perfectly and closing off the outside. "Did you see that?" Frolli asked excitedly. "I mean, did you see how they all just unfolded?"

"I saw, I did. Believe me, I'm just as impressed as you, and I even knew that was supposed to happen. Come on; let's go snag a view."

Frolli followed after Seg, asking, "You don't need to help out or anything?"

"Hmph," he chortled. "Those red-eyed Inderlings say she'll practically fly herself. Half of what I used to do on the *Lysvhal's* automated now."

"You don't sound happy about that."

"We'll just see what needs doing and what doesn't," Seg spat indignantly. "I admit she's a beauty of design, but any sailor'll tell you this girl wasn't built by proper Riders. What do they really know about flying, living up here all their lives? I reckon I'll be fixing and streamlining plenty once we're up."

Bandie led them up through the spiraling, circular halls to the viewing deck. It was, like the

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housing in the Inderling temple, low-ceilinged and wide, running the full width of the fore half of the skip. Once they stepped onto the platform Frolli could see the hangar on three sides through spotless glass panes, curved to fit the skip's shape exactly.

Mynt had come down from the deck, and Snik as well, and even Kavalrist: they all sat near the front of the windscreen, watching as the hangar's great overhead doors ground slowly open. Frolli and Bandie joined them, standing about in the loose throng and waiting tensely.

After only a few more moments Madig's voice crackled to life through a speaker embedded in the wall, just like the one in the hold. The sound was tinny and choppy but even so it was a remarkable reproduction, considering it had been changed to electricity and back. "They tell me you might hold on to something," she instructed, her tone hesitant and unsure. Frolli couldn't decide if her uncertainty stemmed from speaking through the talkbox or from disbelief at how much power the skip could launch with. Maybe it was a little of both.

They all held on anyway, to a rail mounted just inside the window probably for that purpose alone.

The *Losning* let out a frightful noise, something full of bass and deeply resonant; it vibrated every one of the vessel's panels and facets. Raw power seemed to collect behind it, and Frolli felt and heard the sound emanating from the stern. It made him grit his teeth and flinch a little, as though bracing for impact. If any of them had been only halfheartedly gripping the safety rail they clung to it now for their very lives.

Then the sound was ejected out the back of the luftskip, replaced by the punch of the thrusters as they expelled fuel: a quick, short, high-pitched *thwup*, and with it the *Losning* lurched suddenly, even violently, forward, bursting up in a gravity-defying leap and then

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rocketing even more ferociously out and over the crater at the top of Mount Fellrik.

The skip cleared the temple, cleared the fence at the rim, and then there was open air in front of them and all around. The pre-dawn sky was yet dark; it enveloped them, welcomed them, the stars all swimming through the shadowed night in little blurry streaks. After that moment the skip was silent, her initial pounce like the outburst of an enraged beast. The *Losning* nosed down, and the mountainside tipped quickly into view at the bottom of the glass, visible only by the dimness of the stars and soft runninglights casting from the hull.

The rock face held still a moment – an unceasingly long, fluttering moment – and then the luftskip dropped down, piercing the sky, cutting through the night, down and away from Fellrik. The stone whipped past in a feature-melting blur, and as it swept down before them Frolli realized that in mere seconds they'd neared the bottom. The mountain flared out beneath the vessel as she fell, and Madig, up on the bridge, pulled her out of the steep dive, sending all the crew's guts dropping into their feet as the gravity shifted.

Frolli, white-knuckled, let out a scream that melted into joyous laughter.

And here we go... thought he, as Norslade sprung out of the darkness before them.

The *Losning* was fast.

The skip leveled out overland as Madig brought her under control, and then with eagerness she lurched onward and paced across the hills and dales below. The nonessential crewmembers made their way to the top

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deck to watch; the flanged lip of hull plating that served as a rail split the wind, allowing it to arc over the rest of the skip aerodynamically and providing a relatively calm airspace out in the open.

The ground zipped by in a dark green blur, only the faintest indication of a horizon off to the east where tiny fragments of light broke the edge of the world. In less than a quarter of an hour the tangled vines and plants of the Floating Prairie crept into view, a trip that would have taken a quarter of a day in most other luftskips. In only a few more minutes the *Losning* was speeding over the dark and twisted forest, her elongated shadow a barely perceptible mass over the patchwork plantlife below.

"She has got some power in her, after all," Bandie admitted. "I guess maybe those red-eyed mountain-dwellers got a thing or two right, at that."

The skip sailed evenly and smoothly, and nearly silent, too. They made northeast, Madig and Sorvirret setting their course from within the cabin toward Aveling. As this was the *Losning's* maiden voyage, the Rottan gathered on deck thought it best not to disturb them with questions, though really it was only Mynt and Frolli who weren't familiar with the headquarters of the Rider's Guild. Even Kavalrist grinned when they mentioned it, like he'd been there countless times before.

When the vessel banked and redirected along the line of Risktail Ravine, Frolli assumed that meant Aveling would be found along the Stohvkyst Shore, maybe even at the terminus where the canyon let into the vastness of Uglydour: what a perfect hiding place that would have been; no farmer or merchant would ever have thought to root out the Riders there, with the danger of the stohv.

Captain Uredd leaned on the throttle and put on speed, climbing as she did, until the ravine was naught

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but a tiny fissure in the ground below. The crew exchanged knowing glances as the skip rose.

“Why are we climbing?” Frolli asked.

Snik tapped out a reply: “The Kakkerlak.”

Bandie elaborated, “They’ll have made Risktail by now. It wouldn’t be prudent to flash our belly to them, even fast as we’re going.”

Frolli understood: the army’s advance would have brought them once more to Stufford, where they would have crossed the Stufford Span and continued on unhindered. It might have been that they had already passed by, but as large as Avskander’s forces were the chances of that were low, and anyway there was no reason to risk the exposure when a little altitude would keep them hidden as they passed overhead.

Frolli wished they could do something now, wished the *Losning* was the spearhead of the attack, but he had to remind himself that the Rottan had intentionally sacrificed the ground the Kakkerlak would have made in the night to set up their surprise assault. It was not ideal – any caravans or travelers or farms caught in the advance would be lost, sacrificed for the greater good – but it had been the only option when formulating the plan.

Still, the thought of sailing right past the Kakkerlak to go and fetch help seemed somehow dishonest, cowardly, and it didn’t sit well with Frolli. Not his instinctive urge to fight, anyway. The other part of him, responsible for flight, was all but breathing relief at the idea.

The metal fabrications and edifices of Stufford came into view not much later, the polished bridge contrasting starkly against the dimness on the ground. A morning fog clung to the land, seeping into the valley like slow, boiling water.

And there they were.

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They were like a living carpet, a brown, undulating mass blanketing the countryside. They marched en masse and by the thousands, though from this height there was no way to be sure exactly how many they numbered. They were on either side of the ravine, and the bridge was full of supplies being passed across, every one of them working in apparent unison, controlled, somehow, all by Akarot Avskander. Outside of town, to the east, starting up Maidenfield Road, was the column of elite Rottan under black-furred Nadelas's command, their bleached bone armor visible even from far overhead.

Apparently Kavalrist didn't care to slip quietly by them either. He walked to the starboard rail and climbed up, as though to jump.

"What are you doing!?" Mynt called, startled. It took Frolli a moment, too, to remember that the move wouldn't be for him a suicidal one.

He hefted the Folkslayer. "You lot don't need me to rally the Riders. I can be of more use here. They're headed overland at speed, making for Bondby most like. Maybe I can give 'em pause until the cavalry shows up."

"That's crazy!" Mynt said.

"Aye. Even for an immortal, it is. But they won't string out their lines, and they won't move on if I'm wreaking havoc. Besides... I owe Nadelas a visit."

"You can't kill her, though," Frolli pointed out. "Nor Avskander." The boy didn't know why he was arguing; the old Rottan's logic was sound, and even if he was overpowered and captured his presence would stall the enemy, which could only help.

"No," Kavalrist shrugged. "But who knows, maybe I can snatch up his staff. Or maybe I'll throw him into the stohv again. That'd put a kink in the works, eh?"

And with that, he stepped overboard, tumbling away and into the thinning fog below. They were on the west side of the valley; if he wanted to do any damage,

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he was going to have to fight his way across the Stufford Span. But as Frolli watched the glimmer of Folkslayer disappear from view, he figured that was exactly what the old warrior wanted.

The *Losning* continued on, passing the legion of Kakkerlak wordlessly.

Sorvirret came out on deck and approached Frolli and the others. "Did we just see Mister Gammel throw himself off the skip?"

Frolli nodded but made no other reply.

"Do we need to, say, turn around?"

Frolli shook his head.

Sorvirret stared over the rail for a beat. Shrugged. "Okay." Then, as an afterthought, he added, "I wonder, Mister Bandie, if it was perhaps your cooking that inclined him to abandon skip. Ah, well, I suppose we will never know."

Whatever effect Kavalrist had on the insect ranks would be left unknown; the *Losning* maintained her course, plying northward along Risktail Ravine, until Stufford was lost to the dark wake behind. Dawn was approaching; the eastern sky by degrees grew light, an orange haze intensifying like a bed of coals just over the horizon. Hopefully the Inderling fleet would soon reach the enemy's position to make best use of the sun's penetrative light.

Madig brought the skip's altitude back down. The valley below widened, stretching until it was less a canyon and more a pair of distant bluffs. They were coming fast on the Stohvkyst Shore. The *Losning* lowered more as the cliffs now flung far to either side wore down to rocky beachheads before arcing away to the east and west. The vessel plowed into the stohv of Uglydour like it was water; she hovered only a few taillengths above the surface, churning up misty clouds of the crimson grit in the wake of her thrusters.

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Frolli cast his eyes to and fro, expecting the skip to yaw one way or another, but her course stayed true. He wondered then if perhaps Aveling rested on some islet floating out in the stohv far offshore, hidden from the view of average Rottan. But when after the mainland slipped past the horizon and there was nothing but rolling clouds of red as far as the eye could see, Frolli had to ask of Frybitter, "Where then is the home of the Rider's Guild?"

At this Sorvirret sighed. "I suppose, Frolli, that you had to learn of it sometime: what you know as Verden is hardly *all* of Verden. There are other lands not unlike the one we have just left, scattered throughout Uglydour, floating in the vastness of the world. And on them there are towns and villages and cities. And in those places there are Rottan, some with as little a notion as you that there is any order out among all this chaos. Though, for the most part, they understand it plainly enough."

Frolli was nearly floored. His knees grew suddenly weak and shaky. "But... How can this be?"

"Are you asking how there can be other lands, or how nobody on yours ever heard of them before?"

"Umm... Well, the second one, I suppose," the boy stammered.

"Oh, well, the answer then is simple: you spend your whole lives - generations, mind you - with your noses in the dirt, farming and tilling, or digging for scrap underground. Is it really so hard to believe? And consider what we have learned from the Laerdites, and from the Inderlings, and even from Mister Gammel, regarding the early settlers. They came from elsewhere, you see; that does not mean wheres else stopped existing, nor that *all* their residents left."

"But..." said Frolli, "I don't..."

"Does this come as such a shock to you?"

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"Well, yes! I mean... I mean, I don't know what I mean, but... Well, I don't know what. I'm just at a loss."

"I am surprised at your surprise," Sorvirret replied. "Where, after all, did you expect the gangers who had caused your people so much grief to go and hide once they had plundered and pillaged? If what you thought was all there was really was all there was, those rascals would have been found out."

Frolli thought on it for a moment. Sorvirret was right, of course, and it did make great sense. For Frolli's benefit the Rider showed the young boy a proper map of Verden, one which included all the known landmasses. There were dozens of islands, spread all about, most of them farther away from Frolli's home than the continent itself was wide.

"It is called Futbard, by the way," Sorvirret explained. "The land you live on."

"So, this is a map of the whole world?" Frolli asked hesitantly.

"So far as we understand it, yes - but for all anybody knows there are dozens and dozens more such collections floating out there, and who knows what sort of people, separated by time and distances nigh-unfathomable, could be living on them?"

"And so why," Frolli asked at last, after he'd had more time to study the map, and to show Mynt, who seemed less surprised and far less impressed than he had, "didn't you ever tell us about this?"

Sorvirret looked at Frolli blankly. "You never asked."

"What!?" Frolli squeaked, immediately flustered. "Of course I never asked; I didn't know! How was I supposed to ask if I didn't know to ask?"

"That is a fair point, I do suppose, but considering that the Rider's Guild makes its home on another of these isles, it would not have been prudent to

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go about advertising their existence. It is a secret headquarters, after all."

"And you didn't think it relevant information? Or did you just not trust us?"

"Of course we would have trusted you, though you must admit you were hardly a major factor in the planning of our continuing ventures, so until now it was not precisely relevant to you."

Frolli bruxed in dejection, offended. "Well," he grumped, "I did so ask, anyway. Back on Fellrik: I asked about Aveling when you lot brought it up."

"Hmm," Sorvirret said, considering, before shaking his head. "No, you asked what Aveling was - which was explained to you - and then you merely stated that you had never heard of such a place, which most if not all of us knew already, or at least could have guessed without much effort."

"Oh, of all the - well, I say..." Frolli huffed, upset at this treatment. But it was hard to stay mad. He knew the revelation was what took him off guard; Sorvirret really had no reason to reveal that information to some farmboy, and no matter how connected Frolli thought he'd been to the trials thus far experienced, he was in the end not as important as he liked to think.

At any rate he did not sulk for long - by now there were greater things at stake than his pride, and he got over it. He spent more time poring over the maps, mesmerized. He would examine the individual continents, then chart their arrangement in Uglydour, and then stare out at the infinite sea around him, wondering just how anybody ever found anything out here.

The allure of the stohvrider was certainly appealing - the freedom, the escape - but Frolli wasn't as sure of himself out in the stohv as he always thought he'd be. All his life he'd been brained with the idea that stohvridders were one and all mad to go trawling about

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the corrosive seas, but he never could bring himself to believe it. And yet, now that he was an hour from land, with nothing to be seen in any direction for horizons and horizons but crimson clouds of dust, the notion suddenly seemed much more reasonable.

He wondered if maybe he didn't have the stuff proper Riders were made of, after all. The thought was humbling.

On the *Losning* flew, until the darkness faded and the sky lightened, though of the sun itself there was still no sign. The sky overhead lit up a blazing orange with dawn's light, as though the whole world had caught fire. The incandescence reflected off the enormous wisps of stohv all around so that Frolli could hardly make out where the world and the sky met.

He estimated that, for as long as they'd been sailing on their northerly course, if Captain Uredd's navigational calculations were off even the tiniest bit they might bypass their target and fly on forever. However these skip captains did find their way, Frolli was unsure. Instinct, perhaps, as Madig and Sorvirret had said, but it was one thing to plumb a labyrinth for the way out and something else entirely to keep track in this searing void.

Still, the view was wondrous to behold, and one of the most beautiful, albeit terrifying, things young Frolli had ever experienced. Ere long, the *Losning's* altitude shifted once more, rising up out of the buoyancy of the thicker stohv to where she only floated in little clouds. And there, on the horizon, was land.

It rose up out of the eddying mist stark and bare, exposed, sheer rock walls jutting and eternal. Upon the cliffs, facing south, was a tower, tall as three of the *Losning* stood on end, but instead of a perfectly vertical spire like the Communistrail this pylon jutted out over the stohv at a steep angle. It was nearly as wide as the Stufford Span; at first Frolli thought it might be some

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sort of crane, and the crisscrossing tresses holding it together were more than just lashed or soldered scrap: they were Mennesk in origin. As the skip neared, however, he saw that it was a ladder, once painted white but scoured and pockmarked now, with rungs flat and wide like stairs as if the angle at which it hung in the sky overhead was its intended orientation. Red Mennesk runes were writ on the side, indecipherable, and bright lights strung intermittently along its length blinked in succession to signal pilots. At its overhanging end there was a magnificently huge light, shining intensely and cutting through even the thick swathes of eddying stohv.

Luftskips of all kinds docked along the jutting ladder, mostly near the top, with anchors tying them off like balloons, hanging frozen in the sky, or gangplanks bridging to holds and access panels. The sight reminded Frolli of the Communistral a little, but he had to admit this was far more impressive.

As the stairway loomed closer, Frolli felt a wave of relief course through him. The proximity to land was comforting. He looked around the cabin and saw similar elation color his cohorts' faces, but it wasn't merely the sight of land or the perceived safety ahead: this was, to them, home.