

LEGENDS OF VERDEN: THE SHATTERED REFLECTION

Chapter 29

Ringling the crater there were posts of metal, sunk into the rock every few taillengths and strung with stiff, rigid wire: a fence. But the fence was not very tall, and the wire would have been easy to climb; Seg Bandie noted this, saying, "Ha! Some perimeter they've got; who'd be stopped by that?"

"Try to climb it," Kavalrist warned, "and you'll feel the electricity that's running through it run through *you*." That was enough to shut Bandie down, and they all stayed on the path as they followed Gammel to the one and only gate.

The gatehouse consisted of two large spires on either side of the threshold with a doorway constructed similarly to the fence: a metal frame with wires crisscrossing in the center to form a plane. As they neared Frolli could hear the metal popping with the buzz of electrical current running through it, a sound he'd heard plenty in Jordisk and even aboard the *Lysvhal*. It was a sound that meant, "Stay away."

Kavalrist, however, approached incautiously, because of course he was not concerned with getting fried to a crisp, and he had been here before. But, Frolli worried, even if the Inderlings still afforded him status as a guest, would that extend to include the rest of his coterie? The lengths to which they went to ward off

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visitors was staggering; as though merely being up on the peak of Fellrik wasn't enough, now these electrified ramparts made clear the obvious point that the Inderlings were a rather exclusive bunch.

A cadre of guards poured out of the gatehouse on the other side of the fence. White-furred and red-eyed, they approached in well-rehearsed unison, each of them wearing identical armor sets comprised of white plates, the material made of, at least Frolli thought, plastic. He wondered at this: plastic surely could not withstand so much force as metal; who would make their armor out of it when there were stronger materials to be used?

The sentries stopped short of the gate and one of them commanded, in a strange, oddly flowing accent, "State your identity and your business."

"Kavalrist Gammel. I'm a friend of Inder, and a previous guest. Our business is dire, and best left for the Grand Reader."

There was an apparent ripple of confusion among the guards, as though they recognized the name but the Rottan standing before them couldn't possibly be its proper owner. *Welcome to the club*, thought Frolli.

"You need more proof?" Gammel asked tetchily. He unswaddled his stohv-eaten cloak and presented his mechanical arm, which the guards eyed interestedly. At least, Frolli thought they did: their red eyes made it hard to be sure of their gaze. Then Gammel sighed and raised the prosthetic hand; before the sentries could stop him he grasped with his claw the wired gate. Through gritted teeth he grunted, as the electricity coursed through him, "I ain't... got the time... to play around... but I'll... tear... this fence... down... if I... have to."

The guards plainly weren't sure what to do; this was outside the protocols they had so rigidly practiced and prepared for. But then there came a voice from behind them, and another white-furred Rottan of Inder

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came strolling up the path toward the gate. He wore layers of vestments made mostly of white, striped here and there in red and black, the fabric fine and padded for warmth. A long, split robe drifted behind him on either side of his tail, and gilded buckles and chains fringed the outfit at his sleeves and collars.

"Kavalrist Gammel, you are every bit as ornery and surly as my grandfather claimed," the Rottan announced, his accented words flowing from one to the next.

"Grand Reader," the guard who had spoken said, "we —"

"It's alright. They are welcome guests. You may let them in."

Kavalrist stood down and the sentries did as instructed. The whole group filed into the gated grounds, assembling before the Rottan referred to as the Grand Reader. He bowed deeply and said, "I am Grand Reader Skomseff, son of Garskom, son of Pavelgar."

"Grandson to Pavelgar?" Kavalrist laughed. "That long I've been away, eh?"

"It has been some time, yes. But I am glad you have finally come: I was beginning to doubt my ability to decipher the prophecies! We've been expecting you for a while now."

Gammel chuckled again. "Hmph. Well, I can't say I told the stars what I planned on being up to, but being's as this is your house I'll play along. I reckon you know why we've come."

"Well, to know something is quite a feat. Knowing requires absolute certainty. The prophecies are anything but absolute: room for interpretation, room for adjustment. Room for doubt. Let's just say I can confidently suppose why you are here: the harbinger is back."

"That he is."

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"I see," said the Grand Reader morosely. "Forgive my apparent disappointment, but... Well, I had actually hoped my ability to decipher the prophecies was slipping."

"Sorry to interrupt," Frolli interjected, "but how is it you knew – that is, *supposed* – we'd be coming? And how do you know anything of what's going on, all the way up here?"

Skomseff smiled. "I am sure you have as many questions as I have for you, but your queries remind me of my manners. Just inside the door is no place to hold a discussion, and far be it for me to withhold a meal from weary travelers. If you'll please follow me?"

He bowed once again and turned wordlessly away to lead them down into the temple proper. Kavalrist followed just as wordlessly, and so the rest of them did as well.

The Inderling temple was comprised of a series of edifices arranged throughout the crater on the peak of Fellrik, each of them beautifully crafted and set into the stone with precision and planning. Low, wide doorways permitted plenty of traffic, and the exteriors were lined with hand- and footholds in the form of equidistant pegs. The grounds were angled comfortably, the exposed stone smooth but roughly-textured, easy to walk on. The spaces between buildings and the main pathways all lined up evenly, symmetrically, clearly marked and organized in advance.

Frolli had expected the streets to be slippery with ice but they were not: the stone was comfortably warm, and indeed once inside the gate the whole temple area seemed much more temperate than just being tucked away out of the wind would have suggested. He knew better than to ask about their overarching goals, which would be discussed shortly, but he didn't see the harm in raising the question, "Why is it so warm here? Out there it's downright freezing."

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Grand Reader Skomseff offered a minimal glance back as he strode purposefully forward and explained, "We've coiled wire just beneath the stone that carries a constant electric current. It keeps us warm."

After hearing it Frolli could hardly believe it, even though he did feel warmth just below his feet. Looking around at all the well-lit buildings and streetlamps, and then at the charged fence, he realized the Inderlings must have had a monumental demand for electricity. "How many batteries does it take for all of this?" Frolli asked.

"We don't use batteries. We use solar energy," Skomseff explained, and he pointed out large, flat panels mounted at the high points of the fence, all angled skyward. Frolli could see cables connected to them that then disappeared in the ground below. Somehow the blue grids on their faces must have drawn power and converted it to electricity.

He had never heard of such a thing. He wanted to know more: was it simply heat from the sun they stored, or was it the light itself? The farmboy's familiarity with the generation of electricity was limited; most Rottan simply used Mennesk batteries, but if they did make electricity it was via cranks and waterwheels. He supposed that if energy from the sun could be turned into electricity, here would be the place to collect it: with no cloud cover to ever obscure the view, and the stars always out regardless, the solar panels would be very efficient.

But before he could ask more questions, Grand Reader Skomseff turned them down a wide lane with rows of large buildings on either side. It led down the length of the crater to its center, where all of the main roads met. This convergence did not merely consist of cleared-away stone; rather, the perfect circle was fitted with a lens-shaped saucer embedded in the ground and made entirely of metal. It was smooth and sleek and

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grey. From the far end a crane-like arm sprouted, angling over the dish's center and holding in midair some sort of contraption that Frolli did not recognize. A series of planks had been retrofitted to the derrick, obviously not of the same material, but they weren't tied; they seemed to have sprouted directly from the metal itself, fastened somehow in place.

The interior of the Inderling crater was full of activity, and as the Grand Reader led them by the squat, wide warehouses, Frolli saw why: the Rottan were hard at work preparing for battle. The depots were shops and smiths where laborers were constructing weapons and armor: handboomers, platemail, swords, axes, spears. In some they fabricated larger artillery, too, forming the husks of giant cannons. In many of the shops the hands were molding molten metal drawn directly from furnaces, which for Rottan was nearly unheard of. As far as Frolli knew, few Rottan possessed the tools and the means to reshape metal to their whims. They knew how, of course, but forges were uncommon, due to their necessary size and fuel consumption. Instead, folk tended to use malleable wire or screws and bolts to lash or mount already-made pieces of scrap together. Yet, here were a dozen forges operating smoothly. Much of their stock seemed freshly completed, as though they had been counting on the perfect timeliness of the group's arrival.

Kavalrist was speaking now to Skomseff as they walked, mentioning how the fellow's father had been only a nestling the last time he remembered, and complimenting him on his rise to leadership. Apparently the position of Grand Reader was the highest among all Inderling.

But Frolli paid little attention; his eyes were instead captured by the sights around him. Past the workshops were glass-paned structures full of vibrant plantlife: greenhouses, Frolli realized, for growing

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gardens where conditions were less hospitable. Beyond those, stands of circuitry, cables plugged in somewhere. Their purpose was unclear; circuit boards were exclusively Mennesk in design and origin, and Rottan had no idea what they were or how they worked. Anybody who had some simply presented the artifacts as art. But now, Frolli was beginning to wonder if his perceptions were inaccurate. Maybe some Rottan had unlocked the relics' ancient secrets. It certainly wouldn't be the first time his people's longstanding beliefs about the world had been challenged recently.

Everywhere there were white-clad, white-furred, red-eyed Rottan, attending diligently to work. Frolli wasn't sure what he'd expected. Perhaps a desolate, empty place, with all eyes cast skyward. Something austere and ascetic. Not this, though. The home of Inder was, as Kavalrist had said, more technologically advanced than he'd ever imagined. They were dedicated, diligent, and directed. The image was even a little frightening, Frolli realized.

They passed by a hangar and Frolli glimpsed inside. The building was the largest in the whole crater, at least that Frolli could see, and it housed something massive. He wasn't sure what it was, precisely – perhaps some machine, or maybe whatever secret weapon Kavalrist had hinted at – but it ran the length of the building, and it was covered by patched-together sheeting. It stood on stands that held it slightly aloft; its size was immense, and all around it Inderlings scuttled, checking its frame and busying themselves with some task or another.

The sheeting didn't cover it entirely, though, and from what Frolli could see, running down the length of it, the construct was made of metal. It had a curved lower exterior, like a luftskip, and it was similar in size, too – longer and perhaps not as plump as most. The whole thing, from what Frolli could see, was gilded,

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all its plates and struts painted a glistening, sparkling gold.

Frolli wanted to get a closer look but Mynt grabbed his arm and dragged him away; the group was continuing on without him. Grand Reader Skomseff led them into another building, made using the same expert construction techniques as everywhere else in the temple grounds. It was a marvel to behold, all the polished, gleaming metal, the gold trim, the delicately engraved designs and symbols in all the walls and floors and ceilings. Frolli imagined it must have taken some time to build all of it, but of course that made sense, since what else had the Inderlings but time?

This edifice was a lounge, with plenty of open space and nesting material and hammocks strung up. Skomseff passed a whispered instruction on to one of his subordinates and then turned to the group. "We don't usually dine all at once, but on special occasions we do share meals, and I believe this is certainly a special occasion. Please, sit, rest yourselves, and shortly we will have some food for you." They all did as they were told – the room was clear of other Rottan and seating was plentiful – and then their gracious host continued, "So, now we get to our business. I gather that your purpose here is to seek aid, yes? And that our friend Kavalrist led you all here under the pretense that we might be of some assistance?"

Sorvirret nodded, clarifying, "We do come to ask for help, though not merely the sort of help a weary traveler begs. Food and rest and resupply is all well and good, but unfortunately we ask for a greater commitment to a much more dangerous task. You, sir, are not just another stop on our way: you are, ostensibly, our last hope. And, if you will forgive my pessimism, the last hope of all Rottan."

Skomseff nodded sagely, contemplatively. "Well, rest easy, my friends. The followers of Inder are

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not only on your side, but we have been preparing for this day. The stars foretold the coming of a great terror, one long dead, long forgotten. They tell of the would-be king but reveal him false, a tyrant. So we have seen it writ, in the lore of the sky. And so we have prepared, on our worldly plane."

The Grand Reader addressed Frolli, "You asked how we have access to this information, and your answer lays right over your head. At the beginning of the creation of the world the stars were already infinitely old, and in them there were maps detailing events in ages to come. We have simply devoted our lives to reading and interpreting these maps, and then reacting accordingly. It is considered folly to ignore mistakes made in the past, lest they be repeated; we believe it is a similar folly to ignore those that could be made in the future. Hindsight and foresight are two sides of perspective; they form a duality."

"So the stars know what we're going to do before we do it?"

"Oh, try not to think of it like that. That is far too certain a view; the stars cannot know what, for example, you were going to say before you said so. When we read the stars we are not reading pages in a book. Rather, we are letting the stars, in their vastness, inspire our thoughts, which lead us to uncover possibilities that might play out.

"There are more stars in the sky than you could ever count. Just like there are more possibilities in the world than you could ever count. Every time you make a choice, or every time one thing happens when another could have, a possibility is created. These dualities, these differences between what did happen and what did not, are born every moment of every day. So, suppose you sat down and tried to draw a line from one star to the next, tracing with your finger, like a game of connect-

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the-dots. Suppose each of you did. Do you think anybody's lines would follow the same exact path?"

Frolli didn't respond at first, until he realized the question wasn't rhetorical. "No; they'd all be different."

"Different, yes! They would all be different, that is right. Very different, indeed. For every line you drew, there would be infinite others you did not. As in life: for every thing that happened, there would be infinite others that did not. Which is to say, life is like that line. Life is the line that did happen, but there are other possible versions of how things might have ended up that didn't. You might not have arrived here, for example; you might have fallen off the mountain on your way up."

"So... you don't actually read one sequence of events in the stars?"

"Precisely. We observe an infinite number of different sequences of events. When we look at the stars, we see all the different possible outcomes that all the different decisions and happenings in the world might lead to. Our prophecies are infinite; there is a different prophecy for every star in the sky. Some are favored, of course – if we all began tracing lines across the sky some patterns might appear more than others – but really our prophecies might be anything."

It was Mynt's turn to ask, "Wait, so... You don't actually know the future."

"Oh, no, not hardly."

"Then how do you favor one of these prophecies over another? How did you know to expect us, in particular, to arrive? How did you know to prepare for your tyrant harbinger, if there are an infinite number of other possible scenarios where none of those things happen?"

"We didn't. As I said, knowing something is a rather tricky proposition, and with so many possibilities

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it's tough to know one for sure is going to be correct. But every passing moment eliminates as infinitely many possible prophecies as it creates. We, in reading the stars, merely have to keep track of them. That's where the stars do come in handy, you see: we can pin a different outcome to each one. It helps keep things organized, or else we'd all go crazy."

"Yeah, wouldn't want you to all go crazy," Kavalrist mumbled sardonically.

"I just... I just don't understand," said Frolli, echoing Gammel's cynicism. "So, you just think up things that might happen? And you carry out your lives based on which of these theories seems... most likely? Most popular?"

"Hm... Well, that's the simple way to put it, though it's far more complicated than that."

"I can't even follow the simple version," Seg put in. "You might spare me the complicated one."

"I do not expect you to understand; truly, I don't," the Grand Reader said. "But you might consider the results. Here you are, in need. Here we are, ready to offer aid."

"Here you are," Kavalrist interjected, "preparing for a war you calculated might come only because somebody dreamed it up one day, like it was somehow inevitable."

"That they accurately predicted a war," Sorvirret noted, "perhaps says more about Rottan as a species than about the methodology of Inder."

That put an end to the questioning. Frolli still wasn't sure he understood, but then he realized that these folk spent their whole lives up here to understand. They were born into it, and it still took seasons of thought to make sense of. Frolli, a farmboy dragged along behind some stohvriders into a war with an immortal tyrant, wasn't going to get it after just a conversation. He held his tongue.

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One of the other Inderlings came into the antechamber where they had been sitting and reported to the Grand Reader, after which the red-eyed Rottan turned to his guests and said, "The food is nearly ready. Please, follow me."

The dining hall was a low-ceilinged, cozy room with a single raised platform in the center to serve as a table. Around it were round pedestals upon which some Inderlings were already perched, sitting patiently at table for the meal to begin. When the guests were ushered in they all rose and bowed formally, then sat once more, not leaving their daises. The floor was covered in shredded bedding, which made for a soft surface that also kept in the warmth and muffled would-be echoes resulting from conversation. Frolli felt the place might be just as good for a nap as for a meal.

The Inderlings scattered around the table, mostly concentrated near the far end, wore robes similar to the Grand Reader's: ornate and multi-layered, made of padded white and red fabrics, and fringed with gold. The gold was especially impressive, glinting in the dim light cast by lamps hung in the corners; Frolli noticed that it was actual gold, shaped into the trim of the outfits.

The Grand Reader took a seat at the head of the table, directing the travelers to find places at the other side. The Rottan there gathered were all adults save the two on Skomseff's either side, a girl and a boy both very close to Frolli's age. Their resemblance to one another was uncanny, as was the resemblance to the Grand Reader – although, with their white fur and red eyes, all

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the Inderlings looked rather similar. Given their age and positioning, Frolli presumed they must be his children.

The girl in particular caught Frolli's eye. She sat perfectly still on her haunches, like everybody else did on the little podiums, with her hands together, fingers folded over one another. Her head was slightly bowed, although this was not a demure gesture: her eyes were full of energy and took in her tablemates clearly. Her gaze was bold, but her expression revealed nothing. On her forehead there was a golden circlet, the diadem custom-molded to accentuate the curve of her head. Small spirals lay around her ears, and the flowing curves of the tiara drew the eye forward, like the sweeping but delicate strokes of a painter's brush, toward the sharp point between her eyes. A crest of sorts was formed by this point, and Frolli realized only now that he had seen this crest before, all over the temple: in the design of the buildings, in murals and inlays, on the robes of the Inderlings.

Frolli found her to be quite enthralling – he did not remember any of the girls back in Gordby being so pretty, although they all knew him and would have had nothing to do with him even if he'd wanted them to. He realized that he was staring at her when her focused gaze met his. It froze him so that he was unable to move, and a smile tilted her mouth fractionally. He felt his skin grow hot all over, which was all the more embarrassing for the lack of fur to hide it under.

Grand Reader Skomseff cleared his throat and rose, announcing, "We welcome our guests and thank them for the effort spent in coming here. Their arrival marks the end of two journeys: theirs, and ours, as we must now embark on our next, in an effort to protect the sanctity of life and all that is held dear from the tyranny of the wicked and those who would do harm to their fellows. Allow me the honor of introducing the Inderlings here seated."

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Skomseff proceeded to name each of the white-furred Rottan starting furthest from him, stating their duties within the temple as though he was justifying their presence at the table. Frolli felt like he was in an old story for the nestlings, one with royalty and grand halls and knights of the peace. Each name was accompanied by a curt nod from the Rottan in question.

"And these are my children," Skomseff finished, confirming Frolli's suspicions. He indicated the boy first, whose dress was no less ornate, although instead of a simple circlet his head was crowned with a gilded cap, ridged with aggressive-looking furrows. "My son, Seffjern, and my daughter, Seffren. Twins, given to me by my late wife."

They both bowed their heads in acknowledgement. Frolli had dutifully kept his eyes averted from Seffren while the introductions were made, but he figured looking at her now seemed appropriate, if only for a moment. When he did, she was still watching him. Had she been the whole time? Frolli looked away again, feeling flushed.

Skomseff signaled to Kavalrist as though to pass the obligation to him, but Kavalrist remained seated, flanking the captain who sat opposite the Grand Reader. Sorvirret stood instead and introduced himself and the others, and they followed suit by gesticulating as their names were said, just like the Inderlings, although a bit less formally.

Once the names and titles had been shared the food came out. Frolli had been served plenty of meals since he left Gordby, but this was one of the most impressive. Everything was served on golden trays and golden plates, with golden cutlery too. Even napkins for tidying up crumbs and cleaning whiskers, which were already the flair of high-dining, since most Rottan neglected their use in common company, were embroidered with gold. The recipes were unlike any

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he'd ever seen, as well, with stewed greens and baked mushrooms, and a whole slew of beans and peas and even seeds, all somehow cultivated here at the top of Mount Fellrik. Each dish when uncovered sent spumes of steam rising into the air, followed by a flood of enticing scents that made Frolli nearly fall over. He'd eaten a lot of dried rations while on the move, too, and did he ever prefer the home-cooked fare.

After only a few bites one of the Inderlings asked proudly, "So, what do you think?" He was, according to the Grand Reader, in charge of growing food for the temple.

Everybody offered compliments that pushed through full mouths except for Sorvirret, who when he was finished chewing said, "Well, the food is lovely, although I might say the presentation is a little lacking."

This unexpected answer caused the fellow who'd clearly only been trawling for compliments to sit up, nearly aghast. "Whatever do you mean?" he wondered.

Sensing the displeasure Sorvirret clarified, "Perhaps I misspoke. I mean only that the meal's presentation seems forced. You have gold all over the place here, and of course everybody knows that gold is gaudy. It is obvious. Instead, I should like to see silver: silver is sleek and subtle. Silver knows it need not impress. Silver really is the best of the precious metals, when one thinks on it."

One of the other Inderlings sat forward too. "You... all think this way?"

"Oh, it is a point of fact," the captain said, speaking for the group. Nobody bothered to voice a dissenting opinion; it hardly mattered, and anyway the initial question hadn't been meant at all literally. "Gold is loud and boisterous, really, and ultimately cheap. The austerity of silver cannot be denied. Plus, it matches with so many other colors. Not like gold," he finished,

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his nose wrinkling as though he detected something offensive.

"Oh," said the second Inderling. He was the Inderlings' top-ranking engineer, the one directly responsible for overseeing many of their technological feats. The meal resumed, and he signaled to an attendant standing by, whispering a message in his ear. The waiter disappeared dutifully, and a few minutes later another Inderling arrived in the room. He was dressed like his comrades, and he approached the engineer, who explained something briefly, unheard. The newcomer's face went pale and shallow, and then he eyed the captain with something resembling contempt before nodding and slipping back out, a sigh trailing after him. Everybody must have seen, although if Frybitter noticed he gave no acknowledgement.

Once the meal proper had begun Skomseff said, "As you know, our prophecies reveal the coming of the harbinger, the one who would seek to burn Rottan from the face of the world. And while we do collect information from below this peak that confirms or disproves certain suspicions, we are not acquainted with every detail. We should like to know what you know. We should like to know what has brought you so desperately to our door."

Through a mouthful of food Gammel said simply, "Akarot Avskander."

A murmur went through the Inderlings. They whispered to one another, surprised. This revelation evidently disproved a whole lot of prophecies, and confirmed a few that Frolli wagered they didn't want to have confirmed.

"Truly?" Skomseff questioned.

"Aye," Kavalrist said. "The one and only, back again to finish what he started."

"Then," the Grand Reader said worriedly, "he is... like you?"

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"Unkillable?" Kavalrist asked. "Seems that way. At least, part of an eternity of being ripped to shreds by stohv didn't kill him, and anyway, now he's not very happy about it. Seems he wants to take it out on anybody who ain't him. And he brought friends to help him. The Kakkerlak."

This prompted a fresh wave of mutterings and susurrations, far more fretful than the first. More confirmations. The eradication of more possibilities, like the Inderlings, even despite their preparations, had hoped they might not have to face down those eldritch creatures after all.

"We wondered why the returning usurper was gaining ground so quickly," said the Inderling who'd been introduced as a defense administrator. He would likely have been their military advisor.

Frolli spoke up, still not entirely sure what to make of all this. While they spoke of far-off conquests Frolli remembered watching folk die. The Kakkerlak were bearing down on the innocent souls of Verden as they all discussed. "Well, now you know."

Seffren nodded, looking right at the abashed farmboy. "Now we know the difficulty of what lies before us, yes," she said. Frolli froze mid-bite, a noodle hanging from between his teeth. Her voice was smooth and alluring; he felt himself again flush under her gaze. "Tell us your story," she requested, "that we may understand as you do what we face."

Frolli couldn't dodge her eyes now; he had brought himself into the conversation, and she was going to keep him there. He'd told the story before but now he found himself at a loss, not quite sure where to begin. "I, uh," he stammered. "Well, my friend and I, we were... Umm, well, that's my friend, Derli, who I meant: he and I found them. I mean, we didn't actually find them, but that's where it started. Oh, and he'd probably not call me a friend anymore, so there's that."

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Frolli's party leered at him like he was suddenly sprouting flowers out of his eyes.

"What my swooning dummy of a brother means," Mynt said, "is that he and his friend were off on an adventure they oughtn't have been to the town of Stufford..."

Over dinner they now told their story, but this time Frolli mostly took a backseat. He was still too embarrassed, he realized unpleasantly, to properly compose himself before Seffren, and try as he might he couldn't shake the numbness that found its way to his tongue, and brain, whenever it was his turn to speak.

Which was for the best, really, since the tale wasn't entirely his anymore. Now that they knew and understand what they were fighting, the context of finding Stufford sacked wasn't essential to the explanation. The party revealed how they had all come to be here, each adding information here and there as they spoke.

Dinner ended before they were done, and the plates all were cleared away. Finally, when the story was finished, the group sat in silence, as though exhausted: they hadn't said it all out loud like that since before everything went awry, and reliving some moments was a challenge.

Apparently the white-furred Rottan felt that it was a lot to take in as well: they all sat motionless when the tale concluded, following the loss of Sengle Sporrelsten, not saying a word. Into that silence Kavalrist said, "So, I reckoned our best bet was to come here. And it doesn't look like I was wrong."

The Inderlings exchanged knowing glances, mulling over all the new data. How many prophecies fulfilled? How many obliterated? And how many, Frolli wondered, yet to come?

Grand Reader Skomseff leaned forward and said, "No, friend. You were not."

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The Inderlings were ready for what was to come.

The Grand Reader led Kavalrist and his entourage back through the temple grounds to show off their resources. They had more weaponry than either the Uprising or the Rider's Guild, and every white-furred Rottan on the mountain seemed ready to use it. They had armor, they had longboomers, and they had training.

Frolli would never have guessed they were an order dedicated to studying the stars.

"It's surprising to see all this," Frolli said. "You're more prepared for battle than anybody down below, I'd say. And yet you don't even need to be; you're probably safe up here."

"This temple might be secure," Skomseff noted, "but that does not grant us the freedom to cower. We won't sit idly by while the innocent die. If we are able to defend what is right, then we must. It's as simple as that, and I will tell you that every Rottan who lives here will go to the death for that belief."

Skomseff's children had gone off to attend to some other task. Frolli asked, "*Every* Rottan? Even... even the younglings? Even your younglings?"

The Grand Reader turned. "You have done work in your village, yes? On the farms?"

"Yes," Frolli shrugged.

"It is no different with us. We devote ourselves from an early age to what is most important. For several seasons we've been reading the signs and preparing for a war that we hoped would not come. But hope goes only so far, and it would be quite irresponsible to rely

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upon hope alone, especially when we have the means to do more."

"So, will you send your children to war?"

"We will send every last able body to battle, if need be. There are no exceptions."

Mynt said, "That seems... cold."

"If the signs had pointed to famine we would have dedicated ourselves to growing crops this whole time, not building weapons, and yes, every one of us would then work to dole out supplies to those in need. We would rather not go to war, but what we would rather do is not an option. I don't think it's cold to acknowledge that."

"This is all most impressive, Grand Reader," said Sorvirret, "and I am sure it will prove invaluable to defeating Avskander and his minions. But I have one question, the answer to which I hope will not prove an oversight on the part of the Inderlings: how exactly are we to move all these munitions and supplies without proper transport? It cannot all be carried down by hand."

Skomseff led them across the crater to an elevator shaft embedded in the ground ahead. "Oh, we thought of that, Captain. Follow me."

The elevator was set into a metal-braced shaft that descended into Fellrik. It was very large; it had to have been some kind of cargo elevator, meant for ferrying oversized supplies up and down. But to where? Could it really lead all the way back down to the bottom of the mountain?

Frolli was about to ask when the lift shuddered abruptly to a halt, only a little way down into the rock. The doors rattled open and let them out into a broad cavern. One wall of the expanse was exposed to the sky; Frolli could hear wind whistling through the cave. Looking around he realized that it was a giant hangar, full of more weapons and gear being fabricated. And

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spaced evenly across the grand length of it were luftskips, sitting at anchor.

Each was easily as big as the *Lysvhal* had been, and every one of them was made from metals and other strange materials, the likes of which Frolli had never seen in use before on a vessel. Some appeared fast and agile, with long, curving lines and extra wings and flanges to increase maneuverability. Others were hulking and powerful, with thick angles and load-bearing struts, all racked with bombs and guns.

It was a fleet.

"But..." Mynt wondered, "I thought luftskips couldn't climb this high?"

"They can't," Skomseff nodded. "As it stands, the ballast tanks in each of these vessels weigh more than the rest of their skips. Luft is heavier than the air up here. So we built them inside this cave, overlooking the cliff: when they're ready, they'll drop out and descend, finally achieving buoyancy somewhere before hitting the ground."

"Ha!" Madig Uredd laughed. "You'd have to be mad to try such a thing; what pilot would ever..."

At practically the same time, Frybitter also laughed and said, "Good show, sir! I should like to helm the flagship, if you have not already got a pilot in mind."

Uredd cut back in. "Surely you've not tested it; do you even know if it will work? The skips might smash to bits before they can make lift. And how do your skygazers know to pilot anyway?"

The Grand Reader put up his hands, placating. "Please, please. We'd not have gone ahead with construction if we didn't understand, and have ways around, the risks. And we have willing pilots, and crews. Trained ones. Kavalrist here is not the only one to have ever scaled Mount Fellrik, you know."

That calmed everybody down. Gave them a chance to sit back and just take it all in. They'd spent so

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long running and scrabbling for their very lives, now to see something so strongly in their favor was a change of pace. To be surrounded by the hope of something that might actually work... It was heartening.

The veranda of the cavern looked out over the same expanse Frolli and the others had admired on the way up the mountain. Norslade stretched vast before them. Frolli couldn't see the Kakkerlak army out there, in the darkness, but he knew they were advancing. And for once, there was a chance to stop them.

"So," Kavalrist said, impressed, "you're just gonna swoop out onto 'em before they know what's happening, blow them to smithereens, and then, what, unload ground troops to mop up what's left?"

"That is correct," replied the Grand Reader.

"Bu the skips won't be coming back?" Mynt realized.

"That is correct," he said again. "Once they've had their maiden voyage, they'll be unable to return. But hopefully we won't need them to; if we can stop Avskander, it will hardly matter." Skomseff looked around at his guests and asked them a question that had been posited earlier, at the dinner table. His voice rung with just as much pride. "So, what do you think?"

Kavalrist smiled. "I'd say we weren't wrong to come here, after all."

Skomseff bowed. "Thank you. We wish to do our part, and I am glad you approve. But it is no accident that you are here, and we require your assistance as well; you are not merely bystanders. Kavalrist, with your tactical and wartime experience, you can help us ensure victory. Will you help to coordinate our assault?"

Kavalrist was still. "You know, if Frybitter here'd come to me two days ago with just as many skips and just as many troops and asked me that question, I'd have told him I wasn't about to waste my time plotting a

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massacre. But after coming here, after seeing what you've got... There may be a chance yet. It's not a big one, mind, and what you've got in preparedness you lack in experience, but... Aye, I think we maybe got a shot."

"Excellent. We'll have you speak with our troops, impart your wisdom as it relates to fighting the Kakkerlak. And this goes for all of you: you know what it's going to take to win; I ask that you share with us your knowledge. I will convene with my advisors and we will determine a time to begin the assault."

The preparations were all nearly complete: everywhere the Inderlings worked, it was clear they were ready for the fight. And what a fight it would be. Frolli was excited to see the outcome, and while he didn't know how he was going to make much of a difference, he wanted to offer every bit of help he could.

No, maybe he wasn't going back to Gordby to warn them of the impending invasion, but he and Mynt were helping in their own way. Their plan wasn't to just send everybody cowering into the cellars. They were bringing the fight to the Kakkerlak.

The Grand Reader was already going over plans with Kavalrist at a nearby table laden with maps and diagrams. Sorvirret and Madig spoke to one another off to the side, talking low. Kavalrist was saying, "Now I don't want you thinking you and your people can go toe-to-toe with Avskander's forces: it'll still be a massacre if you try that. You can't underestimate the size of his army, and of how dangerous the Kakkerlak truly are. You bomb 'em to bits and the bits'll keep biting. I'm thinking instead that we focus on Avskander himself. I don't know yet how to kill him, but if we can capture him, get 'hold of that stick he's got, we may be able to put a quick end to this."

"That is not wholly wise, gentlemen," Sorvirret announced. They both whirled to face him. He and

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Uredd stood together. "It is mostly wise, I will admit, but the maneuver is a gamble."

"And what do you propose?" Kavalrist asked.

"Grand Reader, if one of these vessels might be spared, we will use it to rally the Rytterslaug. There are skips and fighters waiting to be used, if we only ask. The Riders outnumber your forces, and they are all experienced in combat: they would stand as a perfect complement to your attack force."

"Backup, huh?" Kavalrist snorted. "Well, I actually can't say it's a bad idea. In a fight against the Kakkerlak, more forces is always gonna be better than less. But do they have any idea what they'd be signing up for?"

"Does anybody?" Madig asked.

Gammel tilted his head in a gesture of acquiescence. "True enough, that is. But still, how d'you plan on bringing them to heel?"

"They have little choice but to answer," Sorvirret explained. "A call to arms as this cannot go unheeded, you may trust."

Gammel mulled it over. "With all them skips, too, we might even be able to corral the whole army, keep any from getting away once everything goes crazy." He nodded as the idea gained favor. "And you're sure you lot can get the word to them? I thought they were scattered to the wind."

"Many are," Uredd nodded, "but we mean to get the attention of more."

Kavalrist eyed her narrowly. "In Aveling," he said.

Frolli asked, "Aveling? What's that?"

Gammel answered before Sorvirret or Madig could, "It's the secret headquarters of the Rider's Guild. It's a ways up north."

"I've never heard of such a place," the boy pointed out.

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"Well, it wouldn't be much a secret if you had," Uredd replied testily. "So, what say you, Inderling?"

The Grand Reader looked to Kavalrist, who nodded his assent. "It is a good plan," Gammel admitted. "I say go for it."

Skomseff turned, smiling. "Well, then I have one more thing to show you. A... secret weapon, of sorts."

The flustered engineer who had been summoned to the dinner table met them outside the hangar where Frolli had glimpsed the great golden construct. The Grand Reader asked him, "Oh, is it ready yet?"

He scoffed, "Just barely, thanks to some, ah, last minute changes... But yes, it's ready. Go on in."

They all ducked into the hangar and were presented with the final weapon in the Inderling arsenal. Every mouth dropped in awe.

It was a luftskip, of that there could be no doubt, but it was entirely unlike anything Frolli had ever seen. The skip was long and roughly rectangular, with its corners rounded at the edges. Its nose, which they stood near, was plated heavily, drawing to a point, giving it the look of a battering ram. It was thinner but longer than the *Lysval* had been, with a flat-topped deck. All along the fore of the body, embedded in the hull beneath the deck, was an internal gantry shielded by glass paneling. This viewing window ran back almost to the bridge, lending the skip a tooth-filled grin along its sides.

The main deck swept up and away toward the bridge, which stretched wide across the width of the vessel, its windshield overlooking the long bow. The

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skip's silhouette was smooth, devoid of the protrusions that seemed customary on most boats; the hull's panels interlocked almost seamlessly, with what joints remained looking almost like evenly-measured veins. There was a symmetry to the vessel, a sense of purpose-built design that was unlike other luftskips. It almost seemed organic, grown.

The cargo hold loaded from behind, with a ramp aft of the bridge lowering from the fuselage down to the ground. Farther toward the stern the vessel bulked, following the same curve of the wheelhouse, which in itself seemed just another sloping part of the hull. The skip's stern shifted quickly from sleek and slender to bulging, as though alive with coiled strength, then tapered once more to a point angling back out to level. The cabin's stern deck flanged backward before its taper, and the rest of the skip seemed to cling to its rigid structure.

As Frolli examined he noticed that the luftskip aft of the hold and the bridge seemed quite odd: where the bow nosed out with rounded edges and gently-angled lines, the stern's mass attenuated to a single tip in even, symmetrical protuberances, six altogether, that hung beneath the aft deck overhang. This was the only place where seams were readily apparent, with hard, dark lines between the swollen struts, gaps big enough to fit a hand through. The design in itself wasn't odd, and certainly not out-of-place within the obvious Inderling architecture, but with the stern hanging long and angular behind and above the hold there scarcely seemed enough room to house the engine and ballasts.

Where the *Lysvhal* was plump by comparison, this vessel exuded a sleekness that was mesmerizing to even look at. Its flowing lines evidenced the same Inderling design seen all around the temple, all forming together into one beautiful shape as though drawn by an artist utilizing a single, complicated brushstroke.

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And more than just how impressive a sight it was, Frolli examined the vessel and realized that not one bit of it was gold. He knew he had seen gold paneling – he could even recognize some individual sections – but now the luftskip shone in brilliantly glistening black and silver, with dark, smooth metals against shining, freshly-painted plating. The color striation was in fact the only way to tell where different sections of the skip were divided: the ribbed, silver armoring hanging from the viewing deck gave the impression of something skeletal, with the black metal of the core viewable beneath.

The Inderlings must have taken the captain's comments to heart, Frolli mused. No wonder the engineer's assistant had been miffed.

"Captain," the Grand Reader said after they'd all stared for a few minutes, "allow me to present you one of our finest and proudest achievements. This is a luftskip like no other: this will be the fastest vessel ever created. We've outfitted it with reconfigured ballasts that manufacture their own luft, right out of the air, using high-pressure tanks to divert fuel for thrust, resulting in greatly increased speed. Oh, it's all very technical and the engineers can certainly explain it better than I can, but we would like to present it to you as a gift. After hearing your story, about the loss of your skip, well... It only seems right. And now you can reach your Aveling in record time, too."

"Grand Reader," Sorvirret said, amazed, "this is... this is wondrous! She is a beautiful skip; your people ought to be proud. What is her name?"

"Oh, we hadn't decided. You're welcome to do the honors yourself, if you'd like."

Sorvirret grinned, beaming. Madig stood next to him, but she wasn't smiling. She seemed sad. As impressive as this skip was, it wasn't her *Lysval*. He eyed her a moment. "Miss Uredd," he began, "I wonder if you might agree to a wager with me."

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"A wager?" she asked, uncertain.

"Yes. I wager that I am a better pilot than you, and to back it I will put up this skip as the prize."

"But..."

"I understand that it is quite outlandish, Miss Uredd: that does not change the wager, however. I bet you this new skip that I am a better pilot than you; will you accept the wager?"

"Well... Yes? I suppose," she shrugged, not seeing the point, since the skip was his anyway.

"Okay. Then, since it is practically a matter of public record that you are the superior pilot, I have lost the wager. I bequeath this yet-unnamed skip to your care, and with ownership you shall assume her captaincy. So, what will you name her?"

Madig just stared. Slowly, a smile, an actual smile, crept across her face. Then she turned and eyed her new luftskip. "*The Losning*," she whispered quietly.

Mynt, who was nearby, said, "That's a beautiful name. What's it mean?"

"Redemption," Madig replied.