

# LEGENDS OF VERDEN: THE SHATTERED REFLECTION

## Chapter 25

When Frolli awoke this time, he was not in a dark cave moments from death. His eyes opened on a warm bed of plush fabric nested all around him, and a room filled with the familiar sights a farm-grown young lad took for granted. Soft light filtered in through windows cut high into the walls, dancing along motes of dust in the air before cascading down onto the carpeted floor. He stared dully at the small, comfortable-looking room, and he wondered if maybe he had been just dreaming all of his long adventure. This wasn't his room, but it could be any of a dozen in Gordby.

But then he rustled about in an attempt to sit up, and he found his injuries flaring up in protest. Not a dream, then. He stayed put.

"Frolli!" Mynt called out. His eyes found the source of her voice, and there, draped across a hammock hung in the corner, she was. Alive, well, and unharmed. She was smiling. "Oh, Frolli, we'd thought we lost you for good! You gave us all quite a fright; it's a wonder you're alive!" Mynt erupted from her seat and bounded over, falling into the bedding and squeezing and hugging her older brother. "Frolli, I'm so sorry for every mean thing I ever said! I thought I'd never see you again; oh, I'm so glad you're alright!"

"Ouch!" he cried. "Mynt, that hurts!"

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"Oh!" she replied, unaware. "I'm sorry! Forgive me, Frolli; it's only that I'm so happy to see you again! I'd all but buried you..."

"Buried me?" he asked, incredulous. "Well, thanks for mourning; it's only been a couple days you know."

She sat up and regarded him hesitantly. "Frolli, it's been five days since you got dragged away by that waterfall."

"Five!" he scoffed. "Five whole days it's been; are you joking?"

"If only I could joke about it, Frolli..." she sighed. "And I wanted to go back for you – we all did – but there was nothing for it. We had to get back to Earbiter Grove, and by the time we did there wasn't a moment or a body to spare to go looking for you. It's only luck that we ended up here to find you like we did."

"Tch," Frolli grumbled. "I'd rather not talk about luck, if you'd please. Derli and I haven't been favored kindly by – oh, how ever I could have forgot! Derli, what about Derli? Is he alright?"

"Derli's fine," Mynt consoled, quickly putting a placating hand on his shoulder when he would try to get out of the nest to spring to his friend's side. "Or fine as he can be, anyhow. They're not sure how well his leg'll do, but at any rate he'll recover just fine, and in short order too. But that does bring me to ask..." she drifted off, not quite sure how to phrase her next query. "What about Rikka? He wasn't with you two when they found you. Did something... happen?"

Frolli could not respond. He instinctively curled up defensively into the bedding. He began to brux involuntarily. He bit his lip. Quietly he said at last, "He didn't make it."

"Oh..." Mynt said. "Well... I'm sorry, Frolli. But don't you worry about that. I'm sure it wasn't your fault,

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and we're all glad and thankful you and Derli made it out okay."

Frolli couldn't meet her eyes. He let his sister lie to him, let her tell him it hadn't been his fault. He cast his head down in shame. There was a lingering silence that felt as though she wanted to ask more but couldn't bring herself to try, and in the stillness he wanted to tell her about how he felt but was too afraid to make the attempt.

Eventually a figure ambled into the doorway and stood at the edge of the room. It was Captain Frybitter. "Well, well, Frolli..." he said in order to announce his presence. "I had entertained the slight and distant hope that we might find you here, or that we might at least find some evidence of your passage, but I am still rather surprised, to say the least, that we actually did."

Frolli sat up and this time ignored the stiffness and ache in his body when he did. "Yes, I was wondering about that: how is it you have all come to be here? And how ever could you have predicted that we would come out of the mines where we did? What happened after we went over the waterfall?"

"All perfectly relevant and reasonable questions, if I do say so myself," said Sorvirret, "though all of them better answered over a hot meal, would you not agree? Come; you must be famished."

Frolli's ails and injuries lay forgotten at the mention of food: he burst from the bundle in a mad dash and nearly knocked the captain over as he scrambled to attention. He was led into the dining area of the little home, where in short order a fine meal of stewed peas, steaming and moist, was placed before him, laid alongside a tray of various seeds and a full cup of nose-seducing soup. Frolli could barely contain himself as the dishes were placed before him by his host, the house's matron. She was an elderly Rottan who floated through

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her kitchen with a verve and vivacity that belied her wrinkled hands and greying fur. He expected his surrogate mother figure Lerra Venn might one day transform into a kindly old lady such as this.

Frolli paused before eating, glancing about expectantly for the others to join him. "Oh, this is all for you, fella," his server cooed. "Eat up, eat up! For your strength."

Frolli smiled and remembered to thank her only after he'd shoved a handful into his mouth, which then seemed appropriate considering how immediately delicious the food was. Perhaps it was his hunger leaving his tastebuds biased but the spread was probably one of the best-tasting meals he'd ever enjoyed.

"Oh, what about Derli?" he asked as he chewed, his cheek swollen with food.

"He is resting yet," the Rottan said. "There'll be plenty for him when he wakes."

"And if I know Derli," Mynt added, "the lure of food will draw him from his nap quickly enough."

Sorvirret sat down at the table and seemed to be allowing Frolli to eat at least some of his fill before answering his earlier questions, but Frolli impatiently piped up, "So, what's going on? How did you find us? And what is this place?"

Sorvirret nodded, understanding. "This is Domstraff, if I might answer your last query first. Have you heard of it?"

Frolli thought about that, visualizing the map of Verden in his mind. "Umm, not really. It's in the Western Reaches, right?" The village lay on the western edge of Verden, overlooking an archipelago of uninhabited floating rock suspended just on the surface of the stohv, and by measure it had to be several days' walk from Stufford. But besides that Frolli knew little.

"That is correct. A long way from where we lost you, and longer still from Earbiter Grove. Domstraff is a

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port town, if you will, not unlike that outpost we left behind outside Esterline Number Five. Did you see the cliff, when you reached the surface?" Frolli nodded: the village had been erected right up to the edge, not unlike Stufford on Risktail Ravine, although in this case there wasn't another landmass on the other side. "Luftskips skirt the shore as they trawl their trade routes, and here, as on the east coast, they anchor, for traffic flowing in and out of Jordisk."

"So here is the western entry point for the underground, then?" Frolli asked.

"Indeed. But the main line is not the only way belowground, and once we reached Earbiter Grove we procured maps detailing the system into which you were lost. The tunnels of that network are all self-contained except at two points: the waterfall, and, as it so happened, the exit you found on your own. We calculated that it would be only a matter of time before you emerged. If, of course, you had survived your fall. And if you had any remaining supplies to last you the journey to the surface. Oh, and if you had not sustained any injury that might make so doing impossible."

"That's a lot of 'ifs,' " said Frolli.

"But I never doubted it, not for a second," Mynt put in. "I knew you were still alive."

"It is true," Frybitter nodded. "She was quite adamant."

"And the *Lysvhal*, and Miss Uredd, and the others? How did they find you?"

Mynt explained, "Once we knew where it was we ought to be going, we sent word with a courier to go find Madig and have her meet us back on the surface. Then we came straight here. We would have even gone in to find you, only we just arrived last night and there weren't folks to spare."

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Incredulously Frolli questioned, "My, but the odds of a courier finding a single luftskip must have been greater than your finding me and Derli!"

"Not nearly as great as you might expect," Sorvirret said, shaking his head. "You see, there is a vast network comprising the Rider's Guild, and among that rank the locations and headings of skips are circulated. This is closely guarded information, so that an outsider would indeed have a very difficult time finding a crew, but among the Guild it is a simple matter to send word to a specific skip. A courier carries a message to his handful of contacts, which they carry to theirs, and they to theirs, until ports at all stations along the network have the word in holding, and in no time at all the missive arrives at its destination no matter where that may be."

"I see. And what of Avskander and the Kakkerlak? What's become of them, and of Earbiter Grove?"

Sorvirret sat back, sighing. "Well, sadly, the news of your survival is less joyous than it might be thanks to the current circumstances. They marched on Earbiter Grove, arriving only shortly after we did. In fact, I had only just dispatched the aforementioned courier when the alarms sounded."

He did not continue; instead he looked aside, as though recalling events he would rather not, lamenting something truly dismal. Into this lull Mynt burst out, "Oh, Frolli, it was awful... Nobody was prepared. We tried, we really tried, but they came so fast... It was like Terminus Thirteen, only ten times worse. A hundred times..."

"It was a massacre," Frybitter said grimly. "Plain and simple."

The captain explained the sacking of Earbiter Grove in detail. If Frolli had not already finished his food by then he would not have been able to continue,

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and now he saw why Sorvirret had been trying to get him to eat first.

He explained how the invading forces had decimated the meager defenses the Rider's Guild had managed to put into place. How the panic spread and got so many Rottan killed as they fled, unaware, from beings which their minds could not comprehend as real. How a counter-offensive had sprung up from the remnants of the Uprising and then been beaten down in less than a day.

The captain and the others had allied with Solv Tungen and along with the rallied members of the Rider's Guild skirmished against the Kakkerlak in the very streets of Earbiter Grove, but by then it was far too late to change the tide. Realizing they were fighting a losing battle they fled, escaping only barely with their lives.

"Say what you want about it, "Mynt said, "but it was luck and nothing but that got us out, and luck again that the *Lysval* was waiting where we needed her."

"But all those Rottan in the city..." Frolli protested. "You just left them there?"

"What choice had we?" Frybitter asked. "By then the loss of Earbiter Grove was a foregone conclusion; better to regroup on the surface, where we might claim some advantage, however small."

"But they're not all dead," Mynt defended. "Plenty of folk got away, hid in the outlying tunnels and such, or barricaded themselves, or even made it topside."

"True enough," said Sorvirret. "Avskander needs to succeed in his attack first; systemic extermination of the populace can wait until he has the field under his control."

Frolli nodded dully, taking it all in. So many dead, and only a matter of time before the toll climbed

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and climbed. Eventually he asked, "So what should be our next move? Where do we go from here?"

The captain shook his head. "Oh, we are not going anywhere," he corrected. "Perhaps I have not been expressly clear, a transgression for which I do apologize, but Frolli: we did not come here to rescue you. Such an outcome was ancillary at best, and not likely enough to factor into our main agenda. We came to Domstraff to stand against Avskander's forces."

Frolli was perplexed; his brow knit in puzzlement and he said, "I beg your pardon? Didn't you say —"

"Do not misunderstand," Frybitter interrupted. "We did want to find you fine young fellows, of course. But the lives of one or two farmboys can hardly tip the scale so much as the outcome of the conflict itself. You see, once Avskander finishes securing Earbiter Grove he will send his army forth, onto the surface. The main tunnel lines leading out of Jordisk will most likely be his conduits for conveying his troops, which makes those exit points very, very important for us to guard."

Mynt followed with, "Only, they didn't know which way he'd go, so they had to split what forces they had and cover all the exits. So I voted for us to come here, to Domstraff, seeing as how we thought you'd be in the tunnels nearby. It made the best of sense."

"And there is further evidence," Sorvirret continued, "to suggest the Kakkerlak may take the western line to this exit, if they do not divide and attempt to invade the surface from all sides, which despite their impressive numbers would be a challenging undertaking for them, and difficult to coordinate."

"And what evidence is that?" Frolli queried.

"The taking of Stafford and other outlying steads," the captain replied, as though that explained it all. Seeing Frolli's blank expression he went on, "We



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learned from some scattered members of the Uprising that Avskander has been ready to march on the surface for quite some time, and his lieutenant, that bone-armored warrior, was pushing Enighetter into rallying. I believe that taking Stufford was his preemptive strike to secure a bridge across Risktail Ravine, and the other settlements being all located in the Western Reaches further lends to the conclusion that all along he meant to start in the west and march across the surface."

"But the Kakkerlak, they can climb walls; couldn't they have just gone down the ravine and come up the other side? Not even the stohv would bother them, like that one that got aboard the *Lysvhal*," Frolli countered.

Sorvirret nodded. "True, but Akarot's forces do not consist solely of Kakkerlak. He has many Rottan at his disposal, and his ground troops would require a safe crossing. Not to mention supplies; one cannot conduct a proper war without supply lines. They took Stufford early because they could not risk the bridge being destroyed in their attack."

"But Ferdig wasn't ready; he delayed, wanted to wait," Mynt lamented. "Bought the rest of us some time; why, if they had come up then we'd all be dead now. Never would have known what was happening. In a way, Ferdig saved all of Verden, at least for a little while. And he paid for that with his life..."

Frolli nodded quietly. "I see. So, do you really think we stand a chance, then? If all of those Kakkerlak come out of the tunnel, what hope do we have at repelling them, if the whole of Earbiter Grove fell so quickly?"

"Well," said Sorvirret, grinning, "I did mention that we can claim one or two advantages here, did I not?"

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One of the reasons Frolli did not readily recall anything special about Domstraff was because of its depiction on the maps he had seen. In most illustrations it lay on the rocky shore, overlooking the incalculable nothingness of Uglydour sweeping vast and crimson to the west. It was on the edge of Verden, not far from the edge of the map, with nothing remarkable to differentiate it from any other farming town. If the entrance to Jordisk was even noted, such an indication was scrawled off to the side, in the open fields nearby, an afterthought. The surface-dwelling cartographers had little incentive to accurately depict its precise location.

But unlike Esterline Number Five, the westernmost access point to the great underground was not a ways inland, buried at the foot of the mountains. It was there in the side of the cliff atop which the town sat, spilling out into the infinite sea of stohv.

There was a gantry built from reeds erected right onto the cliffside next to the village, cloth stretched taut over the superstructure to create platforms for standing on. Venturing to its very tip and looking straight down meant looking at the boiling, roiling mists of stohv below, and stretching out and away toward the horizon was more of the caustic stuff, interrupted only by the occasional uninhabited islet poking out like flotsam in a pond. A stairway arced back and forth down the vertical cliff face to the halfway point, where a giant, gaping hole was fixed in the side of the rock. This was the tunnel leading into Jordisk, and anybody wanting to enter or exit had to scale the rickety stair connected to the town of Domstraff.

"Long ago," explained Sengle Sporrelsten, "the reach of land west of here was just as much a part of Verden as what you're standing on now." He had met Frolli and Sorvirret outside the home and, after

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extending his condolences for Rikka's loss, had led the lad over to the cliffside to detail their plan. Mynt stayed warily behind. "But the echoes of the Unmaking still ring throughout time, on a scale much longer and more unimaginably huge than we could fathom. All that you see out there broke apart and fell into the stohv in a great landslide.

"Not that they didn't see it coming, mind. Like I said, on that scale, this would have taken seasons and seasons. And Rottan are stubborn, so they gathered up all the chain they could, drudged up from Mennesk salvage, and bolted the two slabs of rock together, the way you might stitch up a laceration. And for a time it worked: while most of the land broke apart and slipped away, one great chunk remained, tethered by dozens of massive chains strung between them."

Frolli peered out along the cliff. Indeed the evidence of the scholar's tale was plain, as all along the stone face there dangled broken chains of varying thicknesses but mostly equal length, each one mounted to the top of the wall via brackets and bolts sunk heavily into the ground. The whole of the cliff looked like it had been shorn off smoothly instead of eroded over time. "But it all went tumbling into the stohv eventually," the boy observed.

"That it did, sir," said Sporrelsten. "The proper entrance to Jordisk was located there, as well as a number of villages. All lost to the throes of time and a cataclysm ages past. Some geologists at the academy believe that Risktail Ravine may well mark the next fissure to cleave Verden in twain, and if a divide ever began to form in Sorslag I would certainly start to worry."

The tour continued, and the two adults led Frolli out on the gantry which thrust out into the open air. The *Lysval* was docked at the end of the longest bridge and hung tethered by its anchor cable. Domstraff had

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already been evacuated of all who'd wanted to flee, and now all that remained were the cobbled-together members of the resistance, ready to lay down their lives to defend the surface. A few score Rottan, not even a hundred in all, to fight against a single-minded army of thousands and more, and at each of the entrances to Jordisk the count was much the same, the few survivors not left protecting what could be protected in Earbiter Grove come up to regroup and take on Akarot Avskander anew. Even if the Kakkerlak did divide their forces among the tunnels leading to the surface, those odds were not exactly favorable. Whatever advantage Frybitter thought they held here Frolli should like to see.

"We knew already that the Kakkerlak are not immune to fire, of course," Sengle said, "and as it turns out they're not fans of bright light at all. Further, in the enclosed spaces of the city they proved nearly unbeatable, able to scurry through the smallest of openings and climb on walls and ceilings. But out in the open they lose some of their strength: they're still fast, strong, and agile, but they have nowhere to hide, and it is their natural instinct to seek shadow and cover. It is this that tilts the advantage toward us on the surface."

Sorvirret pointed at the ridge where Rottan were working, laying down materials at set intervals. "The verticality of the wall will not hinder the Kakkerlak. When they come, it will be en masse, and they will come scurrying over the cliff onto level ground with great force. The town will occupy them momentarily, but they will find it abandoned. As they sweep toward dummy targets in the field beyond, we will ignite flammable material all along the ridgeline, cutting them off from retreat. This flame will spread, encompassing the entire meadow from here to the foothills: a large enough area to contain nearly the entire force."

Sengle added, "According to my calculations they cannot arrive before dawn tomorrow, given their

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rate of travel from Terminus Thirteen to Earbiter Grove and accounting for time needed to regroup to marching position. They'll come up the dark of the cliff and spill into the full force of the morning's sunlight, blinding them, confusing them. Many of them will have never seen sunlight, you know, probably most of them even. If the timing is just right, they may even have all spread onto the field just as the sun's touch sweeps across the arena, and right as the fires are igniting. They'll never see it coming."

Frolli examined the breadth and scope of the plan admiringly, impressed by its forethought. Hard to believe that a ragtag bunch of fleeing Rottan had still concocted such an elaborate and clever strategy. Harder still to believe it would work. But the enthusiasm in their voices as they relayed it was if not inspiring at least infectious, and for the first time in days Frolli felt hope return.

But he did have some contention. "Why don't we just ignite the entire field? Burn them to ash all at once."

"Would that we could, but there's not enough material," Sengle sighed. "We've scrounged as far and as quickly as we could even for this, and stretched it thin as we dare just to form our trap."

Sorvirret nodded. "But that does not leave us without a killing blow. The *Lysvhal*, as you know, is a nimble vessel. She is not equipped for skip-to-skip combat; she does not need to be. But some in the rank of the Rider's Guild are, you see – gangers and raiders are a problem that we must all unfortunately face from time to time. We have sent word for three such luftskips, which we expect to arrive any time after nightfall. When they do, we will have a veritable bank of artillery waiting for the Kakkerlak. Longboomers and explosives will rake the inside of our trap until nothing is left. We shall stop this invasion before it even begins."

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Frolli tried to picture it but found that he couldn't. Of course he had never seen a battle before, he had until recently spent his whole life on a farm. He'd never been underground; he'd never been farther afield than what could be walked in a day. All he had for comparison were Skronemaker's stories or those told by travelers. He didn't rightly know what to imagine.

But the spark of hope in his breast was catching fire now, like the flatland around Domstraff soon would be. He looked at it all being prepared and felt something stirring alongside the hope, and that was pride. His people were going to fight back against this invasion. He didn't have to be afraid this time. They would be ready.

Frolli spent more time at rest, recuperating from his injuries and exhaustion while the Riders and resistance fighters worked to prepare their grand ambush in and around Domstraff. He spent the better part of the day trying to shake the rest of the blurriness from his eyes, a result of his and Derli's sudden emergence onto the surface after so long underground. Didn't have much luck.

He went to the other members of his party, mostly to see for himself that they were all alive and well: he still had trouble believing he had survived, and part of him wondered if all this was a dream. The last he had seen of Avskander's attack force it was an unstoppable machine, and now to see Rottan ready to turn the tide seemed somehow incorrect. Though some of their enthusiasm was genuine, from others it felt forced, as though the whole scheme smacked of desperation. He was glad, at least, to see that they were all there, except for Skrullet, who had refused to stand again under sky. Nobody could say if he was even still alive, but Frolli thought he probably might be.

He found himself explaining too many times about the passing of Rikka Fane, which left a lump formed in his throat that made it hard to speak. But

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oddly the person he sought out to ease his guilt was decidedly unlikely to do so; perhaps, he mused, he subconsciously sought punishment for his failings, and who better to judge him than Kavalrist Gammel?

When Frolli found him the old Rottan was sitting alone in the meadow outside town. The lush grass waved back and forth around him in a chilly afternoon breeze that he didn't seem to notice but which Frolli had to tighten his cloak against. Frolli poked his way hesitantly across the field toward Gammel and waited patiently a dozen paces away. Kavalrist's back was turned and he sat unmoving, lost perhaps in meditation.

Frolli was just about to turn away when Kavalrist's voice came floating back toward him. "What is it, lad?" His tone did not suggest agitation; he sounded entirely complacent, even fatherly.

Frolli had to think about that; he hadn't been rightly certain of his intent in seeking Gammel out, other than that he had so far reunited with all the others, at least briefly. For the first time it occurred to him that maybe visiting each of his comrades in turn was not only unnecessary but childish: they knew he was okay; he didn't need to check in.

Finally he decided on, "I just, umm... wanted to get away."

"Hm," said Gammel. "You ain't worried I'll drone on about how I told you so, or something like?"

"No..." Frolli replied, uncertain. "That is, Mynt's okay, so..."

"For now," he conceded, but Frolli could hear the sarcasm in it. "And anyway Rikka's not. What if I was to go about blaming you for his untimely demise?"

Frolli hesitated. "Are you?"

"Sounds like you're blaming yourself more'n enough that I don't have to pick up the slack. 'Sides, I ain't exactly a saint myself, and I hear folks have all had

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to watch friends and loved ones get taken from them the last couple days that a good solid 'I told you so' from a hypocrite like me is the last thing anybody needs at the moment." At this, Kavalrist turned around to face Frolli. "So no, I'm not gonna be so mean and crotchety as you might have expected. Have a seat, if you like, or at least come over here so I don't have to holler."

Frolli drew near and sat down, huddling into his robes for warmth. Neither of them spoke for a while. Frolli enjoyed the silence, though, and it seemed as though a bit of a weight lifted from him with Gammel's words. Not all of the weight, he noticed, and still he felt responsible, but somehow the knowledge that much had happened inevitably, far beyond his own control, put Frolli's mind at ease.

Curiosity getting the better of him Frolli eventually broke the silence by asking, "So, what were you up to on the surface while we were underground?"

Kavalrist eyed him sidelong. "Got my arm fixed," he mumbled, which he demonstrated by flexing the mechanical limb showily. "Still a bit unresponsive, though, and the thing keeps cutting out on me. Going to have to see about that."

"Oh," Frolli grunted noncommittally, not terribly interested in the excuses Gammel had sidestepped the question with. But he played along anyway. "Did you have whoever it was built it for you do the repairs?"

"No," Gammel sighed. "Haven't quite made it up that way. Just had some local tinkerer look at it. His skills left a little to be desired, but it's better than nothing."

"I see," said Frolli. He sighed; the effort at small-talk was grating on his nerves. "Anything else?"

"Just helped Uredd and the others rally their troops, is all," Kavalrist said slowly. It was obvious he was lying.



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Frolli huffed and said bluntly, "And what about that business you said you had to attend to? Get that taken care of?"

"I did you the courtesy of not going on the offensive, lad; you might do me the same."

"I'm serious; I want to know," Frolli said sternly. He found that on the eve of battle he didn't have patience for Gammel's secrets; there seemed bigger things to worry about.

"What business is it of yours, boy?" Kavalrist responded stonily, his tone this time laced with displeasure.

"We could all be dead tomorrow, you know, and anyway we're supposed to be on the same side. I just was curious; I thought you'd maybe be a little forthcoming for once," Frolli said sulkily, like a nestling denied a treat.

"Could we, now?" Kavalrist grinned as if impressed with the boldness of Frolli's prediction. Then he exhaled deeply. "Alright, then. I was doing a little research of my own, rooting out some old contacts and calling in a couple of favors. Trying to figure out what it was we were dealing with. I had a hunch and I wanted to see if it was right."

"Was it?"

"For the most part," Gammel shrugged.

Frolli sighed. "You're not going to tell me the truth, are you?"

"Not if I can help it, and seeing as how it's not relevant to you or your current situation I don't see a reason to. Believe me, lad, when I say you're better off if it remains irrelevant."

Frolli bruxed in reply, unable to come up with a proper quip, then got up and left.

Derli finally woke up that afternoon, and by the time Frolli had gone round to the others his comrade was finished eating and rested now inside the little

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house where the two of them had been interred. Their gracious host had fixed up his leg, mounting him with a brace that allowed him to walk, if with an awkwardly-gaited limp and an equally awkward grimace.

"How are you feeling?" Frolli asked.

"Oh, not bad, all things considered. And on the other hand, pretty awful. Apparently I might not walk right ever again, though not that it matters, since everybody's pretty intent on hanging about here for some suicidal attempt at stopping the Kakkerlak in their tracks."

Frolli rankled slightly. He hadn't expected gratitude, precisely, though in his head he had envisioned an exchange of platitudes leaning more toward discussing how they'd saved one another's lives. Frolli had at least intended to thank Derli, if anything, for he wouldn't be alive without him. Defensively he said, "Well, now, I think it's a pretty solid plan, all told..."

"Oh, please!" Derli snapped. It caught Frolli off guard. "Frolli, you're a farmboy. So am I. What would you know about military tactics of all things?"

Frolli's brow knitted. "I don't suppose I have formal credentials or anything, but who would? It's not as if there's been a war anybody alive today'd remember, and I don't exactly think they could afford to look for somebody with the proper work experience 'fore they got started, either."

"Ugh, that's not even my point, Frolli. Look around! What in the world are we still *doing* here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Frolli! Why aren't we headed home, away from all this mess? Those Kakkerlak are coming, and I can't figure why anybody'd want to be around for when they get here."

"As if we could even outrun them!" Frolli argued.

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"Listen: if these fools' plan is sound, and I'm not saying it is, then they don't need us. That's all I'm trying to say." Derli sat and huffed, agitated.

"Derli, what's got into you?" said Frolli.

"What's got into me?" Derli asked, glaring. "Rikka Fane is dead, Frolli, in case you forgot. And so are a bunch of others. The last contact we had with home was in some letters we sent from the academy, and who even knows if they ever got there? I'm hurt, you're hurt. I want to see my folks again. I want to be home. *Home*, don't you see?"

"I haven't forgot, for your information," Frolli said, offended, "but we're in this together. You said yourself, when we were leaving Laerd, that we couldn't go back. We've got to see this through to the end."

"Oh, chew what I said," Derli spat disdainfully. "A thing or two's changed since then, you know."

"What's changed? Just 'cause Rikka's dead doesn't mean you have to replace him!" Frolli snapped, then immediately regretted it.

Derli gasped, bruxing. "What's changed, Frolli Helter, is that you and me've become murderers."

"Derli, is that what this is about? That was self-defense; we did what we had to in order to survive."

"Self-defense, murder: call it whatever you will; I just know that if we stick around we're liable to have to do it again. I know I don't want to do that, and I thought you wouldn't either, but maybe I was wrong," Derli cried.

Frolli was silenced at that. He stood in place, not knowing at all what to say. Eventually he cast his eyes down, but that didn't seem enough, and so he left the room.

Frolli wasn't sure what he had expected upon waking. Part of him, he supposed, thought they'd be met as heroes, that their miraculous survival would somehow be the subject of song. He certainly hadn't

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expected this kind of response. But that was just all the romance of the stories getting to him, he now knew.

Maybe Derli was right. Maybe the two of them were inherently different. Maybe they always had been, and only now in the extremity of their plight could those differences be seen. Frolli felt something straining between them, the way his muscles had back in the underground. He wondered if these injuries could be as easily repaired. He hoped so.

He milled about the abandoned, ghostly town of Domstraff for the rest of the day. Tension filled the air as the Rottan all geared up for their fight. Frolli ate and tried to nap but proper sleep didn't come; he was too wired, like the night before a festival. He offered to help out here and there but everybody encouraged him to rest, which only made him feel more useless and unwelcome than he already had.

Eventually he went out to the gantry and sat to wait for sunset. Evening would bring the other luftskips, he knew, and reinforcements, and then they would be ready to defend their home, to defend Verden, against the true enemy. But as he sat instead of the earlier hope he only felt a cold chill come on as night approached.

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The luftskips never made it.

Once dusk fell and the last of the sun's light slipped away over the horizon, the Kakkerlak came instead, as though they'd been waiting at the ready all day.

They poured out of the entrance to Jordisk without warning and ascended the cliff with ease. An advance watch of brave Riders had been posted inside the tunnel to warn of their coming but they must have

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been overwhelmed; the Kakkerlak streamed by the hundreds into Domstraff before even a single alarm could be raised.

Left and right they began their relentless attack, cutting off barely-voiced screams that died in the throats of those who made them. They streaked like living shadows between houses and carried unwary Rottan off only to be dismembered and ripped to shreds streets away, the corpses discarded on the ground.

Frolli was helping himself to some snacks in the storage room of the recovery house, located on the second floor, when he heard them flooding the town. He leapt to the window, almost unable to believe his ears as the sound filled the tiny room: the horrifying scuttling noise of the insectoid, chitinous plating rubbing together as the Kakkerlak moved.

He thought at first he must be dreaming, having dozed off somewhere. He stood at the window and watched the dark silhouettes dart through the dim, just-lit streetlamps and realized that he was shivering. Just like in Terminus Thirteen, the attack was frighteningly fast and evinced a staggering level of coordination. However Avskander controlled the Kakkerlak was yet a mystery and all the more ominous, considering the brilliant power such an undertaking must have required.

Frolli watched helplessly from the window as they stormed the village. What in the world was he to do? He couldn't go downstairs, either to fight or to flee; he would never stand a chance. The grand trap the resistance members had been laying was not yet ready, and even now dozens of still-unaware Rottan worked in the field outside town to prepare it, with no idea that their enemy raced silently toward them to cut them down preemptively.

In that moment Frolli felt the hope which had been blooming in his heart wither and die. There was no way now to carry out their optimistic plan, and from the

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looks of things there might not be a way to escape even with their lives. Frolli shrunk back in the window and slunk to the floor, only the top of his head peeking over the sill. He watched the Kakkerlak trample past, wave after wave, an unending, unyielding mass.

But then, as quickly as it had begun, it was done. The streets of Domstraff were clear, the dust settling, the only evidence of the Kakkerlak's passing a few ragged corpses and bloodstains strewn about. It could as well have been Stafford, Frolli realized. So this was what it must have been like. Only, those poor citizens had no idea what they were even seeing. Frolli shuddered at the thought.

Frolli listened intently at the window for signs of more Kakkerlak, expecting another flood to come boiling over the cliff which he could see at the edge of town, but the only sounds to be heard now were distant screams and boomerfire as the Rottan in the meadow were taken.

And then, a voice shattered the stillness around Domstraff, and Frolli flung himself to the floor in fear before he realized whose it was. It was his sister's. She was calling softly up to him. "Frolli, are you alright?"

He climbed back to the window and peeked out. She stood in the street below with Derli, who had his arm slung over her to keep his balance. They were peering into the windows of the house, not sure if it was safe to go inside. "I'm here!" he called quietly down.

"Oh, Frolli!" Mynt cried. "Thank goodness! We worried they'd got you. Come down here, quickly, 'fore any more show up!"

Frolli nodded, still shivering a little, and darted back to grab his cloak, which his kindly host had taken the time to mend where it had been shredded in places. The dull patches she'd used were starkly drab in comparison to the shiny, gaudy silk. Frolli wondered idly if she was still alive.

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He swung the mantle around his neck and fastened it quickly, moving toward the door. Dolkssverd was as ever at his side, his Kakkerlak buckler attached to the scabbard. He swung open the pantry door and stepped out onto the landing that overlooked the living space; a ramp descended to the left, and the bedrooms were sectioned off directly beneath him. He started to go down the ramp but then —

It turned, alerted by his movement. Its bulk occupied more than half of the open quarters below, and furniture was thrown about where it carelessly moved. Six-limbed, armor-plated. Feelers wavering grotesquely back and forth. Mouthparts quivering. One of the insects had gotten into the house, and here it now lingered. It reared up and Frolli stumbled backward, practically falling over himself.

Frolli scrambled back into the storeroom and slammed the door shut behind him. He lunged for a shelf and levered it over, the contents spilling loudly to the floor as the heavy fixture crashed down to block the door. Then, without waiting to see if his handiwork would hold, he vaulted out the window and dropped down to his companions below.

He hit the ground hard and staggered a little, still sore. Mynt and Derli jumped back in surprise. "We should move," warned Frolli quickly.

But looking around there was hardly anywhere to go. In the field beyond the edge of the village the Kakkerlak still laid the Rottan to waste. And every dark corner, every edifice, every nook, every cranny, might still house more of them, waiting to snatch any strays missed by the initial blitz.

"The skip," Derli grunted, pivoting on his injured leg. "The *Lysvhal*; she's anchored over there. We can get away maybe."

"Is anybody even aboard?" Mynt questioned.

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"Who knows?" Frolli replied, not exactly disagreeing with the idea.

"Who *cares*?" Derli grumbled.

In the frantic, hectic, fear-tinged indecision of the aftermath of the attack, that was all the thought they put into their goal. They started for the edge of town and the gantry that hung off the edge of the cliff. The skip was strung up from the loading dock; if they could just reach it, they might be able to reach safety.

If they weren't spotted by any stragglers in the village.

If the swollen, combat-ready army of Kakkerlak was not waiting on the cliff wall to intercept them when they set foot on the scaffold.

If anybody was left alive who could pilot the skip.

Frolli gulped hesitantly and then set off.

He readied his mind to defend himself and his friends at every turn, even though he was convinced if anything should attack them he was more likely to let out a startled squeak and dive for cover. He was so rattled that his stomach felt queasy and his hands were shaking.

But nothing came. They made their way down the street toward the dock frame at the cliff, and nothing came for them. They limped as quickly as they could, just the three of them, unable or unwilling to spare a moment to look for others, even though part of Frolli's mind wanted him to. He silenced it guiltily. All he could think of as they advanced was that main street in Stufford, and his very first encounter with what he now knew to be a Kakkerlak. It sent shivers down his spine.

Finally, after what seemed like hours but must have only been seconds, they reached the platform. Frolli peered over the edge, holding his breath. And nothing was there. The wall was clean, free of gravity-defying monsters from another era. Frolli was beginning



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to wonder if, large as it had seemed, this force was merely an advance unit, sent ahead at speed to devastate the resistance before the rest of the army arrived. If so, it had done its job remarkably well.

They took their first steps onto the scaffolding and followed it over the yawning abyss. Frolli instinctively took Mynt's hand to help with her fear of heights but perhaps it was the urgency of the situation or merely that she had grown more brave because unlike even earlier that day she marched along the gantry without hesitating.

The scaffold ahead of them angled to the right, following a series of turns and overlapping walkways to where a ramp descended down and met a lower platform. Here the twisting stair that led all the way down to the tunnel was connected, and extending out in the opposite direction, away from the cliff, was the single dock to which the *Lysval* was anchored. The three of them were going to have to follow the narrow gantry out to the mooring line, then climb it up to the skip's loading bay: not easy tasks, given Derli's leg and Mynt's aversion to heights, but there was no choice other.

Frolli peered down through the network of rigging to where the entryway was etched into the cliffside. No light emanated from within, but that didn't mean they were safe: neither Rottan nor Kakkerlak required much light to see by, and the moon hanging low off the horizon offered plenty anyway.

Frolli led his sister and friend to the ramp and started to descend, but Derli slipped, a squeak of pain bursting from him. Frolli whirled to grab him and shifted the boy's weight over and off of Mynt, which occupied him enough that as they went down he did not see the figure moving on the scaffolding above them.

The trio limped along in tandem, heading for the dock that might lead them to safety. But then, a

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shape fell onto the platform ahead of them. The figure landed in a crouch, moonlight reflecting brightly off its white-clad form. It stood.

Black-furred Rottan wearing plated armor of bone, laconically wielding a spear in the one hand, her other loosely gripping the hilt of a massive, saw-edged sword on her back. She stood erect. Her helmet was shrugged off, hanging from her back, and her eyes were dark and vibrant. Avskander's lieutenant.

"Hello there, children," she drawled. "Going somewhere?"

Frolli and the others froze in place. His free hand went to Dolksverd purely on instinct, but he had no idea what he thought he was going to do with it when he drew it. If he even could unsheathe the thing before she ran him through. In her gaze he sensed murderous intent.

"Well," she continued, "isn't this a surprise? You lot ran off before, if I'm not mistaken. I think I'll rectify that."

"I think not," came a voice from above.

Frolli looked up and saw as a second figure bounded over the rail of the scaffold above and landed between the children and the terrifying warrior before them. She looked him over, genuine surprise washing over her face, and said, "Kavalrist Gammel... Why ain't I surprised to see you here? You're siding with the downtrodden masses, eh?"

Kavalrist stood and mirrored her pose. His scarf wavered in the breeze, the light reflecting off the metal of his robotic arm similarly to how it shined on her ivory armor. "Nadelas," he said curtly. "It's been awhile."

"It has. Not long enough, either," she responded venomously.

"Now that hurts, lass."

"I sincerely doubt that," she chortled.

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Derli interrupted foolishly, "Wait, Kavalrist, you two know eachother?"

Mynt hushed him with, "Of course they do; didn't you hear what they said?" And in addition to that Frolli realized then why he had sensed some familiarity in her voice in Terminus Thirteen: she and Kavalrist shared the same accent. They must have been from the same place, which would explain their acquaintance.

Kavalrist, without moving, turned his head just enough to glare at the children behind him. "Fly, you fools; I'm trying to save your lives!"

" 'Trying' is right, kids," Nadelas called to them. Her acknowledgement would have pinned them in place had any of them been able to move. "Kavalrist here is always there to *try*, but it's just never quite enough. Is it? Mighty convenient, that."

"Put it to rest, Nadelas. I'll not let you have 'em."

"Oh, and I see you're playing the hero once more? How's it working out this time 'round?"

"They're no part of this, girl," the old Rottan said, his tone gathering force. "Leave them out of your personal vendetta," he commanded.

She continued to address the children directly, heedless of his warnings. "I wager he told you about his spear, didn't he? The Lion's Whisker. So proud of it, he was."

"Stop it," Kavalrist cut in, his voice knife-edged and cold.

Nadelas saw the exposed nerve and grinned with satisfaction. Made sure he saw it. "But what about the sword? That had a name he wasn't as fond of." She looked into his eyes. "Folkslayer," she sneered. It was an accusation. Kavalrist seethed visibly, his fur standing on end. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, his stance tightened, ready to fight. "Earned every letter of that name. Didn't you, Kavalrist?" she goaded.

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"What do you think you'll accomplish here?"

She shrugged. "Killing you would be a goal."

"Well, you can't," Kavalrist huffed. "You tried. It didn't work then, and it won't work now."

"Oh, I've got time," she mocked, "and I think you do, too. I'm happy to try again." With that she drew her weapon, and it was every bit the warblade that Kavalrist's was. She held it to the side, single-handed; its rend was sharpened to a polish and caught the light perfectly.

"Stay back, lass," Kavalrist warned, shifting into a battle stance. He did not draw his sword, but his mechanical arm hovered adroitly over its hilt. If he wanted to he looked like he could free the blade and cut her in half with a single motion. "You're not getting through here. I'll not allow it."

"What's this?" Nadelas scoffed. "You'll not allow it? After all this time, you still think I'd kneel to your will? How *dare* you, Kavalrist Gammel," she spat derisively.

"Nadelas, I am telling you, stand down," Kavalrist commanded with a severity that chilled the blood. If it had been said to him Frolli knew then and there he would have obeyed. "You won't succeed, you know," he added, his voice brimming with what at first might have been contempt but then Frolli thought it sounded more like sadness.

"No!" she barked, drawing her bone-carved sword up to the ready. "You do *not* tell me what to do!"

"It's pointless," Kavalrist sighed. Slowly he drew his beastly blade, his Folkslayer, and hefted it with ease. "I taught you everything you know," he warned.

"Then you won't win either," she growled.

"Aye, that'd be true," he nodded, "if not for the fact that, while I taught you everything *you* know, I didn't teach you everything *I* know."

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Metal met bone as the two warriors came together.

Their swords rang with a furious clang, powerful enough to rattle the reed-framed scaffolding, sharp enough to send a shiver down Frolli's spine. Unlike Kavalrist's exchange with the honor guard from the Communitral, however, this clash was between combatants on much more equal footing. They broke and swung once more, and their swords sung again in reply as each fighter blocked the other's attack. Back and forth they traded a series of blows that were no less fast for the weight they were wielding, like bolts of lightning striking over and again, and the thunder of their blades echoing afterward into the night.

Frolli stood mesmerized by the duel for a moment before the presence of mind swelled enough for him to say, "Come on!" and he grabbed at Derli and Mynt, hauling them away from the fray. They turned tail and scarpered across the platform, winding their way around and back up the ramp.

They crossed over to the other side and below them the conflict raged. Frolli saw through the framework as Kavalrist and Nadelas fought it out, their monumentally powerful attacks sending vibrations through the gantry with every blow. The two ducked and dodged one another expertly, less like a swordfight and more like a dance, as though they'd been doing it for ages. The younger Rottan would offer a wide, heavy-handed swing under which the older would fluidly slip before following up with an inverted counterpoint, the rising length of his blade arcing upward as he spun away, only to meet the flat of her blocking rend in reply. Each flurry of attack and counterattack was followed by a separation as they leapt apart, reestablished their footing, and then pounced again.

Their dance carried them across the platforms with a frightening grace: they leapt over openings that if

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missed would send them tumbling all the way down to the storming stohv below, trading thrusts and ripostes in midair. When rails or struts separated them they fought heedlessly, too focused on one another to see the obstructions but expertly avoiding them still. The leapt from position to position as though they were players on a stage, their every move carefully calculated and choreographed.

The children descended the opposite ramp and came down to the lower structure with a clear shot at the extended dock. Frolli moved quickly as he was able with the others in tow, the thought flashing briefly in his mind that if Kavalrist had still been in town then the *Lysvhal's* crew might be, too. And that got him thinking that if the whole ship was abandoned it could just as easily be infested with Kakkerlak scouring it for prey, or with enemy Rottan looking to claim it as a prize. He tried to push those ominous possibilities aside, though, and kept going.

They took the now unobstructed path toward the narrow gantry, and over his shoulder Frolli cast a glance backward to see Kavalrist and Nadelas still engaged in bitter combat, not a whisker of ground lost or gained either way. They could have fought to a standstill at this rate, although so far neither of them showed any signs of tiring.

Frolli led the way up the dock, which was too small to walk abreast on, with Mynt in tow and Derli hobbling along behind using the railings for support. Up ahead the *Lysvhal* hovered in the sky, the moon just over her bow, her runninglights like a beacon in the calamity of the night.

They sprinted to the end of the walkway and reached the grappling line. Under normal circumstances it wouldn't be a terribly difficult climb, but these weren't normal circumstances, and what Frolli didn't find

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difficult Mynt and Derli probably would. He turned to them and said, "You ready for this?"

They both looked at him with twin uncertainty on their faces.

"Forget it," he huffed, flustered. "No time." He grabbed Mynt's arm and flung her over his back. She protested but the sounds squeaked short as her voice caught in her throat at the sight of the vast expanse of nothingness that lay far below them. Frolli climbed onto the cable and started scaling it hand-over-hand; he felt Derli follow after him.

Mynt was yet small, and between Frolli's youthful stamina and his pounding adrenaline she made a light package. Even so he could feel his muscles straining, neither fully healed nor properly rested from the previous days' trials, but he couldn't dwell on it: he must keep moving, he must make it to the skip. Behind him Frolli saw that Derli could still climb despite only using three limbs, even if he was slower at it, and in the worst case he could hook his braced leg over the line and dangle there indefinitely.

Frolli kept his eyes, and his mind, canted upward. He shuffled up the anchor cable as quickly as he could, watching as the *Lysvhal* drew nearer with every new handhold. The cargo hold's bay door was not open for them to escape into, but that was no matter: Frolli pushed on toward the cable housing mounted on the outside of the skip.

Soon, he had reached it.

He levered himself off the cable and grabbed the lip of metal on the vessel's hull above where the anchor normally mounted when hauled. After that it was just a short vertical climb until the deck railing was in his hand; with a grunting breath Frolli heaved himself over the balustrade and onto the wide deck of the luftskip. He lay sprawled and panting for a moment as Mynt dislodged herself. Then together they reached over and

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extended their hands for Derli as he climbed aboard. The three nearly collapsed right there; there was some measure of finality in standing on deck. But their escape would not yet be over with.

Frolli peered about but the *Lysvhal* seemed quiet. Nobody was around. "Come on," he breathed, jogging over toward the bridge. Its lights were dim and it appeared empty.

Inside they found that it was indeed abandoned. The navigational components were powered-up and functional but nobody was there, and of the crew there had been no sign. Frolli wasn't sure what to do. He examined the console and uneasily slipped into the pilot's seat.

"No," Mynt said simply. "No, no, Frolli, no. You can *not* fly this thing."

"You don't know!" Frolli keened defensively. "I don't know what else we're supposed to do without the others; if you've got a better idea I'm all ears."

Suddenly the door in the back of the cabin swung open and into the gloom stepped another of Akarot's elite: one of the bone-clad soldiers directly in Nadelas's command. "What have we got here, then?" he chuckled, his grin seeming twisted and wretched beneath the skull-faced helmet. Frolli's guts twisted up inside: there was no room to fight here, and even if there was he doubted he could have taken the warrior.

"The trouble with armor, I have always said," came a familiar voice from behind the Rottan, and then the fellow's eyes went glassy and mouth fell slack as a sword pierced through an opening in his ivory plating; slick with blood it retracted and he fell flat on the floor, leaving a thoughtful-looking Captain Frybitter standing in the doorway, who continued, "is that in order for the wearer to maintain mobility it must have gaps. Better to eschew the bulk and the weight altogether and simply avoid getting hit in the first place." Then, looking at the



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children as though for the first time realizing they were even there he said, "Greetings. Glad to see you are all still alive. Oh, Frolli, perhaps you had better let me sit there."

Sorvirret slipped into the seat. Behind him Madig Uredd stepped onto the bridge. "What were you lot doing?" Derli asked grumpily, surely in a great hurry to quit this doomed place now that they were on the skip.

"Taking care of some stowaways," Frybitter said as he made ready to depart.

"Was that the last of them?" his first mate questioned as she stepped over the body.

"It had better be," the captain said grimly.

Below them the *Lysvhal's* inner workings thrummed to life, and Frolli felt instantly more at home, and far safer to boot. The luftskip began to move, and they felt the grapple unfasten and crank back into place.

As the ship began to move Frolli thought of the other Riders and resistance members trapped in the town or otherwise left behind. They couldn't have been the only survivors; there had to be more. "Is everybody okay?" he asked worriedly. "Who made it back to the skip?"

"Everybody is aboard," Uredd replied coolly, but Frolli knew she could only have been counting among that number her own crew. Even if some lucky Rottan were safely on the skip her tone made it plainly evident that no more would be joining. The risk was too great, and there simply was not time to wait any longer.

"Not Kavalrist!" Mynt hollered. "What about him? He's down there still on the platform!"

"Then let us go and fetch him," Sorvirret said, and with that he started to bring the *Lysvhal* down, listing so that the deck could line up with the extended gantry.

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Frolli ran out onto the deck and leaned over the rail, watching as the scaffold came into view. The two warriors were still locked in their seemingly timeless battle; now they had moved out onto the lone walkway and were clashing violently, with nowhere else to go but at each other.

The luftskip's floodlights flared over them, drowning their battle in incandescence. "Kavalrist!" Frolli cried. "Kavalrist, come on!"

The old Rottan was the closer of the two; getting aboard would require only a quick dash and a vault that would be tame compared to his earlier acrobatics. He should have no problem.

Nadelas leapt back, separating from her opponent, and watched as the *Lysval* lowered. She eyed it longingly, like she wanted nothing more than to leap aboard and tear it apart with her bare hands. And Frolli was convinced she could do it, too.

Kavalrist stepped in her way, drawing close and bringing his sword to bear. In her fleeting moment of distraction he seized the opening and slashed; she still dodged, but she wasn't on her full guard, and he followed it with a free-handed grapple that she clearly didn't know how to escape from. He really hadn't shown her all his moves, after all.

Even over the sound of the engines and the creaking of the luftskip Frolli heard Kavalrist roar, "You'll not get past me, girl!" They struggled against one another, seemingly matched for strength. "Do you hear me?" he grunted madly. "*You'll not get past!*"

"Perhaps not," she shouted back, her eyes boring into his, "but I'll not go back into the stohv, either!"

And then she rolled backward, flipping up and over the railing of the gantry. The force Kavalrist had been applying took him after her, and she kicked against him as she went. He went flying over her, losing his

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hold on her. Her arm shot out and caught the platform but he was too far to grab hold of anything. He tumbled end over end and plummeted down and down and down, disappearing into the dark, murky maelstrom below.

Frolli screamed his name, feeling his limbs turn to rubber as he watched. In his mind the last images of Rikka Fane slipping below the surface of the water in that dark cave flashed, and a heavy lump wrestled once more into his throat.

Nadelas hoisted herself back onto the gantry and casually sauntered toward the *Lysvhal*. The skip pitched slowly back, well out of reach. Her eyes met Frolli's, and she grinned, watching the vessel pull away.

Behind her, as if on some unspoken and unseen command, the Kakkerlak swarmed out of Domstraff and onto the scaffolding.

As the *Lysvhal* banked away from the cliff and nosed toward the empty horizon, Madig, who had joined the children on deck, turned back to the bridge and announced, "We're clear."

Frolli watched Nadelas's pleased expression until it was too small to make out. He watched as the creatures scabbled over the platform and one another as if in apparent fury. He saw the black-furred, bone-clad Rottan raise her arm and then point toward the escaping *Lysvhal*.

Then the Kakkerlak began to chase it.

They leapt from the gantry entirely of their own power, and their arcs carried them high into the air. Then the carapaces on their backs unfolded, revealing wide, flat membranes that expanded outward. Wings. They glided quickly after the luftskip, gaining fast.

Madig turned, regarding this pursuit quizzically. "Or... not."

"They can fly!?" Derli squeaked.

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Uredd was stomping past, already shouldering Loudmouth, her massive handboomer. "All hands on deck!" she commanded authoritatively. " 'Ware boarders!"

Sorvirret relayed the order below, and Frolli followed after Madig to the stern, where the airborne Kakkerlak were drawing in. He drew Dolksverd and strapped the buckler to his forearm. Madig sighted down the cannon. "Time to see what you're made of," she shrugged. Frolli didn't know if she was talking to him or to the creature she was aiming at.

She fired.

The explosion of the weapon rang out into the mostly still night, the blast of smoke from its muzzle suspended in the air and trailing away in the skip's wake. The closest Kakkerlak took shot in the thin stretch of its wing and tumbled from the sky, but that sky was filled with more of them, a hundred at least, and they were all bearing down on the *Lysvhal* like a barrage of arrows.

The Kakkerlak descended on the skip in a cloud, a swarm, landing all over the stern and scratching for purchase with their bony claws. Wherever they touched down they began to scuttle all over the hull, darting this way and that. Still more of them peppered the aft deck, landing at the rail or beyond. Dozens of heavy thuds shook the *Lysvhal* even as she flew, the weight of so many Kakkerlak threatening to throw her off course.

A long, thin arm lunged up to the rail as one of the monsters hoisted itself up; Frolli, gripping his heirloom sword tightly, swung at it, trying to cut it away. The taloned hand let go and the bulk of the Kakkerlak slipped from view, but he knew it had five more claws with which to find a hold anywhere along the skip's exterior.

Madig had reloaded, and she brought Loudmouth quickly to her shoulder as one of the

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shadowy wretches, maybe even the same one Frolli had attacked, came scrambling over the rail. At point-blank range she fired, and the top half of its body splattered into giblets and white goo. It toppled overboard and plummeted away, its remaining arms still clawing at the sky as it fell.

Frolli watched as the mass of silhouettes trailing the luftskip followed the same arc down now toward the stohv, and he realized that they could not fly so much as glide; most of the buzzing cloud disappeared in the blood-tinted miasma below, falling well short of the *Lysval*. But even still that left too many to count still climbing all over the surface of the skip, and now some of them were on deck, streaking about with their spiny arms flailing.

Frolli whirled to face them and saw that the other crewmembers who could be spared had made it topside, along with a handful of Riders who had escaped the razing of Domstraff. Snik Skytter and Seg Bandie were there, the former with his boomers firing, the latter wielding a heavy-looking, sharp-edged wrench.

Bedlam befell the deck as Rottan and Kakkerlak fought. The insects leapt nimbly from opponent to opponent, slashing as they came down before jumping away to another part of the skip, sometimes clearing the whole length of the deck in a single bound. Some of their opponents dodged the attacks or suffered them lightly, but some were cut down in the vicious assault, their blood painting the deck in swathes.

The Kakkerlak's strength was in their chaotic method of attack: the way they jumped around or scrambled back and forth, with such terrifying speed, was overwhelming, but for all the pandemonium and seeming disorderliness there was form to it, control and communication in their movements that the Rottan simply could not follow. Added to that was their nigh-

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indestructibility: their natural armor plating allowed them to ignore even close-range boomer blasts, and even if one of the Riders got lucky enough to dismember a Kakkerlak it could still continue fighting without pause. Their every step was an attack, and at every angle were they lethal. There didn't seem to be a way to beat them; only their softer undersides were vulnerable, but even wounds there administered went mostly ignored.

Frolli found himself dodging blow after blow as the beasts lunged all over the deck, rising at one rail and cutting a bloody path across the skip's width before disappearing over the other side. He felt searing flashes where they raked him, but he ignored the pain and kept fighting. When one landed close he swung, remembering to go for the legs, and Dolsverd's sharp edge claimed its fair share of limbs. The deck was littered with bodyparts and splashes of white blood that did not seem to be missed. Frolli could barely keep up, and he felt himself tiring already. His heart pounded and fear gripped him; he knew that at any moment one of the dozens of attackers could impale him from behind or above or even directly in front, and he found himself turning about to watch for targets more than he was actually fighting them.

The *Lysvhal* pitched suddenly to one side, the whole deck canting to starboard. Frolli and the other Rottan were thrown sideways, and he stumbled nearly off his feet before Snik caught him. The Kakkerlak didn't seem to notice.

Frolli glanced around; Bandie was missing, and some of the others as well. Madig had made her way to the bow and was hailing projectiles down on the creatures as they skittered across the deck. Boomerfire and screams filled the air. The skip lurched wildly one way, then the other. Frolli looked to the bridge, fearing the worst: that somehow the Kakkerlak had gotten inside. But its hatches were closed fast, and he could see

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Derli and Sorvirret; the captain was fighting the controls to keep the *Lysval* in the air. Frolli did not see his sister, though, and panic flooded his veins like ice-water.

Frolli whirled once more, his eyes casting about the deck. He found Madig again, who was fighting her way aft, mowing through the Kakkerlak with measured steps, reloading quickly and never missing. But then one of the creatures landed behind her and swiped, tearing a gash out of her back. She shrieked and fell forward, and her bandolier of dwindling ammunition, now severed, slipped off her chest and fell to the deck. It slid across the metal surface as the skip kept listing heavily; she recovered and scrambled after it, whirling to fire Loudmouth's already-chambered round at her attacker, but by then it was gone, having moved on.

Seg Bandie appeared from belowdecks, panting, and he shouted, "They're in the engine room!"

Through the speaking trumpet from the bridge Frolli heard Captain Frybitter reply, "They are in the *everything*!"

Skytter went storming past, chasing down an errant insect. Uredd, as well, dashed by, chasing after her remaining ammunition as it rolled along the deck. More of the creatures continued to storm over the skip.

Frolli spun around, searching desperately, trying to regain his footing, wondering what, if anything, he could even do. How could they defend against these creatures? They were just too fast, and there were too many...

And there, near the port rail, he spotted Mynt. She was bounding across the deck, after Madig's scattered rounds. "Mynt, what are you doing!?" he shouted. "Get back inside!" But she didn't listen. One of the rounds had wedged on a lamp on deck, and she was moving for it. Frolli watched as above her one of the Kakkerlak descended. "Mynt!" he screamed, but it was too late. It landed right in front of her, throwing her off

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balance. It lashed out with its forelegs and Frolli saw blood spatter the deck, red blood, glistening in the moonlight.

He charged forward. The Kakkerlak reared back for a killing blow but Frolli leapt between it and his sister, blocking with Dolksverd as its claws came lunging down. The jagged spines caught on his blade, and they struggled back and forth for a moment. Frolli wrestled valiantly but the Kakkerlak was much, much stronger: it flung him aside with all the effort of a temperamental nestling casting aside a toy. Frolli felt sharp stings of pain bolt through him, rattling his bones, but he quickly found his feet and brought Dolksverd up again. It might be hopeless, Frolli might be unable to kill even one of the beasts, but he was going to make that Kakkerlak prove it beyond doubt.

The creature followed after the farmboy, ignoring Mynt. He swung his sword low as it stampeded toward him, aiming right for a leg joint, hoping the meager lessons he'd learned during the battle thus far were legitimate and not mere happenstance. He cried out with glee as he felt it connect and give, the stabbing arm of the leg tearing free where he sliced. So, they had their weak points.

But pain wasn't one of those weak points, and the Kakkerlak spun on him, adapting immediately to its handicap and kicking furiously with two of its legs. Frolli saw it coming, ducked, and spun Dolksverd upward. The rend sliced through, drew blood, but no real damage was dealt. Frolli blocked the counterattack with his buckler, scrabbled for a better vantage as the creature whirled. He spun the sword in his hand. The monster towered over him, its mouthparts twitching hungrily, antennae wobbling. Then it lunged.

Frolli darted forward and thrust upward, burying Dolksverd's tip into the Kakkerlak's neck, right below its gnashing mouth. Its weight came down and



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the sword sliced through; it slid down farther, the width of the blade digging deep. Frolli saw it poke through the other side. The insect's mouth still wavered disturbingly. Frolli wrenched the sword sideways and he saw with a spray of thick, mucousy blood the head detach. It went flying to the side, and the Kakkerlak stumbled backward, for once reacting to its wounds.

Frolli cheered triumphantly and then pulled away from its flailing death throes, not waiting around to revel in his victory. He jaunted back to Mynt's side. Her fur was slick with blood but she was rising, not too hurt. "Mynt, what in the worl—" Frolli began, but her eyes were staring past him. He turned.

The Kakkerlak wasn't dead at all. It pivoted just as ably as ever, blinded by the loss of its head but otherwise unhindered. So apparently decapitation was not a weakness.

It rushed forward and Frolli had just enough time to shove his sister out of its path before it trampled them. He felt its spear-like limbs dig into his flesh; he squeaked in pain, and then it flung him aside. He rolled over and came up in a crouch, his muscles protesting. He could feel intense heat in his wounds, could feel blood leaking out and dousing his skin. He struggled back up and brought his buckler to bear just in time for the Kakkerlak to come crashing down on him, thrashing wildly. He blocked blow after blow but even wounded it was still faster, and it didn't need eyes to know it was hitting something. One of the blows was going to land.

Frolli pulled back, trying to gain ground. In his periphery he saw Mynt dive for the discarded boomer round, saw her pluck it free and throw it. Frolli spared a sidelong glance behind him; Madig was there, and she deftly caught the shell in midair. As she rammed it into Loudmouth's breech Frolli saw that it was colored red.

He dove for cover.

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The slug sparked out of its thrower with a high-pitched whine, then pierced the headless Kakkerlak with a wet, sickly sound. There was the briefest of moments as the explosive triggered, and the whole creature was then blown apart from within, its limbs and chunks of body flung all over the deck. The explosion was deafening, causing Frolli's ears to ring.

He sat up. The skirmish raged on, fierce as ever.

Suddenly, the *Lysvhal* shuddered and sputtered and seemed to stumble like she might drop out of the sky. There was the sound of groaning, warping metal, and an explosion rumbled from within the bowels of the skip. Beyond the stern a huge fireball erupted into the night sky, and the whole vessel pitched violently forward. Frolli was thrown across the deck, and this time even the rampaging Kakkerlak were sent flying.

The whine of the ruined engines pierced the night sky, and the *Lysvhal* shrieked and shook as though to tear herself apart. The Kakkerlak must have been the cause, damaging the luft ballasts or the engines somehow. Frolli caught on the forward rail and spun to see their heading, but it was no longer a heading: the skip was arcing down now, toward the sea of stohv. Rushing wind swept past his ears, drowning out the other sounds, the screams and the dying boomerfire, and even the crackling flames. Frolli felt light and sick and very small, positioned on the tip of the world as it was tearing apart.

He thought to brace for impact, but this was stohv: there was no impact, only the limitless void of death. Even still, his body tensed as he saw the undulating waves flying up to meet him.

The dying *Lysvhal* penetrated the caustic cloud and Frolli felt fine, stinging grit blast over his body and envelop the deck. Now there was certainly no sound, other than the fiery rush of howling fury whipping over

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the skip, taking it, taking him. Blackness fell upon them  
all like a shroud, and then there was only the maelstrom.