

LEGENDS OF VERDEN: THE SHATTERED REFLECTION

Chapter 22

“Well,” concluded Sengle Sporrelsten after having interrogated Skrullet, “he’s quite mad.”

“Well, that much is obvious,” Frolli noted. They were back at the inn, this time having taken one of the elevated trains to return more quickly than they had come. The captain had decided that there was naught to be done for it; they were going to have to take the risk of being trapped aboard than the greater one of getting caught in the streets by the spreading news of what Skrullet had done. At least in transit they could outrun the outcry.

Though in the end there had been little outcry: it seemed that in Jordisk such riotous behavior was if not common at least more common than on the surface, and there was no constabulary force to contend with such matters on an emergency basis. A handful of sheriffs patrolled, making their rounds to investigate the most heinous claims and bring perpetrators to justice, but for the most part petty crime went unpunished – officially. Vigilantism was high, and upsetting a community by stealing or hurting somebody else was in many cases met with swift street justice.

In this instance, it had quite thankfully turned out that nobody was hurt by Skrullet’s firebomb; it had amounted to a bunch of flash and noise and little else, so there was no real call to have his head on a platter,

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except probably by members of the Uprising, and their retaliation would be anything but swift: flyers calling for information on the white-furred, red-eyed Rottan would go up, most likely, but even that might take a day.

Still, the group had kept Skrullet's hood up and wrestled him aboard the very next train they could manage, all the while trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible. Fortunately he did not struggle and mostly kept his muttering to a manageable volume, except for once when he leapt up and started hollering forewarnings about the grisly and uncomfortably specific, though terribly outlandish, eventual deaths of everybody in the car.

He was sitting quietly now, alone in the back room of the meager rented unit, while the scholar reported on their interview.

"But there is, if you listen closely, some truth in what he says. Most of it's rambling, you see clear enough, but all inlaid with the facts. For example, he says he came from above, and that he fled the sky. The void, he calls it. He said it was a place of merciless discovery, of faith, of conviction, of certainty, of doom. A place of prophecy. Now what would you make of that?"

The others sat around listening. They stared back quite dumbfounded. Nobody answered, and so Sengle continued, "Well, that's about right, to be frank - not much can be made of just that, but compare the context. He also said he ran underground to hide, so that he would never have to stare into that void again, that unblinking void that so terrified him. So what does that tell you?"

Mynt hazarded a guess. "Um... that he is from the surface, and is afraid of the sky? So he came to Jordisk because there's no sky down here?"

"Yes, to put it simply."

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"So?" Rikka asked. "That doesn't really tell us anything."

"Ah," corrected the scholar, one long finger gesturing, "but it does. Examine the detail. He speaks of a mountain, impossible to scale. He speaks of an unblinking sky, one bathed in night for all eternity, but filled with light, navigable only by prophecy, and of invasive understanding brought on by a lifetime's examination of it. He mentions a fall, a fall from some position, some ranking, but also a literal fall. Then there is his jitteriness, and the anxious fluid that secretes from his eyes when he is nervous – some Rottan get that, you know; it's perfectly natural in cases of extreme stress."

"I'm examining," said Derli, "and I don't see the point. What are you saying?"

"Is it Fellrik?" Frolli asked even as the thought dawned on him.

Sporrelsten bruxed excitedly. "Yes, yes! That's exactly right!"

"What, what's right?" Derli asked. "I don't understand."

"He lived on the peaks of Mount Fellrik," said Frolli, "and then went mad, sitting atop the world like that. Right?"

"Precisely," the scholar confirmed.

"So?" Rikka asked again. "I don't see how you'd go mad living up on Fellrik. Anybody could do it; what's so rough about living on a mountain?"

"Oh!" Mynt chimed in. "Beruset used to tell us stories, d'you remember? About when Fellrik was still part of the world, and how folk settled there, at the highest peak of all, just 'cause they could. And then they lorded over everybody, thinking they were all high and mighty, and so the mountain broke off and plunged past the sky, where it was always night, like as to punish them for their showing off."

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"Yes, but those were just stories," Derli pointed out.

Frolli said quietly, "Well it seems to me that lots of things that had until very recently been just stories are proving to be truer than anybody supposed."

"Okay," Rikka grumbled, "so this fellow's backwards ancestors have been stuck up on Fellrik and all these seasons they've been living trapped up there, until finally this one goes plumb bonkers and leaps off to his doom to end it all, only he survives, and then he comes down to the mines to get away from all that sky. Have I got the right of it?"

"I think you do, yes," nodded the Laerdite.

"Okay, then I must say again: so? What's all that matter? Even if it was true – folk living on Fellrik since before anybody can remember, that is, which I'm not saying it is true, since they'd have no food, and I don't reckon Skrullet here is the first one who ever decided he'd had enough of the mountainside and tried to jump off – what difference does it make, since we've already decided he's certifiably crazy?"

"The answer to your question lies in the point you just made," Sengle said. "Skrullet *isn't* the first to come down from the mountain, though I suspect he's the first in a long time."

"And how could you know that?" Derli asked.

"Because I believe he's an Inderling."

The scholar's audience responded among themselves with murmurs of surprise, talking back and forth to discern his meaning. Sorvirret, who had remained silent, spoke up at last. "I wondered. What a discovery, to learn that the old legends are true after all!"

"Okay," Frolli interjected, "now this one, you'll have to explain."

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"Gladly," Sporrelsten bowed. "I see the captain is already acquainted with the legends, so tell me: what do you children know of Inder?"

"Only what Beruset Skronemaker tells," Frolli replied. "He's the Inderling in Gordby, although nobody really much pays attention to him besides as a storyteller, since he's always drunk, or working on being drunk. Folks think him harmless, and really I think they only keep him around because they're superstitious: it's bad luck to not have an Inderling around."

"They're soothsayers," Mynt added, recalling the tales. "Back when Verden was being settled, they showed up with prophecies they'd seen in the stars, foretellings of the future and of ages to come. So what makes Skrullet an Inderling: that he's carrying on about prophecies?"

Sengle was smiling with the revelatory flow. "Not quite. Even many Inderlings don't know their own history; the truth of it is that they were themselves those folk upon the mountain before it split. Once Fellrik became free-floating they were thrust headfirst into the eternal night above; that's where they learned to read the stars. And so they sent their prophets down to their brothers below to spread the word of their discoveries, to aid in the development of civilization, to help in the growing of crops. These eventually became the Inderlings we know today."

The siblings Helter pondered it openly, though the skeptical Derli and Rikka were more doubtful. "I don't know," Derli drawled. "I can't say as I believe all that; it stretches the imagination some, especially with you having just put so many pieces together to think this fellow Skrullet's one of them."

"Does it seem so unbelievable? Remember, examine the details: what do all Inderlings have in common?"

"I dunno," Derli shrugged.

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"Oh, of course you do!" Sengle prodded.

"Oh, I know it!" Frolli squeaked. "They're all white-furred, save a patch or two."

"Precisely! And seeing Skrullet here confirms it: the original Inderlings on Mount Fellrik were white all over, with these curiously red eyes, the likes of which I've never seen before. The Inderling descendants who live now in Verden have commingled with other Rottan, hence the mix, but that's how they're registered at birth as Inderlings: that same white fur. And they've spent so long apart from their progenitors that they've lost much in the way of their scrying ability, not to mention their recollection of prophecies laid down, but there isn't a doubt in my mind: Skrullet is a true Inderling, hailing from the mountain itself."

"Congratulations are in order," Frybitter said, nodding at the Laerdite. "I imagine this find will be returned with you to the academy?"

"Oh, this and more!" Sengle beamed. "You know, if I may say it, I must thank you all for this opportunity: this has all been quite fascinating, if not harrowing!"

Rikka stared blankly. "Maybe I'm missing something vital, but I still can't for the life of me see what it matters. So Skrullet's an Inderling. So they're living up on Fellrik, the fools. He's still crazy, and likely they all are too. Who cares? The Kakkerlak are still down here somewhere, and plus there's this Uprising to worry about, too. What's there to celebrate in that?"

"Knowledge and discovery are always cause for celebration, sir," Sporrelsten chided.

There was a beat, and then Rikka scoffed, "That's it? We dragged that wretch back here, and in the end he's useless? Yeah, great, now you know something you didn't, but it's about something totally irrelevant! Or have you gone as mad as him in there? What good's he doing us?"

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"I was getting to that," the scholar said patiently. "Because, like I just said, I have gleaned much more from his ramblings."

Sorvirret sat up, interested. "Such as?" he prompted.

"Such as that he knows where to find the Kakkerlak."

Again the others were all a bustle with the announcement. Sporrelsten sat proudly, waiting. At last he explained, "When I realized he must be a proper Inderling, I knew he had to be a little more familiar with the star-readings than the inebriate you've got back in Gordby. As... unhinged as Skrullet here is, when he confronted Enighetter he spoke of things most folk just don't know. That was as much a confirmation as any for me, and I thought that it might clue us in to what he thought he was doing. Once again: beneath the rambling, there's detail. Important detail. Science is like that, you know: data and data and data, all to be sifted through, and the invaluable nuggets of truth mixed in."

"Unhinged is hardly the word," Frolli said. "He seemed to have no memory of the rally. Like it was done by somebody else."

"Indeed. A defense mechanism, I think. He's fled his Inderling roots, he's fled the sky, but at his core there's still a lifetime of behavior defining who he is. So when somebody comes along and starts twisting history and prophecy about to suit their own needs, some part of him, still awake, still cognizant, reacts. The rest just shuts down into broken raving. And it seems this isn't the first time the name Enighetter used has come up, this Akarot Avskander. It got Skrullet's attention just as quick as it got mine, though for different reasons.

"According to Skrullet," the scholar continued, "Enighetter is using the memory of Akarot Avskander to fuel his Uprising, but this isn't just metaphor. From what I can tell, this symbol plastered about, the black-furred

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figure with the skull armor, is real. Enighetter's claiming it to be Akarot Avskander, or at least some reincarnation thereof, and it seems he's got folks believing him."

"But Skrullet, being a true Inderling, knows it must be false," Frybitter said knowingly.

"Precisely. He knows who Avskander really was, and he's not falling for the ploy."

"But you said he knew about the Kakkerlak," Derli recalled. "Where do they come in?"

"Ah. Yes. That, I think I will let him explain," said Sengle. He rose and stepped through the doorway. "Skrullet?"

The red-eyed Rottan had been lost in thought, mumbling to himself and counting something on his fingertips. He jerked to attention at the call, his head hunching down against his shoulders, his eyes wide, eerily unblinking and clear in the dimness of the back room. "What?" he replied distrustfully.

"Tell us about the Kakkerlak."

Skrullet's eyes went wider, somehow, and his whiskers began to twitch. A slow keening whispered from his throat, and then he started bruxing. Just when Frolli thought he would be unable to speak, it all came tumbling out. "Destroyers, all. Destroyers of us all. Like shadow they move, with too many arms to count, as many as they want, as many as they need, and like shadows they think, only of darkness and dark things, and only cold, nothing warm. They don't feel or reason, they just do. They kill because they have to, and that is all they know, it's all they desire. They will wipe us all out, and it'll be all his doing. He's the herald of their coming. He is the harbinger of the destroyers. Akarot Avskander."

Sporrelsten turned back to face them. "This imposter who's sided with Enighetter, this Rottan pretending to be Avskander, is, he thinks, responsible for the Kakkerlak, somehow. And it's not just paranoia

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and old prophecy that makes him think so; he's seen them himself. Here, in Jordisk, beneath our feet, hidden. Avskander is raising an army of them, breeding them, and Enighetter is, unwittingly, helping him. So you see, Captain Frybitter: Ferdig Enighetter is the least of our worries."

Sorvirret stared blankly, consternation drawing his features. He gravely walked past the Laerdite and into the anteroom. He knelt before Skrullet, who had gone back to reciting his quiet gibberish. "Skrullet," he said softly, "you know where to find the Kakkerlak?"

Skrullet once again rankled defensively, squinting. "Yes," he whispered. "Deep down, deep in the cold, and the black, they lurk, they hide. There they are born, made, forged, created to end the world. They are children of the stohv, and architects of the next Unmaking. They will finish what was started at the beginning of time. And he will stand atop the mountain of destruction and be king over the nothing his victory has wrought."

"And you remember how to get there? You could find this place again?"

Skrullet's crimson orbs were seeking. "Yes," he replied fearfully.

Grimly, Sorvirret said, "Show us."

They set out within the hour.

Skrullet was hardly happy to be returning them to the place where he had encountered the Kakkerlak; he tried vehemently to convince them to let him go instead. "You don't need me," he pleaded. "A map! A map is

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what you need. Maps tell you all kinds of things, if you look – like stories, they are. I can show you on a map; then I won't have to go, yes?"

But Frybitter would have none of it. "You have spent a great deal of your time running, Skrullet, and from a great many things; I shall not let you run farther. At the very least you will pay for your attack on the square by escorting us to the lair of the Kakkerlak."

Skrullet begrudgingly led them away from the inn, complaining all the while, and lamenting his station. Before long his protests dissolved, as they were wont to do, into prophetic mutterings that were harder to understand and easier to ignore.

But Ungut Barnslig had her own objections, which smitten as she was sounded half-hearted but upon examination did seem sound. "What is it you're thinking of doing, sir? Not that I mean to question your judgment, only, I don't rightly see the use in going after this Avskander, whomever he is. It seems reckless; I mean, why not wait and send word to the rest of the Rider's Guild?"

The captain's reasonable reply was, "I should not care to trust the claims of this rapscallion until I have confirmed them with my own nose; if it turns out all a fabrication we will have spent time and resources we can scarcely afford summoning the others."

But Frolli had been there from the beginning, and he sensed the underlying tone in Sorvirret's voice that had another explanation. He was tired of waiting and guessing, tired the way Frolli had been before entering the mines of Jordisk. He was ready to take action.

Frolli only hoped that didn't mean taking on the entire alleged Kakkerlak army by themselves.

Skrullet pointed out the entrance that would lead them to the underground chamber where he claimed the Kakkerlak were hiding. It was located on the

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fringes of Earbiter Grove, to the west. They boarded another elevated train to carry them the distance quickly. When the passenger car disembarked, they found themselves in a station situated on a shelf of wet rock, positioned some distance from the nearest support pillar. The plateau overlooked an outcropping of stone pilasters that had erupted from the cave floor as though from seed cast lazily. Between their bases water pooled, but some stretches were left dry and bare. Each one was as tall as any plant Frolli had ever seen, and they looked like a stone garden, growing there in the damp and the dark.

A few shacks had been erected near the tops of the spires, and between them hung a series of walkways strung with meager lights. Soft-capped mushrooms grew near the bases, and rope ladders hanging down from the dwellings allowed the residents to gather the fungus. The scant light cast an eerie, bluish glow upon the field of rock, and then Frolli realized that the tint came not from the electrical lights but from natural ones: the mushrooms themselves glowed in the dark of the cave floor, bathing the area in stripes of azure cool and enshrouding black.

Skrullet led them from the platform down to the drip-formed monuments, tracking along the gantries with his nose, mumbling to himself as he retraced his previous steps. Nobody was around; they'd either seen the strangers coming and hid or they just weren't there, but in either case the emptiness only added to the eerie dread about the place.

Presently he came to a growth of stone otherwise unmarked and mounted the rail of the suspended walkway. He gingerly though without apparent effort stepped down onto the slick formation and began to climb down. The task was easy enough; even Mynt had little difficulty getting down to the ground, and shortly they all assembled at the base of the

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little spire, standing in a semicircle around it to see the Inderling's next move.

Skrullet paced around it, sniffing, until he found what he was looking for: a hole shorn into the cave floor, just barely wide enough to permit entry. Beyond it lay the obvious darkness of some sort of tunnel.

"This? This is the way?" Derli asked uncertainly.

"Looks promising," Rikka added sarcastically.

Frolli shot them both reproachful glances at which they rolled their eyes. "How ever did you find it?" the boy prompted.

Skrullet seemed hyper-focused on the hole. His mouth hung loose and open. His eyes seemed slick with some kind of fluid. "I saw it in a dream," he explained matter-of-factly.

"A dream?" Mynt asked, incredulous, and this time Frolli didn't bother with the chastising stare, because he felt equally as doubtful.

"Yes. They beckoned me. The stars did, that is; they told me to come here. They told me I would find destiny."

"And obviously somehow the dream worked, because you found this entryway," Sorvirret offered reassuringly. He had a point, though it still made no sense.

"Yes. And then, in the dream, I died."

"Oh, yes," said Rikka. "*Very* promising."

One by one they squeezed into the hole, tunneling their way deep underground. They had to wriggle through the narrow passageway for a few dozen taillengths as it spiraled down into the rock, and then after that it opened up into a more comfortable passage. It was no Esterline, to be sure, but at least they could stand easily, even if they had to move single-file. The shaft led deeper and deeper, and here in the unused tunnel their way was lit only by the electric lamps they carried.

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For a long while they marched through the winding, sloping channel with no sound to accompany them but what their own advancement provided. Footfalls echoing fore and back seemingly forever, the scraping of fingernails on stone. The rustle of fabric and clinking of supplies shifting with motion. Breathing. But no words uttered, and none of the din associated with Earbiter Grove, already so far away now, its unceasing cacophony long-gone, replaced by a heavy silence.

Frolli lost track of the time as they walked: there was only the path before him, watching the rocks slip by, staying in line. Who knew how long they walked; he didn't, but he wasn't thinking about it even so. His mind was elsewhere. He thought of Stufford and the other ransacked homesteads, of the death and destruction wrought there. He recalled the Tynnman, the faceless creature of myth made manifest by the Kakkerlak. He thought of the banner of the Uprising, the black soul staring out from beneath armor comprised of the dead. He pondered at all the poor folk uniting against some enemy only they really saw, misled by Enighetter, and of Ferdig himself, just as misguided. He had no idea what was coming. None of them did.

Eventually the path branched, then branched again thereafter, and Frolli realized that down here in the very deepest parts of Jordisk there must be immeasurable unmapped or unused networks, unexplored or abandoned, and certainly unoccupied. The Kakkerlak would have all the room they needed to hide in, if they knew the tunnels, and nobody could stand a chance at following after them.

Except this madman who followed his dreams as much as his nose, heeding the advice of stars he had not seen in who knew how long.

They kept going, never stopping once. Skrullet's rantings grew more desperate, and louder, as he led the group onward. He said things like, "You'll all pray 'fore

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it's done for death they won't grant," and, "I'll not be held responsible for it, I won't." And then, later on, "Nobody left alive, not for ages, who can stop Akarot the Wroth. Not a slaughter that's coming, not a war, nor an uprising, bah. A cleansing, this. A baptism."

At this Mynt asked ahead, "What's he so worried over, if Enighetter's just using the name of some old monger nobody knows of to rally troops? What is there to be scared of?"

Skrullet stopped, the first and only time, and held up the line. He turned back his head, about all he could do in the cramped space. A sharply inhaled breath hissed through his clenched teeth, as of one gravely offended. He said nothing but only then continued on, his pace quickened, bruxing all the while.

At last they neared their destination: Skrullet drew to a halt and crouched low in the tunnel, sniffing the air delicately. Ahead the path ramped upward and widened, and beyond it was the distant shimmer of light reflecting off the roof of a cavern. Sorvirret signaled for silence and they all of them froze; Frolli dared not to even breathe as he strained to sense what lay ahead.

A fear had been building in him this whole way, a fear palpable and real, and now as he sat crouched in the darkness just taillengths from their enemy his fear struggled to take hold. He did his best to get a handle on it, to clamp it down and be still, but he felt his pulse quicken as he smelled them, felt an involuntary breath shudder out of his lungs as he heard that hostile, alien scuttling sound.

Skrullet turned around to face them in the now more open space. He peered unflinchingly at each of them in turn, with an odd, mischievous grin on his face, as if to say, "Don't say I didn't warn you..." Then he crawled up the smooth, slick embankment on his belly, waving the rest to follow suit. Frolli glanced back at his companions and saw the same fear he felt clearly visible

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on their faces and in their hunched frames, in the wideness of their eyes and the twitchiness of their motions. He took a slow, quiet breath and willed himself to move. They must not be turned back now, not after having come so far. This was what it had all been leading to, all the way from Stufford.

At the top there was a jagged, uneven ridge that overlooked the cave beyond. They hid behind outcroppings of stone and slowly, so slowly, peered over the edge. There wasn't a single one of them who did not have to stifle himself at the sight.

Before them stretched a quarry wherein a vast deposit of Mennesk scrap had been interred, dredged up from the various nearby mines and brought here for sorting. Whatever was useful had been taken or purchased, and the remnants left behind to rust. But this was not the scrap pile tended by Solv Tungen's lackeys at the edge of Driptown: this repository was ten times the size, and full of artifacts the likes of which Frolli had never even heard of, let alone seen. This was not all random assortments of scrap metal; there were objects left here that would fetch a fortune on the surface, all of them simply left to gather dust, sitting alone in the darkness for ages.

There must have been a tunnel collapse, thought Frolli, something to prevent the Rottan who had originally laid claim to this place from mining everything out. These chambers would have been left empty for generations before their rediscovery and repurposing. But for as amazing and mesmerizing as the relics all were it was the newly adapted purpose of the store that inspired true, and terrifying, awe in the onlookers that now took it in.

The Kakkerlak. Frolli had only actually seen the one alive, and after all this time he'd forgotten how petrifying it had been. This was just as bad, but now, there were more. Not hundreds, but *thousands*. There

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were more of them in the cave than Rottan he'd ever seen in one place. They scurried across the salvage perfectly at home, darting frighteningly quickly to and fro as they tended to whatever dark business occupied them. They came in all sizes, most of them like the one that had boarded the *Lysvhal*, but some even larger. Too many legs scuttled over the remnants of an age and a legacy long dead, feelers wagging and claws clicking, unblinking eyes staring out and seeming to see everything.

All throughout the cavern, mixed into the various piles of ancient detritus, were little, dark capsules that appeared to be glued to anything rigid. The pods were striated and hard, and Frolli could see many of them split open to reveal empty casings. And seeing the smaller Kakkerlak, lighter in color, scurrying about, feeding on banks of mushrooms that grew from the rubbish, Frolli realized what they were: newborns, being bred. The farmboy from Gordby didn't have the comprehension necessary to understand exactly what they were or how they functioned, their insectoid features and lifecycles totally foreign to him, but it didn't matter, for in front of him and with his own eyes he was witnessing the birth of an army, an unstoppable force the likes of which all Verden had never seen, a legion. Of that he was without doubt.

And perhaps worst of all, mixed in with the swarm, there were Rottan, tending alongside Kakkerlak to the young, or forging weapons and armor from the piles and piles of available material. Frolli's gut sank; here would be the perfect well from which the war machine could draw the water needed to quench its thirst. There would be no shortage of killing tools, no lack of supply for the Uprising, not with these turncoats here to manufacture the cold, murderous machine about to be unleashed. A machine that, from the looks of it, was nearly ready.

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The group's eyes scanned the scene below them, and along with the Rottan making equipment they also spotted the weary, beleaguered forms of others, shackled and linked together by chains. There were cages, too, throughout the cavern, filled with dozens of disheveled civilians in every one. The survivors of Stafford and the other towns, forced on pain of death into slavery for manual labor. What survivors there were: Frolli tried not to retch as he spied the heaps of dead bodies tossed throughout the scrapyard, the rotten, decaying masses splintered by cracked bones that stared up at nothing.

How these Rottan working alongside the Kakkerlak had been corralled into so doing Frolli could not fathom, but the very thought disgusted him to the point of sickness. Whether they were paid mercenaries or gangers, or whether they had been cajoled or threatened into it, was impossible to tell, although it did not matter to him. He could see no reason in it; to him, they had to be mad down to the last.

Whatever dread he'd felt before was now replaced by a dread deeper and greater. What hope had the Rider's Guild of defeating such a foe? A ragtag and motley crew of thieves and vagrants, even if united and rallied and properly armed. There was no way they could stand against this army. There had to be a Kakkerlak for every Rottan there was in the whole of Verden. Skrullet had been right, about the cleansing, although the only word Frolli could conjure for it was an extermination.

Out in the center there was open ground where no activity was taking place. It led to the far wall where a large tunnel was embedded: probably the original exit, and the way by which they'd have found the place. From it there marched a group of Rottan, toward the central area. The group divided neatly into symmetrical sections that split across, and they walked out in step.

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Frolli had heard stories of armies before, and he had seen the Communistal's militia in action. None of it compared to this. These were the elite; these Rottan put the coin-armored honor guard to shame.

From the distance at which they saw this garrison arriving little detail could be gleaned, but Sorvirret produced a spyglass and peered out for a few moments. He passed it on, and when Frolli got hold of it he could see more clearly.

Every one of them wore plate armor fashioned from bone. The bone of Rottan long dead, bleached white by age or some other means, polished to an ivory shine. Sectionals and pauldrons made from shoulder blades, ribcages wrapping torsos, arm- and leg-bones custom fit, as though they had selected victims themselves for just the right size. Skulls carved out and lashed back together, cut to slip snugly over their heads. And they all carried weapons, swords and pikes and spears and bows and axes and maces and hammers, all of them as menacing as anything Frolli had ever seen, even in the most fantastical storybooks or in his wildest fancies.

And in the center of them walked a lone figure. Fur entirely black, the color of inky nothingness, the bare flesh of ears and tail even greyed to a pallid, shadow-veined ash. Armor like the rest, made from the bone of slain foes. Sharp, white ribs tracing the torso up and around to the chest. The spinal sections clamped along the tail, ending in a sharpened spike. Across the back was slung a sword every bit as big as Kavalrist Gammel's, but instead of carefully honed scrap this one was made from the mandible of some ancient creature that lived before the Unmaking, maybe even a Mennesk: the lower half was sharpened to a razor edge, and the teeth on the other side were filed to serrated points. The figure walked proudly between the ranks of troops,

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levering forward with the long haft of a spear, shining white and tipped with a polished metal blade.

Frolli shuddered. *Akarot Avskander*. This was the Rottan who had somehow bred and brought to heel an army of Kakkerlak; even if the name was stolen from nigh-forgotten texts, Frolli had more than enough evidence to make him plainly terrified of the imposing figure, looking for all the world ready to kill everything else in it, backed by an elite coterie of soldiers ready to do the same. Could such a force even be stopped?

Involuntarily the scuttling sound the Kakkerlak's chitinous forms made as they moved forced its way into Frolli's mind: he suddenly felt as though his own flesh was made of hard, ablative plating rubbing back and forth. A cold chill ricocheted down his spine, and it was all he could do to stop himself squeaking aloud and leaping out of his own skin.

But no, that wasn't right. He had heard it before feeling it.

The fear peeled back, revealing beneath cold, raw data, exposed and tender and blatant.

The sound was not just in his mind.

Behind. Above.

Frolli turned slowly, and he wasn't the only one who did.

There, suspended on the vertical face of the wall above, was one of the Kakkerlak, its long, segmented antennae waving, its merciless, calculating eyes judging.

Frolli didn't even see the motion, it moved so fast: in one instant it was on the wall, and in the very next it was on the ridge with them, larger than any of them and crouched in attack position. It flailed about with its legs and began to ravage at them nightmarishly. In his periphery he saw others thrown aside; he sensed Mynt pinned beneath the sharp, spiny limbs of the insect. It spun and lashed out furiously yet gracefully,

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always moving, its every slashing blow delivered unpredictably.

Sorvirret was the first to muster a response other than blind panic; he drew his silver sword and brandished it defensively, blocking incoming blows and stabbing in when he could. The rest of them lay scattered across the platform of rock as the Kakkerlak wrought havoc. Frolli recovered from a glancing blow and managed to produce Dolksverd; he tried to follow the captain and swiped at the beast's exposed flank, but it kicked him fiercely, its clawed foot catching him in the still-sore ribs and flinging him onto the hard stone. He didn't let that stop him; he bounced back up to his feet and rushed in, plunging the sword nearly to its hilt into the same side, right into the soft section between two natural armor plates.

If the Kakkerlak felt pain it showed no sign, though it did try to kick Frolli again. Its defensive maneuver was successful; one thin, spindly leg hammered into Frolli, but he kept a grip on the handle of Dolksverd, now anchored into the horrendous creature's side and coated in thick, white blood. The spiked foot raked along Frolli's body, leaving a jagged gash that he had no choice but to ignore. As the Kakkerlak flailed it loosened Frolli's grip and also the lodging of Dolksverd, which shook back and forth as the monstrosity struggled to be free of its attacker.

The farmboy's eyes shot upward and he saw Skrullet there, having climbed up to the wall from which the creature had pounced. "What are you doing up there, you mad fool!?" he heard somebody shout, and in the chaotic skirmish he couldn't be sure he hadn't said it himself.

Skrullet leapt down and Frolli saw the hook in his hands, borne overhead even as he jumped. The Inderling landed on the Kakkerlak's back and embedded the hook into a plate just behind the monster's head. He

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tumbled off and a rope attached to the eyehole at the end of the hook went taut; with his forward motion Skrullet brought the insect into a low bow as he yanked on the cord and the hook buried itself. Frolli cast backward, realizing suddenly that the white-furred Rottan meant to drag their attacker off the edge of the cliff. He tried to free Dolksverd but it was wedged in still too deeply; Skrullet pulled, joined by Derli and Rikka who both took up the line.

Frolli let go of his heirloom. He wouldn't put the sword's value over the value of his own life.

But what he wanted and what would happen were not going to be the same.

The Kakkerlak slid across the rock, claw-tipped feet scrabbling for purchase. Frolli let go and moved to duck under, but then one of the hind legs caught on his cloak, the tines poking through the fabric. It yanked him roughly sideways and his protest was choked off in his throat.

Frolli tried to shrug out of the mantle but it all happened too fast, certainly too fast for him to think, let alone to actually get his fingers to undo the clasp around his neck. The Kakkerlak was towed across the rock and to the edge, and it brought Frolli along with it.

The sickening feeling of weightlessness as they both went tumbling over the side, like the whole world tilting on its edge and dumping everything it wanted gone.

The thrashing chaos as the Kakkerlak clawed at air with all its legs, Frolli caught in the frenzy.

The disorienting shift as the hook caught and the creature flipped over in midair, flinging Frolli away, and the squelching *pop* as the armored carapace was ripped free by the being's own weight pulling against it.

Frolli fell free along with Dolksverd and landed on his back on the cavern floor a few taillengths below. He felt the air being pushed out of his lungs, felt old

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wounds cry out with new pain. Not his largest fall of late, but not a pleasant one at any rate. Above him the dark, tangled mass of the creature remained whipping and lashing about for a moment before the hook slipped free and it came tumbling down on top of him. Frolli barely got himself curled into a fetal ball in time for the Kakkerlak's form to come crashing down.

It immediately seized up and worked at righting itself, seemingly oblivious to the damage it had sustained. Frolli was pinned beneath the insect – so heavy despite how nimble it had appeared – as it rocked back and forth, razor-tipped limbs flailing all the while. When its feet found purchase and it flipped back to level, Frolli forced himself up too. Without sparing a moment to think he reached up and plunged his blade into the now exposed softness of the creature's back beneath where the armored shell had been ripped away. The Kakkerlak turned as though to strike at him again but Frolli levered himself up onto its back using the embedded sword as a handhold and narrowly avoided a sharp retribution. The creature bucked and clawed and Frolli could have sworn he heard it hiss at him, but he held on, gripping Dolksverd's hilt so tightly his fingers ached. He grabbed at the half-removed plate of armor to steady himself as the monster flailed beneath him.

The carapace hinged back and forth, tissue stretching where it was still connected, and then with a mighty heave the Kakkerlak bucked and flung Frolli away. He felt something pulpy tear and snap, and then he was rolling across the ground, coming up in a crouch paces away with a piece of chitinous plating in his hand. It was larger than the boy's whole head, and he thought to discard it but then realized it would make a decent shield and so he kept his hold on it.

The Kakkerlak turned, slowly this time, to face him. For a moment he fathomed a fantasy wherein he

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could defeat the barely-wounded beast in single combat. The moment passed.

Frolli saw the scrapyard stretching out behind it, and all throughout the chamber he saw more of them, too, converging single-mindedly on his position. The thousands-strong army of Kakkerlak, all coming for him.

Sorvirret's voice echoed from above him, "Run!"

And Frolli did.

Frolli scarpered across the cave floor to his left, following the cliff face where his comrades still were. He darted behind a pile of scrap and kept moving, hazarding a glance up at the others. They were running along the ridge above him, the tops of their heads barely visible. "This way!" Mynt shouted, and Frolli quickened his pace, pumping his legs as fast as they would go.

He left behind the debris and found open ground, gaining speed in his sprint. But he sensed the Kakkerlak yet closing in around him: he heard their scabrous, scuttling legs, saw their shadows dance across the cave wall in the low light. He heard the shouts of Rottan, too, as they took up the chase.

Frolli pushed harder.

His lungs heaved and ached, his ribs cried out in pain from his not-fully-healed wounds. He felt his breath coming in ragged gasps, but still he knew he must move: there was no way he could defend himself, not even momentarily. His only chance to survive lay in getting away.

But where was he going? The edge of the cavern loomed ahead and still there was no way up. A mound of metal and scrap lay directly ahead of him, near the ridge, but there was no path nor a set of viable handholds to climb, and even if there were Frolli doubted he could make the ascent quickly enough to evade his pursuers. Next to it was a forge where several Rottan had been working, a fire lit in a small tin in the center of their area. Now they bore tools as makeshift

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weapons, glaring and sneering at him as he neared. But where else could he go? The way ended here: to his left was sheer stone offering no escape, and ahead much the same. Behind him were innumerable monstrosities plucked from legend and nightmare eager for his blood, and to his right an army more of them spread all throughout the cavern. He dared not slow or stop, though; he only forced himself to keep moving, the mechanical motion of his limbs taking over where thought would surely fail.

Another sidelong and fleeting glimpse of his comrades showed them with their own troubles as two Kakkerlak descended upon them from above, splitting their group. Sorvirret and Mynt kept moving, one of the creatures on their heels; Derli, Rikka, and Skrullet were halted and had to stand their ground against the other. Of Sengle and Ungut there was no sign.

Only a little more free space now lay ahead of Frolli; he was going to have to make a decision or face inevitable death. Ahead, the clifftop path arced around to follow the chamber wall, and Mynt reached first a large scrap of metal that had been left there, long and flat, like a giant fanblade. It was leaned against the wall next to the path, and she grabbed at it, pulling and tugging like she might somehow get the heavy slab of metal to topple over. Sorvirret was right behind; he saw her attempt and turned to help, adding his weight. Frolli wondered what good it would do: as an obstruction to the Kakkerlak chasing after them it would offer little impediment, since the insects could without a care mock gravity and scale sheer walls, and even then it would stall the creature only if it fell perfectly balanced on its side. But then Frolli understood: Mynt meant for the vane to drop down onto the knoll ahead of him, so that he could use it as a bridge to climb up.

He surged forward and reached the debris just as the top of the fanblade began to wobble; it stood

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balanced for a moment that seemed to last forever, a moment in which Frolli looked briefly back behind him and saw dozens of the Kakkerlak flooding across the open ground toward him, in which he saw the Kakkerlak chasing Mynt and Sorvirret nearly upon them with outstretched claws, in which the Rottan weaponsmiths closed in from one side to jab at him even as he reached the pile. Without hesitation Frolli leapt up onto any stable bit he could and began to climb. As they traced his path the enemy Rottan looked up to see the fanblade, half a dozen taillengths tall, pass the point of balance and begin craning toward them. There was the creak of metal warping as its severed base bent under its own weight driven into the rock, and then with a yawning shriek like something alive it toppled over.

Frolli looked up as he leapt for the next outcropping of scrap to scale, far too late to do anything if he found himself in the path of the falling slab of metal, and watched as it came down. Its base caught the Kakkerlak up on the ridge just before the creature reached Frolli's companions, crushing the thing with a stomach-churning *crunch*. The far end of it slammed down onto the pile just to Frolli's left, and it sent huge chunks of heavy salvage tumbling down onto the forgespace below. A couple of the Rottan there were caught in falling debris, and a larger piece of unidentifiable ore rolled into the barrel that held the flame, knocking it onto its side and throwing flaming coals out across the cave floor. The whole mound of scrap heaved with the sudden impact as its contents shifted like grains in a feed pile, one bit cascading into the next in an avalanche of collapsing detritus.

Frolli held on as best he could; something hard bounced against his fingers where they clutched the edge of the plastic sheet upon which he had been perched and he let go one hand, squeaking in pain and contempt. More random collections of metal were falling

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toward him and he hefted the pilfered Kakkerlak carapace to block them hitting his head. Their collisions nearly threw him off balance but then he saw a hand, looked around his shield at Captain Frybitter who was sliding down the smooth length of the awkwardly canted makeshift bridge. He caught Frolli by the cloak and tugged him back upright, and Frolli grabbed at the new platform with a sudden lightness in his chest. He wondered at how all that had ever managed to actually work.

Frolli scampered up the bridge toward his sister, who was beckoning him closer. Beneath her the legs of the crushed Kakkerlak still twitched reflexively, but she didn't seem to mind. When he reached the top Frolli looked behind him to where Sorvirret was backing up the ramp, fending off the Rottan who had avoided the brunt of the chaos. The swathe of fire from the barrel kept the Kakkerlak at bay, Frolli noticed – some reprieve, he thought with great relief as he realized that they had at least that one weakness. Sorvirret slashed at his opponents, and from the high ground against clearly inexperienced foes he held the advantage. He knocked two down with a fanciful rejoinder, disarmed a third. One drew in close and he blocked a wide sweep with a club, stepped in and plunged his rapier into the other Rottan's body. With a kick he tossed the felled opponent away, the body tumbling down the ramp and knocking others down with it. Sorvirret swung his blade around as though in challenge, waiting for a counterattack from the enemies who had been sent sprawling. Then he casually dusted off his vest, sheathed his sword, and turned around, licking his forearm to groom his ear as he ascended the ramp.

"It may be time to depart," he said wisely as he rejoined the siblings Helter.

"This way," Mynt nodded, and they doubled back toward the rounded corner of the room. "I saw

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Sengle and Ungut find a tunnel up here," she huffed as they took off along the ridgeline once more. Frolli did not bother looking back.

Just outside the tunnel they skidded to a halt as the others met up with them. Skrullet, Derli, and Rikka had evidently dispatched the Kakkerlak in their way, or somehow disposed of it at any rate, for they arrived unimpeded. Sengle, too, was there, just inside the tunnel entrance, beckoning them inside.

They all piled in, no idea where they might be headed. A dead end, quite possibly, and if so, they would have spent the only meager lead they had and doomed themselves: the Kakkerlak were not far behind, judging by the tumultuous sound roiling behind them.

They sprinted through the dark, unlit tunnel, their torches barely illuminating its growing circumference. The sound of their footfalls echoed loudly in the widening space, their footfalls and the panting breaths they drew. And always that ceaseless scuttling sound, growing more intense with every step they claimed. Very shortly they came upon a gate that spanned the width of the tunnel, made of metal and set into sliding grooves that had been mounted there. It was held open by cords strung through pulleys suspended in the ceiling of the cave on the far side.

Frolli slid to a halt. "The gate, the gate!" he chattered excitedly. "We can close it, block them off!" he pointed out. Then he added, "Right?"

The others, having passed through without devoting much attention to the structure, now stopped and looked more closely, at least as closely as their frantic, flight-focused minds would allow. "Worth a try," Sorvirret shrugged, and he unsheathed his sword. He found where one of the two cords was tied off: a stake embedded in the ground a few taillengths away. Frolli followed suit, raising Dolksverd in preparation.

"Wait!" Rikka squeaked. "Where's Ungut?"

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They glanced about, and Frolli noticed for the first time that Ungut Barnslig was indeed missing. The group looked to Sporrelsten expectantly.

"I—I thought she was with you..." he said, his voice painted with genuine disbelief and heavy guilt in equal measure.

Suddenly and as if in answer there came an abrupt and terrible cry from the main chamber where even now dim light still spilled into the deepening tunnel. It was the cry of the young stohvrider, her voice shrill and brimming with terror. And just as suddenly, it wrenched in pitch awfully, bracketing upward alongside a heartstopping squelching sound, like something wet being shredded by something dull and overlarge, before cutting short. Then there was only the sound of the Kakkerlak filling the tunnel, their shadowed forms melting through the darkness. Frolli could see legs and antennae wagging all around the rim of the entryway as more and more of them followed.

Captain Frybitter was bruxing to himself. Sengle panted weakly, clearly unconvinced though trying hard not to be, "We have to... go... back..." but trailed off without finishing.

"Frolli," Sorvirret said determinedly, an instruction. It was all he had to say.

They cut the cords and the heavy gate came crashing down with a loud clank, slamming home into ruts cut in the floor. A pair of thick, metal clasps fell once it was in place and pinned it there, effectively locking it. Evidently whomever constructed the postern had intended for whatever might be on the other side, the one with the Kakkerlak, to stay there.

The group turned away and, into the darkness, fled.