

Hallowing the Hearthforge

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Chapter 1: After the Drums

The last drumbeat died into the stone.

For a moment, no one moved.

The ritual chamber still shook with the memory of thunder, fire, lightning, and the terrible hollow boom that had answered from somewhere far below. Smoke crawled along the ceiling in black ribbons. Broken bone charms clicked against one another where they hung from the pillars. Green-black runes, freshly cracked, guttered in the floor like coals drowning in rain.

Thordak Faerdhal stood in the middle of it all with his warhammer low in one hand and his chest heaving. The red dragonborn's scales glowed dimly through soot and dust. Around him, the rest of the party had rushed too far into the chamber to pretend the doorway still mattered. The double doors lay behind them in splintered halves, one slab hanging crooked on a hinge, the other flattened under bootprints and claw marks.

They had not won because the doors broke.

They had won because everyone had known what would happen when they did.

Leif Arrowsong lowered his bow only after he had counted the fallen enemies twice. Shenanigan Swift crouched beside a cracked pillar, sling still looped around two fingers, eyes flicking between shadows. MechaKirby stood with one metal hand outstretched, the pale shimmer of a fading ward ticking softly between his fingers. Steve leaned against his staff, face pale beneath his silver-white hair, trying to steady his breathing without looking away from the runes.

Risar Stormborn was several strides from the ruined doors, not at them. He had charged in with everyone else when the plan broke open. A jagged line of fresh bruising darkened the scales above his brow where his head had helped Thordak smash the way through. His shield was lifted, his sword Fjorglimt humming in his fist, and his eyes were fixed on the floor as if he expected the stone itself to rise and challenge him.

Caleb Gandalfson's Wand of Wonder smoked gently at his side.

His other hand was pressed flat over his awakened spellbook, which had wedged itself half out of his satchel to stare at the chamber with its embossed cover.

"Hey buddy," the book said, much more quietly than usual, "I do not like that the mountain listened."

Caleb swallowed. "It listened?"

The floor answered before the book could.

A deep shudder passed through Hearthforge. Dust drifted from the ceiling. Somewhere beyond the chamber, old beams groaned. Thorgall Giron looked down at the red gem against his chest. During the fight it had blazed like an ember in a forge. Now the glow had faded, but not gone out. A weak pulse moved inside the stone, slow and resentful.

"Still near," Thorgall said.

No one asked what he meant.

Thullgrim was not near like a troll in the next tunnel. Thullgrim was near like winter was near inside a frozen lake. The party stood in the mountain's throat, or lung, or wound. The exact word did not matter. The danger had a heartbeat, and they had only stopped one hand from beating the drum.

Thordak turned toward the broken doors at last. Beyond them lay the passage they had crossed to reach this room, the long hallway where Thorgall's necklace had first warned them that the mountain was not merely stone. The ruined doors showed the shape of the plan better than any song could have. Splinters pointed inward. Scorch marks crossed the threshold in sharp lines. Arrows jutted from the far wall where enemies had stood a breath too long. The first enemy body lay barely three paces inside the room, proof that surprise had carried the party farther than strength alone could have.

"We should move," Thordak said.

Risar glanced at him. "Move where?"

"Forward."

Shenanigan gave a small laugh, too thin to be cheerful. "That narrows it down."

Thordak's jaw tightened. He looked toward the deeper arch at the back of the chamber. Its stones were carved with old dwarven knotwork, but the horde had smeared the carvings with ash, blood, and crooked signs that hurt the eye. A cold draft breathed through it, carrying the smell of wet stone and old iron.

"Before they gather," Thordak said. "Before another drummer finds another drum."

Leif's fingers tightened around his bow. "Or before we run into the next trap too tired to see it."

The words landed hard, not because they were loud, but because they were true.

Thordak looked at him. For an instant the chamber felt smaller. Thordak was the most seasoned of them, the one with Skythor, the flying karve, the storm-voice, the stories that already sounded half like saga. He had led assaults that saved villages. He had also called lightning too close to friends before. Everyone there knew both things.

Steve pushed himself upright. "The Havamal says a man should never be too sure of his wisdom."

Thordak blinked at him.

Steve looked embarrassed but did not take it back. "I may have the wording wrong."

"You have the sense right," Thordak said after a moment.

The answer changed the room more than a shout would have. Risar's shield lowered a finger's breadth. Shenanigan stopped pretending to inspect the pillar and watched Thordak directly. MechaKirby's optics brightened with a soft blue click.

Thordak drew in a breath through his nose and let it out slowly.

"Then counsel," he said. "Fast, but counsel. What do we know?"

Thorgall touched the necklace. "The worst pull is not from that arch. Not yet. It is below us. Deep."

Leif moved to one knee beside the nearest set of smeared runes, careful not to touch them. "Tracks went through that arch before the fight. Goblin feet. Bigger boots too. Some came in dragging something heavy. None came back after the drums started."

"That is friendly," Shenanigan said.

"No," Leif said. "But useful."

Caleb crouched, and his spellbook craned farther from the satchel.

"Do not touch the green line," the book warned.

Caleb froze with his fingers above a cracked rune. "I was not going to."

"You absolutely were, buddy."

Caleb pulled his hand back and leaned close enough to study without contact. The wand at his belt gave a tiny pop, shedding one orange spark that died before it hit the floor. He rested his palm over it, not drawing it. Twice in the battle he had trusted its wildness, and twice the wildness had answered with impossible force. The chamber still smelled of burned air where one surge had bloomed into fire and another had split the room with lightning. Caleb's face held the wonder of it, but also the new caution of someone who understood that a storm in a bottle did not become safer because it had saved him.

"The wand is tired," he said.

"Wands do not get tired," Steve said.

Caleb's spellbook made a rude little flutter. "This one does if its wielder has any sense."

Caleb nodded. "It has more in it. Not enough to use every time we are scared."

"Then we save it for strange problems," MechaKirby said. "Ordinary danger can be addressed by ordinary planning."

Shenanigan spun a sling cord around one finger. "I love when you call this ordinary."

Risar's sword hummed.

"Little thunder", Fjorglimt murmured, its voice low enough that only Risar heard every word. "A storm that spends itself on the first hill leaves the valley undefended."

Risar glanced down at the blade. "I know."

"Do you?"

His claws tightened on the hilt. Across the chamber, Thordak was asking Leif to mark the direction of the tracks. Caleb and Steve were arguing softly over whether the ash ruined the dwarven runes or merely covered them. MechaKirby had started examining a broken chain of symbols in the air above the floor, tracing without touching. Shenanigan had vanished from her crouch by the pillar and reappeared near the deeper arch, somehow stepping only where Leif had already looked.

Risar wanted to stand at the front of all of them.

He also wanted, with an ache that surprised him, to put his shield between every friend and every shadow at once. That was impossible. He could not be every wall. He could choose the place where a wall mattered most.

“Little thunder,” he said under his breath, “where?”

Fjorglimt’s blue glow softened. Not where glory is loudest. Where fear would enter.

Risar looked again.

The deeper arch was not the only way into the chamber. A narrow crack split the left wall behind a fallen curtain of hide and bone charms. Too small for an ogre, perhaps, but not for goblins. Not for something crawling. Cold air touched the back of his wrist from that direction.

“There,” Risar said.

Leif followed his gaze and rose silently. Shenanigan, already at the arch, looked back with eyebrows raised.

“Side passage,” Risar said. “Hidden by the charms.”

Thordak turned at once. He did not argue. “Leif?”

Leif crossed the chamber, bent near the curtain, and studied the dust. “Fresh scrape marks. Small feet. Something came through while we were fighting or just before.”

The chamber changed again. Not panic. Readiness.

“Then our next problem is not forward,” Thordak said. “It is what heard us win.”

Shenanigan grinned for real this time. “Finally. A door my size.”

“Not alone,” Thordak said.

She gave him a look.

He lifted one clawed hand. “Not because you cannot. Because we are finished making this mountain fight us one at a time.”

That, more than anything, made the broken ritual room feel like the beginning of the next story instead of the end of the last one.

They moved quickly, but not blindly. MechaKirby set a small ward near the cracked runes so no one would back into them by mistake. Steve whispered a charm that made the dust around the hidden crack tremble, revealing the faint pull of air. Caleb tied the flap of his satchel tighter, though the spellbook immediately loosened it enough to see. Thorgall stood where the red gem could be watched by all, and when it pulsed he lifted a hand instead of speaking.

Risar took the left side of the hidden opening, shield forward. Thorgall took the right with his daneaxe ready. Leif stood behind them with an arrow aimed through the gap between their shoulders. Shenanigan crouched low, sling loaded with a dull copper glint. Thordak did not take the center from them. He stood half a pace back, where he could see every face.

For once, he waited.

From the hidden passage came a scrape, a hiss, and the wet click of claws on stone.

Thordak looked to Risar.

Risar looked to Thorgall.

Thorgall's necklace flared red.

"Now," Thorgall said.

The first shape lunged through the curtain of bone charms, and the party met it together.

Chapter 2: The Crack in the Wall

The thing came through low.

It was goblin-sized, but it did not move like a goblin. Goblins ducked, darted, cursed, and looked for the nearest way out when courage failed them. This creature flowed over the stone on long arms and bent legs, its shoulders hunched too high, its fingers black with ritual ash. A strip of torn mail hung from its back. Green-black marks crawled along its skin as if someone had painted runes on water.

Risar's shield caught it before anyone else had to.

The crash drove him back half a step. His boots scraped stone. Fjorglimt flashed blue in his hand, eager to answer. For one hot instant Risar wanted to strike over the shield and finish the thing himself.

“Wall,” Fjorglimt warned.

Risar held.

The creature clawed at the shield rim, jaws snapping inches from his forearm. Thorgall’s daneaxe swept in from the other side, not wild, not rushed. The broad blade bit into the stone beside the creature’s hand and forced it to flinch exactly where Leif’s arrow was already waiting.

The arrow struck through the torn mail and pinned the creature’s shoulder to the hanging curtain of charms.

Bone pieces rattled like teeth.

“It is not alone,” Leif said.

He did not need to shout. Everyone heard the second scrape inside the hidden passage.

Thordak’s grip tightened around his warhammer. Fire gathered at the back of his throat, a red glow behind his teeth. Then he looked at the cramped opening, at Risar braced in front of it, at Thorgall’s axe already moving, at Leif’s narrow angle through their shoulders.

He swallowed the fire.

“Hold the gap,” he said. “Do not crowd it.”

The second creature came faster than the first, climbing over the pinned one with a wet hiss. Shenanigan’s sling snapped. A copper coin spun through the gap with a bright little ring, struck the thing above one eye, and burst in a spray of glittering sparks. The creature jerked sideways just as Thorgall’s axe haft slammed across its chest and drove it into Risar’s shield.

This time Risar did not merely endure the hit. He shoved.

He shoved with the shield he had carried into the room, the oath he had carried longer, his legs, and the lesson Fjorglimt had just cut into him: a wall did not chase. A wall chose where the enemy stopped.

The creature stumbled backward into the crack. Its heel caught on the first fallen body. Leif's second arrow vanished into the dark behind it. Something inside the passage shrieked and fell silent.

Thordak looked from one face to another. "Again if they come."

They waited.

The hidden passage breathed cold air over them. The bone charms swung slowly. No third shape appeared.

MechaKirby tilted his head, listening in a way that had little to do with ears. "There is movement beyond the bend. Smaller. Afraid, perhaps."

"Afraid things can still stab," Shenanigan said.

"Correct."

Caleb edged closer, spellbook clutched against his chest. The book's cover wrinkled around its brass corners like a frown.

"Hey buddy," it said, "those marks were copied badly."

Caleb looked at the pinned creature and then very carefully looked away from its teeth. "Badly copied from what?"

"Old binding signs. Dwarven work underneath. Enemy scrawl on top. Imagine someone found a beautiful song carved into a wall and tried to turn it into a drinking chant by scratching between the notes."

Steve glanced at the green-black marks. "Can they still do anything?"

"Yes," the book said. "That is why I am insulting them."

The pinned creature twitched. Thorgall stepped in and ended the movement with the back of his axe. The red gem at his chest pulsed once, then settled into a sullen glow.

"Not a troll," he said. "But touched by one."

Leif crouched and studied the passage. It was not a hallway. It was a wound between stones, widened by tools where the horde had hacked through old mortar and broken the careful dwarven fit. The air from it smelled of wet clay, old smoke, and something sourer beneath.

"Small feet went in and out," Leif said. "Bare claws too. One set dragged a chain."

“I love chains in tiny murder tunnels,” Shenanigan said.

Thordak ignored the tone, but not the warning. “Can you scout it?”

Shenanigan leaned sideways until one eye lined up with the black crack. “Yes.”

“Can you scout it without vanishing beyond help?”

She looked at him again, this time with less bite. “Probably.”

“Probably is not a plan.”

For a moment, no one spoke. It would have been easy for Thordak to fill the silence with an order. He had a voice built for orders. Instead he looked at Leif.

“How far can you see?”

Leif put his cheek near the stone, not quite touching the ash. “The passage bends after ten paces. It drops after that. I can see scraped knees in the dust. Goblins crawled here often.”

“Caleb?”

Caleb hugged the book tighter. “There is magic in the marks, but it is weak. The strong magic is deeper.”

“Steve?”

Steve wiped soot from his lower lip with his sleeve. “If the crack is carrying air, I can send a little light ahead. Not bright. Enough to catch wire, maybe.”

MechaKirby raised one metal finger. “I can anchor a warning ward here. If the passage tries to collapse behind Shenanigan, I may be able to slow it.”

“May be able to,” Shenanigan repeated.

“That is more honest than promising.”

She laughed once. “Fair.”

Thordak nodded. “Then Shenanigan scouts to the bend. Steve gives light. Leif watches the floor. MechaKirby holds the mouth. Risar and Thorgall keep the way open. Caleb and the book read anything that looks like a bad idea before anyone touches it.”

Risar’s bruised brow lifted. “And you?”

Thordak looked toward the deeper arch, where the cold draft still breathed from the larger road. "I watch what we are not looking at."

It was the right answer, and everyone knew it.

Shenanigan slipped into the crack like a shadow with elbows. Steve whispered, and a pale bead of green-white light rolled after her along the floor. It did not shine enough to wake the whole mountain, but it glimmered on dust, wire, and the wet edges of claw marks.

"Wire," Shenanigan called softly.

Leif leaned closer. "High or low?"

"Both. Because whoever made this was annoying."

She eased one hand forward. A moment later a tiny bell sound came from the dark: not a ring, but a stopped ring, a choked little click as her fingers caught the clapper before it could strike.

"Alarm," she said.

"Can you pass it?" Thordak asked.

"Already did."

"Can the rest of us pass it?"

There was a pause.

"Not elegantly."

MechaKirby's eyes brightened. "Describe the anchor points."

Shenanigan did. Two hooks, one hammered into new goblin iron, one tied around an old dwarven nail that should have held a lamp bracket. MechaKirby listened, then reached into the crack with slow precision. His fingers were too large for the space, but he did not need to grab the wire. A shimmer spread from his palm, thin as ice over a puddle. The wire stopped trembling.

"It will not ring unless struck hard," he said. "Please do not strike it hard."

"There goes my plan," Shenanigan said.

She moved on.

Beyond the bend, the crack widened into a cramped service passage. The dwarves had built it for air, repairs, and lamp oil, not for fighting. Small shelves had once held clay jars. Most were smashed. A few remained whole, sealed with wax and marked in neat angular dwarven script.

Then the light found the chain.

It ran across the passage at ankle height, blackened with old grease. One end vanished through a hole in the wall. The other disappeared under a pile of broken shields and gnawed bones. Behind it, a goblin crouched with both hands wrapped around the links.

He was smaller than the ritual creatures, very much alive, and shaking so hard the chain clicked against the stone.

Shenanigan froze.

The goblin froze too.

For one absurd breath, they stared at each other in the dim light like two children caught stealing from the same pantry.

“Do not pull that,” Shenanigan said.

The goblin pulled.

Leif moved before the chain finished its first clatter.

His arrow flew past Shenanigan’s shoulder close enough to stir her hair. It did not strike the goblin. It struck the chain link in front of the goblin’s fist and wedged it hard against the stone. The chain snapped taut and stopped.

From somewhere below came a groan of old machinery denied its work.

Shenanigan looked back through the passage. “I liked that shot.”

“Thank me by moving,” Leif said.

The goblin abandoned the chain and scrambled for a side hole. Shenanigan’s sling was already turning. She did not have room for a full cast, so she snapped it short, ugly, and perfect. A lead bullet cracked against the wall beside the goblin’s hand. He yelped, flinched away from the hole, and ran straight into the pale light.

“Enough,” Thordak called, his voice low but carrying. “Drop.”

The goblin did.

He flattened himself on the passage floor and covered his head with both hands. His words came in a tumble of Goblin, too fast for most of them to follow. Thordak caught enough: no more drum, no wake mountain, boss dead, don't feed me to the stone.

Risar shifted at the mouth of the crack. "What is he saying?"

Thordak's nostrils flared. "He says the next alarm opens something below."

Thorgall's necklace brightened as if in agreement.

Caleb's spellbook whispered, "Buddy, ask him what something means."

Thordak did.

The goblin answered with his forehead still pressed to the floor.

Thordak's expression changed.

"He says there is a mouth under the old cistern," Thordak said. "Not a real mouth. A stone one. The ritual folk fed it blood, drums, and stolen dwarf-silver. If the chain falls, the mouth opens and the lower tunnels hear."

Steve went pale. "Can mouths hear?"

Caleb looked down at his spellbook.

"Unfortunately," the book said, "I hate several possible answers."

MechaKirby kept his warded hand steady on the trapped wire. "Then this passage is not just an ambush route. It is a control path."

Leif nodded. "A way to wake the deeper halls if the ritual room fell."

"Which it did," Shenanigan said.

Risar kept his shield braced in the opening, but his eyes went to Thordak. Waiting. Asking without words.

Thordak looked back toward the ritual chamber, then toward the deeper arch, then into the narrow crack where the goblin lay trembling beside a chain that could still betray them.

The old answer would have been forward.

The easy answer would have been fire.

Thordak remembered Steve's uncertain Havamal wisdom and found a truer line beneath it: a man should be watchful and wary, but not fearful of counsel.

"We do not go deeper yet," he said. "We silence this mouth first."

The mountain gave a low groan beneath their feet, as if it had been listening for that choice.

Shenanigan looked at the goblin. "Good news. You get to help."

The goblin made a miserable squeak.

"Better news," she added, "if you help well, nobody feeds you to anything."

Thordak repeated the offer in Goblin, less cheerfully and more solemnly. The goblin nodded so hard his chin clicked against stone.

Caleb finally let go of the Wand of Wonder at his belt. He had not drawn it. He had not spent another piece of its wild storm. Instead he opened his spellbook, and the book's pages fluttered in the cold draft until they found a blank space.

"All right, buddy," the book said. "Let us map the ugly song before someone sings it again."

In the ritual chamber behind them, the broken drums stayed silent.

Below them, something waited to be taught the same lesson.

Chapter 3: The Old Cistern

The goblin's name was Skrag.

At least, that was the first name he gave after Shenanigan asked, "What do we call you besides Chain-Puller?"

Thordak listened to the answer in Goblin, then narrowed his eyes.

"He says Skrag," Thordak said.

Skrag nodded eagerly.

Shenanigan leaned close enough that the goblin tried to flatten himself into the stone. "Is that his name, or is that the sound he made when I scared him?"

Thordak asked.

Skrag answered with a wounded little burst of words.

“Both, apparently,” Thordak said.

Shenanigan looked satisfied. “Efficient.”

They did not laugh loudly. The old service passage did not feel like a place that rewarded noise. It ran behind the ritual chamber wall in a crooked line, half dwarven craft and half enemy damage. The dwarves had built tight stone ribs overhead and narrow shelves for lamp jars along one side. The horde had broken three ribs, smeared ash over every clean mark, and driven iron hooks into places where no careful builder would ever wound stone.

Skrag crawled ahead with Shenanigan behind him, a sling cord looped once around her wrist and a lead bullet ready in her hand. He did not like the arrangement. He liked Thorgall behind him even less. The red gem on Thorgall’s necklace gave enough light to color the passage like a wound, and whenever it brightened Skrag made a tiny whimper and tried to crawl faster.

“Slow,” Leif said from behind Thorgall. “He is about to miss something.”

Skrag froze before Thordak translated. Fear, it turned out, understood tone very well.

Leif slid forward on one knee and brushed dust away from the floor. A narrow groove crossed the passage from wall to wall. It was clean in the middle, dusty at the edges, and angled toward a row of small holes under the shelf.

“Darts,” Leif said.

Skrag shook his head violently and whispered something.

“Not darts,” Thordak translated. “Needles. Bone needles. Sleep poison.”

Steve swallowed. “Why would anyone put sleep poison in a tunnel this small?”

“Because they are rude,” Shenanigan said.

“Because they needed workers alive,” MechaKirby said from the back. His voice stayed calm, but his blue optics moved from the holes to the chain route disappearing through the wall. “An alarm that captures is useful if the captured can be fed to a ritual later.”

No one answered that for a moment.

Risar shifted his shield, scraping it softly against the stone. In the tight passage, he could not stand tall. His horns nearly brushed the ribbed ceiling. He had to move sideways, shoulder to wall, shield angled across his body. It made him feel clumsy and too large, but when he looked back he saw Caleb and Steve boxed safely behind him. That helped.

“Can we cross it?” Thordak asked.

Shenanigan had already taken out a sliver of broken bone charm and a bent nail from her pouch. “We can cross anything if everyone stops breathing at me.”

Caleb immediately held his breath.

“Not literally, buddy,” his spellbook whispered.

Shenanigan worked the nail under the groove and lifted with tiny, careful pressure. The floor plate rose no more than a thumbnail’s width. The bone charm slid beneath it. She eased the plate down again. Nothing clicked.

“One at a time,” she said. “Step where I step. If you are big, be less big.”

Thorgall looked at Risar.

Risar looked at Thorgall.

“I will try,” Risar said.

Skrag went first, trembling so hard that Shenanigan put a hand on the back of his neck and steered him like a badly made cart. Then Shenanigan crossed, then Leif, light-footed and silent. Thorgall crossed with surprising care for someone built like a falling tree. Risar came next, shield tucked close, breath slow, every scale aware of the waiting holes.

Halfway across, the mountain pulsed.

It was not a quake. It was worse because it felt almost like a thought. The stone tightened under Risar’s boots. The red gem on Thorgall’s chest flared bright enough to throw everyone’s shadow against the walls. Skrag squealed and clapped both hands over his mouth.

Risar’s foot slipped.

Fjorglimt flashed in his hand, but there was no enemy to strike. Only the plate beneath his boot, the holes beside his shin, and Caleb behind him with no room to dodge.

“Wall,” Risar breathed.

He dropped his weight forward onto the shield instead of flinching back. The shield rim struck the opposite wall. His body bridged the trapped groove for one hard second. The floor plate dipped, then stopped against the bone charm Shenanigan had wedged beneath it.

One needle snapped out.

It struck the inside of Risar’s shield with a tiny tick.

Then silence.

Caleb stared at the needle quivering an inch from his sleeve.

“I am extremely in favor of the shield,” he said.

Risar let out his breath. “Me too.”

Shenanigan looked at the bone charm wedge, then at the shield, then at Risar. “That was not less big, but it worked.”

They crossed the rest more slowly.

Beyond the needle trap, the service passage opened into a chamber that had once been useful and ordinary. That made what the horde had done to it worse.

The old cistern was round, deep, and lined with fitted stone. Dwarven steps spiraled down its inner wall to a dry basin below. Channels entered from three sides where water had once flowed from mountain springs into storage tanks. Iron brackets on the walls had held lamps. A carved band ran around the chamber at shoulder height: fish, waves, hammer marks, and small runes Caleb could not read until Steve’s light touched them.

“For clear water, clear memory,” Caleb read slowly, guided by his spellbook’s murmurs. “For halls below, life above.”

The basin was no longer dry.

A black pool filled the bottom, too thick to be water. Broken drums floated in it. So did strips of hide, splinters of dwarf-carved chests, and silver rings bent out of shape. At the far side of the basin, where the lowest water channel should have been, the horde had carved a mouth into the stone.

It was taller than Thorgall. Wider than a longship's prow. Its lips were rough and uneven, hacked into the old wall with brutal tools. Between them, darkness gathered in a throat that should not have existed.

Thorgall's necklace burned red.

Skrag dropped flat to the floor and started whispering into his own elbows.

Steve took one step back. "That is enough mouth for me."

"Agreed," MechaKirby said.

The chain from the passage ran through a hole in the upper wall, down a row of iron loops, and into the mouth. It hung slack now because Leif's arrow had jammed it, but the lower end vanished between stone teeth.

"If the chain falls," Caleb said, "the mouth opens."

"It is already open," Shenanigan said.

The spellbook's pages fluttered. "No, buddy. This is its listening face."

Nobody liked that.

Thordak stood at the top of the steps and looked down. His first instinct was to break the chain, smash the mouth, call thunder, end the insult. He could feel the storm wanting shape in his hands. The cistern made a perfect bowl. Thunder would roll around it beautifully.

It might also wake everything below.

"Counsel," he said.

The word came easier this time.

Leif knelt and followed the chain with his eyes. "If we cut it here, the lower part may drop."

"Bad," Shenanigan said.

"If we leave it, someone else can pull it," Leif said.

"Also bad."

MechaKirby descended three steps and stopped where the stone changed color.

"The dwarven cistern channels are still sound. The enemy mouth is carved

through one of them. If we can restore pressure through the old water path, we may be able to force the lower mechanism closed rather than open.”

Steve looked at the dry channels. “There is no water.”

Caleb’s spellbook rustled. “There is old water.”

Caleb frowned. “That is not a helpful phrase.”

“It is when dwarves build things properly. Cisterns do not simply hold water. They remember where water belongs. Those runes are not only decoration.”

Steve’s eyes sharpened. “The clear water, clear memory line.”

“Yes,” the book said. “Good. Keep up.”

Thordak looked at Steve. “Can you wake the old runes?”

Steve hesitated. “Maybe with Caleb. Maybe with the book. But if the horde wrote over them...”

“Then we scrape off the bad writing,” Shenanigan said.

Risar looked down at the black pool. “From there?”

Shenanigan followed his gaze. Several green-black marks had been painted around the mouth at the bottom of the cistern. Some were on dry stone. Some were only inches above the black pool.

“I was hoping not from there,” she said.

Skrag lifted his head just enough to speak.

Thordak listened, then grimaced. “He says the small ones were sent down on ropes. If they slipped, the pool made them dream until the stone took them.”

Skrag pressed his face down again.

For once, Shenanigan did not joke.

Thorgall gripped his daneaxe. “Can the pool be fought?”

“Not usefully,” Caleb’s spellbook said. “But it can be denied.”

Caleb looked from the runes to the channels to the mouth. “If the cistern remembers water, and the enemy made it listen for blood and drums, then we need to make it listen to water again.”

Leif glanced toward the upper channels. "There was a spring once."

MechaKirby pointed to the highest channel. "Air movement there. Faint moisture."

Thordak followed the line of the channel up the wall, across the ceiling, and into a narrow grate clogged with ash, bone bits, and strips of hide. Too high for Shenanigan to reach from the steps. Too delicate for a hammer. Too important to ignore.

"Risar," Thordak said, "shield me if the mouth moves. Thorgall, watch the gem. Leif, if anything reaches for the chain, stop it. Shenanigan, keep Skrag alive and honest. Caleb, Steve, book, tell me what not to break."

He glanced at MechaKirby. "Can you lift me?"

MechaKirby considered the grate, the wall, and Thordak's size. "Not gracefully."

"Can you lift Shenanigan?"

"Yes."

Shenanigan pointed at herself. "I have become the tool."

"The precise tool," MechaKirby said.

"Better."

MechaKirby braced his feet on the cistern steps and raised both hands. A pale platform of force formed above his palms, humming softly. Shenanigan stepped onto it with the grave dignity of a queen boarding a suspiciously magical stool.

"Higher," she said.

The platform rose.

The mouth below made a sound.

It was not speech. It was stone remembering hunger. The black pool trembled. One broken drum turned slowly in the thick water though nothing touched it.

Thorgall's necklace flashed. "Now would be a good time."

"Working," Shenanigan said.

She reached the grate and began pulling out ash-clotted hide. The first handful fell into the black pool and vanished without a splash. The second uncovered a

line of clean dwarven carving. The third came away with a wet tearing sound, and cold water began to drip from the grate.

One drop fell.

Then another.

The mouth opened wider.

Leif's arrow struck the chain before it could twitch. Risar planted his shield on the step below Thordak. Thorgall moved beside him, axe ready, necklace blazing. Steve and Caleb stood together at the carved band, hands near but not touching the old runes.

"Read with me," Steve said.

Caleb nodded.

Their voices began uncertainly, then found each other.

"For clear water, clear memory. For halls below, life above."

The spellbook joined them, its old voice suddenly deeper than its small leather body should have allowed. "For clear water, clear memory. For halls below, life above."

Shenanigan tore the last plug free.

Water burst from the grate.

It was not a flood. Not yet. It was a hard, bright stream, cold as snowmelt, striking the upper channel and racing along the old path. The carved band around the cistern flickered blue-white. Old runes woke one by one, not with the angry green-black of the ritual, but with the clean shine of moonlight on a river.

The stream struck the basin.

Where it touched the black pool, steam hissed upward. The mouth convulsed. Stone teeth ground together. The chain jerked, and Leif's arrow snapped in half.

"Chain!" Leif shouted.

Skrag screamed and lunged, not away this time but toward the wall. He threw both arms around the chain above the nearest loop and hung from it with all his small weight.

For one breath, every eye went to him.

“Help him!” Thordak barked.

Risar moved first. He shoved his shield edge into the chain loop, pinning it to the wall. Thorgall drove the haft of his axe through the next loop and twisted. Metal shrieked. MechaKirby dropped the force platform just fast enough for Shenanigan to jump onto the steps instead of into the pool, then thrust one hand toward the chain and wrapped it in pale force.

The mouth fought them.

The mountain groaned. The black pool surged up the lowest steps. A broken drum bumped against the stone and split with a sound like a cracked bone.

Caleb’s hand went to the Wand of Wonder.

The spellbook snapped, “Not yet.”

Caleb froze.

“Read,” the book said.

Caleb read.

Steve read with him.

The water grew brighter.

Risar’s shield bent against the chain loop. Thorgall snarled and twisted the axe haft until the wood creaked. Shenanigan grabbed Skrag by the belt before he could be dragged sideways. Leif put an arrow into the chain hole itself, not to break anything, but to jam the next link as it tried to slip.

Then MechaKirby stepped down one more stair into the rising black water.

Steam hissed around his metal foot.

“MechaKirby!” Steve shouted.

“Continue reading,” MechaKirby said.

He reached below the waterline and caught the chain with both hands.

The blue light from the old runes reflected across his faceplate. For a heartbeat, he looked like something the dwarves might have built themselves in the first proud days of Hearthforge: a guardian placed where water met darkness, patient enough to hold until others finished the work.

The chain stopped.

The water roared.

The mouth slammed shut.

The sound rolled through the cistern and out into the halls, not like a drumbeat, but like a door closing deep inside the world.

Silence followed.

Then the black pool began to sink.

It drained between the closed stone lips in smoking threads, shrinking from the steps, leaving behind broken drums, bent silver, and gray sludge that smelled of old fear. The clear water kept running, washing the basin stones clean inch by inch.

Thorgall's necklace faded from blazing red to ember-dark.

Skrag dangled from Shenanigan's grip, eyes wide, mouth open.

Shenanigan looked at him. "That was almost helpful."

Skrag said something very small.

Thordak listened, then gave a tired huff. "He says he would like that counted in his favor."

"It is counted," Thordak said in Goblin.

The goblin blinked at him as if mercy were stranger than the mouth.

Risar pulled his shield free from the twisted chain loop. The rim was scraped bright where metal had bitten into it. He ran one thumb over the mark, then looked at MechaKirby standing ankle-deep in steaming water.

"Are you damaged?"

MechaKirby lifted one foot. Black sludge slid from the metal. "I am dirty."

"That is not what I asked."

"Also mildly damaged."

Steve hurried down the steps. "Let me see."

Caleb closed his spellbook gently, though the book immediately opened itself again.

“Well,” it said, “that was not the worst version of that.”

Caleb gave it a look. “Was there a better version?”

“Several. Most involved not being here.”

Thordak stood at the edge of the basin and watched clear water reclaim the carved stones. He had not smashed the mouth. He had not called thunder into the bowl. He had asked, listened, and let each hand do the work best suited to it.

The cistern was not safe yet. The lower halls were not safe. Hearthforge was still full of traps, enemies, and old wounds.

But the broken drums in the basin no longer floated in blood-dark water.

For the first time since the last drumbeat died, the mountain sounded less like it was waking and more like it was breathing in sleep.

Chapter 4: The Hearth Without Fire

They did not leave the cistern at once.

Steve insisted on cleaning MechaKirby’s leg before anyone took another step. He had no proper workbench, no lamp oil he trusted, and no quiet room where a sensible person would examine a friend’s damaged foot. He had a damp stair, a strip torn from his own sleeve, and water that had just remembered how to be clean.

“This will be cold,” Steve said.

“I am aware of water,” MechaKirby replied.

“That is not the same thing as holding still.”

MechaKirby held still.

Steve washed black grit from between metal plates and wiped away the gray smear where the pool had bitten at the joint. He worked carefully, with the focus of someone copying a spell into a book: slow hand, sharp eye, no wasted motion. The damage was not deep, but it was ugly. The black water had tried to cling.

Caleb watched over Steve's shoulder until his spellbook said, "Buddy, hovering does not make him mend faster."

"I am not hovering."

"You are almost in his sleeve."

Caleb stepped back.

Leif had climbed halfway around the cistern, studying the old carvings and the channels leading away from the basin. Shenanigan sat on the step above Skrag with one boot planted beside the goblin's hand. She did not tie him. She did not need to. Every time his eyes wandered toward a tunnel, her sling cord made one lazy circle around her finger and his eyes came back.

Thorgall stood where he could see the mouth. It remained shut. His necklace glowed only faintly now, but faintly was not dark.

Risar rested his scraped shield against his knee and looked at the mark the chain had left. It was bright, raw, and honest. He found he liked it.

Thordak stood apart, listening.

At first there was only water: steady trickle from the grate, soft run in the channels, small drops ticking down the cistern wall. Then, beneath that, he heard voices.

Not speech. Not yet.

Movement. Farther in.

"Skrag," Thordak said.

The goblin flinched.

Thordak spoke in Goblin, and Skrag answered in a rush. Thordak listened, asked again, and listened longer. His face changed in small ways while the goblin talked: suspicion, anger, calculation, then something more difficult.

"There is a hearth hall beyond the west channel," Thordak said. "Old dwarf living space. The ritual folk used it for prisoners and supplies. Some horde remnants are there now."

"Ritual folk?" Shenanigan asked.

"His words, not mine. The ones who wanted the mountain awake."

Leif descended the steps without taking his eyes from the west channel. “How many?”

Skrag answered before Thordak translated. He held up both hands, then one hand, then seemed to regret having hands at all.

“He does not know,” Thordak said. “More than five. Fewer than twenty. Some goblins. A hobgoblin with a burned face. Maybe an orc. He says the others are scared of the lower mouth and waiting to see who wins.”

“We won,” Risar said.

Thorgall glanced at the closed stone mouth. “One part.”

That was the truth no one liked.

The west channel began as a water path, but the dwarves had built a narrow walkway beside it. The party followed single file. Clear water ran ankle-deep beside them, carrying soot and gray threads away from the cistern. The farther they walked, the more the air changed. Less blood. Less ash. More old smoke, cold iron, and the stale smell of many frightened bodies breathing in one place.

The passage ended at a bronze grate shaped like woven branches. It had once been beautiful. Someone had bent two branches aside just enough for a goblin to squeeze through.

Shenanigan eyed the gap. “I feel judged by the architecture.”

“Can you see through?” Thordak asked.

She leaned close. “Big room. Benches. Dead hearth. Crates. Movement behind the far table. Someone tried to block the main door from inside.”

Leif crouched beside her and looked through a lower opening. “No one is watching this grate.”

“That is because no one sensible comes through water tunnels,” Caleb said.

Shenanigan smiled. “I love being unsensible.”

Thordak lifted one hand before she could move. “We are not starting with blades.”

Thorgall’s brows drew together. “If they are ritual loyalists...”

“Then they will choose that,” Thordak said. “If they are scared remnants, we do not need to turn them into loyalists by charging in.”

Risar nodded slowly.

This was new. Not mercy; they had all seen mercy before. The new part was how Thordak held it like a tactic instead of a hesitation.

“Skrag goes first?” Shenanigan suggested brightly.

Skrag made a sound like a kettle beginning to scream.

“No,” Thordak said.

Skrag stopped screaming and looked confused.

“Skrag talks,” Thordak said. “From here. He tells them the mouth is shut and the drum room is lost. He tells them we will not kill those who drop weapons and come out.”

Skrag listened to the Goblin version of that, then spoke one small word.

“He asks if it is true,” Thordak said.

Thordak looked at the party before he answered. Not because he did not know his own mind, but because his promise would bind all of them.

Risar lifted his shield. “If they drop weapons, they are under our protection.”

Leif nodded. Steve too. Caleb looked nervous, then nodded harder than necessary. MechaKirby said, “Accepted.” Thorgall hesitated longest, eyes on the red ember inside his necklace.

“If the gem flares?” he asked.

“Then we watch closer,” Thordak said. “Not every scared goblin is Thullgrim.”

Thorgall exhaled. “Then yes.”

Thordak turned back to Skrag. “It is true.”

Skrag crawled to the grate and shouted.

The hearth hall erupted.

Voices yelped, snarled, cursed, and overlapped. Something heavy fell over. Someone shouted back in Goblin, harsh and disbelieving. Skrag shouted again,

pointing at the cistern behind him as if the closed mouth were visible through stone. Thordak added his own voice, deeper, steadier, and far less afraid.

For three breaths, it almost worked.

Then a javelin struck the grate.

It punched through a gap beside Skrag's head and shattered against the wall behind him. Skrag flattened himself so hard his nose scraped stone.

"That was not a dropped weapon," Shenanigan said.

"No," Thordak said.

The bronze grate burst inward.

Risar met the first attacker shield-first. It was a goblin with both eyes wide and a kitchen knife in each hand. Risar knocked him sideways without cutting him. The goblin tumbled into the shallow water channel, sputtered, and lost both knives.

"Down!" Risar roared.

The goblin stayed down.

The second attacker was not so frightened. A hobgoblin with a burned face came over the broken grate with an axe and a strip of ritual cloth tied around one arm. Green-black ash marked his teeth. He saw Skrag and spat a word that needed no translation.

Traitor.

Thorgall's necklace flared.

Leif's arrow hit the hobgoblin's axe hand before the axe could fall. Shenanigan's sling cracked a stone against his knee. Risar drove him back with his shield, and Thordak stepped into the opening, not to finish him, but to fill the room with his voice.

"Enough!"

The word struck the hearth hall like a hammer on a bell.

Inside, the old dwarf room froze around them. Benches lay overturned. Cooking hooks hung above a cold central hearth. Shelves had been stripped bare. Crates and stolen chests formed a crooked barricade near the far wall. Behind it

crouched goblins, two orcs, and three shapes wrapped in blankets who were not holding weapons at all.

Children, Caleb realized.

Not dwarf children. Goblin children, or close enough that the difference did not matter.

The hobgoblin snarled and reached for the axe with his other hand.

Thorgall moved.

For one breath it looked like the old answer again: axe, anger, grief, all of it falling. Then the red gem at his chest pulsed, not bright with warning but dim, as if the danger had already shown itself and was waiting to see what he became.

Thorgall kicked the axe away instead.

The hobgoblin lunged barehanded.

Caleb's hand found the Wand of Wonder.

"Buddy," the spellbook said sharply.

"I know," Caleb whispered.

He did not point it at the hobgoblin. The wand trembled, warm and wild, and for a heartbeat Caleb felt the coming shape of it: not fire, not lightning, not a spear of force. Something that wanted empty ground. Something that wanted room.

He pointed at the cold hearth.

The wand sighed.

Every old ash in the hearth burst into green.

Not flame. Moss.

Soft, impossible moss poured over the stones, bright as spring on a riverbank. Tiny white flowers opened in the cracks. Ferns uncurled beneath the cooking hooks. The moss rolled outward in a thick cushion, swallowing loose ash, coating the slick floor, climbing the legs of benches and the front of the barricade. It wrapped around ankles without binding them, softened the stones without hiding them, and filled the hall with the smell of rain after winter.

Everyone stared.

The hobgoblin slipped.

He landed flat on his back in the moss with a sound that would have been funny in any other room.

Shenanigan blinked. "I want one."

Caleb lowered the wand, looking both delighted and slightly horrified. "I think it helped."

"It helped," Leif said.

Because now the floor showed everything.

The moss grew thin where old dwarven stones were clean. It grew thick and dark where ritual ash had soaked into cracks. It curled away from two hidden pits near the barricade, leaving their edges outlined in white flowers. It climbed one crate and stopped at a line of green-black symbols painted across the lid.

Steve pointed. "That chest."

The blanket-wrapped children began to cry.

The crying did what Thordak's shout had not. One goblin threw down a spear. Another shoved both hands into the air. An orc cursed, looked at the children, looked at the hobgoblin lying in the moss, and dropped a cleaver.

The burned hobgoblin tried to rise.

Thorgall planted one boot on the haft of the kicked-away axe. "No."

The hobgoblin looked up at him with hate.

Thorgall looked back with something harder to fight.

"No more drums," Thorgall said.

The last weapon fell.

It took time after that. Surrender was not tidy. Fear had to be moved one person at a time.

Thordak spoke in Goblin until his voice grew rough. Risar stood where everyone could see his shield and no one had to feel the edge of his sword. Leif watched hands, not faces. Shenanigan collected knives, cleavers, hooks, and one surprisingly nice spoon from places where desperate people had hidden them.

Steve and Caleb knelt by the moss-outlined pits and marked safe paths with broken bench legs. MechaKirby examined the marked chest without touching it. Skrag hovered near the grate, trying to look useful and invisible at the same time. The orc who had dropped the cleaver finally spoke in rough Common. “You close stone mouth?”

“Yes,” Thordak said.

“Drum-priest dead?”

“Yes.”

The orc looked toward the marked chest. “Then do not open that.”

Caleb’s spellbook whispered, “For once, excellent advice from an orc.”

The orc heard it and stared.

“Talking book,” Caleb said, because there was no better explanation.

“Bad cave,” the orc replied.

“Also true.”

MechaKirby crouched by the chest. The moss had climbed to the painted symbols and stopped as if unwilling to cross them. “This is not storage. It is a seal.”

Steve studied the symbols from a careful distance. “A seal on what?”

The orc shook his head. “The priest put dwarf-silver inside. Blood silver. Said if hall lost, break box and lower dark comes up.”

Thorgall’s necklace warmed again.

Not blazing. Warning.

Thordak looked around the hearth hall. The surrendered remnants watched him. So did his friends. So did the goblin children, peering out from blankets with enormous dark eyes.

He could not leave the chest here. He could not open it carelessly. He could not march prisoners through uncleared halls while something like that waited behind them.

He almost wished, for a tired breath, that every choice were as simple as an enemy with a raised axe.

Risar came to stand beside him. “This is why we are here.”

Thordak nodded.

Then he looked at the room again and saw not a battlefield, but an old dwarven hearth hall buried under fear. Benches. Hooks. Shelves. A central firepit where families had eaten before the horde came. A place meant for warmth had become a place where frightened survivors waited for monsters below to decide their shape.

“We make this room safe,” Thordak said. “For them. For us. For the dwarves coming home.”

The words settled over the hall.

Not victory yet.

But a promise large enough to stand on.

Chapter 5: Blood-Silver

The chest did not want to be looked at.

That was the first thing Caleb noticed. Not touched. Not opened. Looked at. Every time his eyes settled on the green-black line painted across its lid, his thoughts slid sideways toward easier things: the moss on the hearth, the goblin children sniffing under blankets, the old dwarven hooks above the dead fire.

“It is shy,” his spellbook said.

Caleb frowned. “That is not better.”

“No. It is much worse.”

The hearth hall had become three rooms in one. Near the broken bronze grate, Thordak and Risar stood with the surrendered horde remnants, sorting fear from threat. Near the old hearth, Shenanigan kept the children and Skrag occupied with an increasingly dishonest story about a market goat that had stolen a jar of honey. Near the far barricade, Caleb, Steve, MechaKirby, Leif, and Thorgall studied the sealed chest.

The burned hobgoblin sat against the wall with his wrists tied in front of him. He had refused to give his name. Shenanigan had named him Scowl, and the name had stayed because he answered to it with his eyes.

“Do not open it,” the orc said again.

“We heard you,” Steve said.

“No. You listen, but you do not hear. Priest said if hall lost, break box. He said dark below would come up hungry and take all.”

Thorgall’s necklace gave a soft red pulse at the word hungry.

Leif studied the floor around the chest. The moss Caleb’s wand had called still grew there, curling away from hidden danger. It made a pale ring around the chest, then thickened on the side facing the old hearth.

“Something runs from the chest toward the hearth,” Leif said.

“The hearth?” Caleb asked.

His spellbook rustled. “Hearths are not only for cooking, buddy. In dwarven halls, a main hearth can be an oath-place, a council-place, a family-place. If you wanted to poison a home, you would not start with the roof.”

Steve crouched near the moss line. “You would start where everyone gathers.”

MechaKirby extended one finger, stopping just above the painted symbols. “The seal is pressure-bound. Breaking the lid releases what is inside. Lifting it may do the same. Burning it likely does the same.”

“Smashing it?” Thorgall asked.

“An efficient way to do the thing we are avoiding.”

Thorgall grunted.

Thordak crossed the room and knelt beside them. “Can we move it?”

The chest creaked.

No one had touched it.

A whisper slipped through the hall. It moved in no language and every language at once, brushing ears, scales, metal, and bone. The goblin children stopped crying. The surrendered orc clenched his jaw. Scowl smiled for the first time.

Thorgall stepped toward him.

“No,” Thordak said.

Thorgall stopped, breathing hard.

Scowl's smile widened. He said one word in Goblin.

Thordak's face darkened. "He says the mountain remembers its enemies."

"Tell him this enemy remembers axes," Thorgall said.

Thordak did not translate.

Instead he looked at the chest, then at the hearth, then at the frightened remnants watching from the walls. The ritual had been built to make them cruel to each other. Break the box and blame the heroes. Keep the box and leave poison in the room. Kill the prisoners and prove the priest right. Spare them and risk being betrayed.

Every choice was bait.

"We need to unmake the promise inside it," Steve said quietly.

Caleb looked at him. "Do you know how?"

"No."

"I appreciate the confidence."

"But I know what it is pretending to be," Steve said. He pointed to the painted line. "This is not a lock. It is a false oath. The priest used stolen dwarf-silver to make the hall promise itself to the thing below."

The spellbook's pages lifted. "Good. Yes. That is almost certainly true, which is rude because I wanted to say it."

Steve flushed but kept going. "Then we do not open the chest. We make the hall remember its real promise first."

Caleb looked toward the old central hearth, now green with wand-made moss. "Clear water, clear memory?"

"Wrong room," Steve said. "Same idea."

The dwarven hearth stones were carved under soot and moss. Not many marks. Just a ring of small symbols around the firepit, half hidden by ash. Shenanigan had been sitting on one while telling her goat story.

"I knew this was a good seat," she said, and moved.

Caleb and Steve brushed moss aside without tearing it. The marks beneath were not grand runes from a king's hall. They were simpler. Names, Caleb realized.

Family marks. A hammer. A cup. A spindle. A little fish. A crooked handprint made by a child and carved over by an indulgent adult.

Thordak lowered his voice. “This was their home.”

Skrag, who had been trying not to listen, looked around the hall as if seeing it for the first time.

The orc did too.

“We need names,” Caleb said.

Leif pointed to the far shelves. “There were clay tags. Some whole.”

The next few minutes became careful work. Leif found storage tags. Shenanigan climbed the shelves and retrieved a cracked family tally board. MechaKirby held the pieces while Steve matched marks. Caleb’s spellbook supplied guesses where old Dwarvish had worn thin. Even Skrag helped, after Shenanigan told him that finding a tag counted in his favor only if he did not eat, hide, or lie about it.

At last Steve stood beside the hearth with seven names.

He read them badly.

The spellbook corrected him three times.

He read them again.

Something in the hearth answered.

Not fire. Warmth.

It rose through the stones, faint at first, then stronger, until the moss shivered and tiny white flowers opened wider. The false green-black line on the chest recoiled like a burned worm.

Scowl shouted and threw himself forward.

Risar caught him with the flat of his shield and drove him back against the wall. “No.”

The chest lid cracked.

Inside, silver screamed.

Every bent ring, brooch, coin, and cup fragment inside the chest tried to become a voice. The sound pressed against their teeth. The goblin children wailed.

Thorgall staggered, one hand over the necklace as it flashed red. The hearth warmth guttered.

Caleb reached for the wand.

Then stopped.

He had already asked enough of wild magic for one room.

“The names!” he shouted.

Steve read louder.

Thordak joined him.

Risar did not know the words well, but he knew what a shield wall sounded like when voices had to hold. He spoke the names after Steve, rough and wrong and strong. Leif added his voice. Shenanigan did too, mangling one name so badly the spellbook snapped a correction in the middle of the screaming. Even Thorgall spoke, each syllable forced through clenched teeth.

The surrendered orc stared at them.

Then he shoved himself upright and spoke the names as best he could.

Skrag followed, squeaking.

One by one, other goblin voices joined. Not because they loved the dwarves. Not because they understood. Because they had lived in a poisoned hearth long enough to want warmth that did not bite.

The hearth flared gold.

The chest burst open.

Nothing came out.

The silver inside lay still: bent, dark, and ordinary. The screaming stopped so suddenly that the quiet felt like snow.

MechaKirby reached in and lifted a broken silver cup. The black stain on it flaked away under his fingers. Beneath it was a maker’s mark shaped like a little anvil.

“Recovered property,” he said.

Thordak looked around the room at the prisoners, the children, the broken benches, the scraped shield, the mossy hearth, and the dwarven names glowing faintly in the stone.

“Not loot,” he said.

No one argued.

Scowl spat on the floor.

Thorgall looked at him, then at the goblin children, then at the axe still kicked far out of reach. His brother’s village had died under things like this. His own old grief wanted simple shapes: enemy, axe, end.

But the necklace had gone dim.

So Thorgall turned away.

That hurt more than striking would have.

“What now?” Leif asked.

The orc pointed to the far door, the one the remnants had tried to block from inside. “Forge road. Priest sent strong ones there. Said if mouth closed, break iron heart.”

“Iron heart?” Caleb asked.

His spellbook sighed. “I was hoping for a nap.”

Chapter 6: The Forge Road

The forge road began behind the barricade.

It was not a road in the open-air sense. It was a broad dwarven corridor, tall enough for Risar to stand straight and wide enough for a cart to pass beside a line of workers. Rusted rails ran down the center. Old soot darkened the ceiling. Every few paces, square alcoves held empty lamp bowls shaped like cupped hands.

The horde had hated this road.

That became clear almost immediately.

They had not decorated it with trophies or marked it with their own signs. They had scarred it. Hammer blows dented the walls. Axe cuts crossed old carvings. Someone had tried to pry out every lamp bowl and failed at most of them. Where

a dwarven inscription arched over the first bend, goblins had smeared mud across it rather than carve over it.

“They were afraid of this place,” Leif said.

“Good,” Thorgall said.

“Not always good,” MechaKirby replied. “People damage what they fear and awaken what they do not understand.”

The prisoners stayed in the hearth hall under Risar’s promise and Skrag’s nervous supervision. It was not perfect. Nothing in Hearthforge was. But the old hearth was warmer now, the marked chest was empty of curses, and the surrendered orc had agreed to keep the children there until the heroes returned.

Scowl was tied to a bench with three knots Shenanigan considered “insultingly good.”

The party moved down the forge road without him.

Thordak led, but not alone. Leif walked two steps ahead where the rails curved, searching for traps. Risar and Thorgall held the middle. Caleb and Steve followed with MechaKirby behind them, still limping faintly but refusing to call it limping. Shenanigan moved wherever she wanted, which somehow meant exactly where she was needed.

The first attack came from above.

A goblin dropped from a lamp alcove with a hooked knife in each hand. He landed on Thordak’s shoulders and screamed into his ear. Two more sprang from a broken cart ahead. A fourth pulled a lever behind a pile of coal baskets.

The rails shook.

From uphill, an ore cart began to roll toward them.

“Back!” Steve shouted.

“No room!” Caleb answered.

There was room to dodge if they scattered. There was not room to keep the group together. The cart was heavy with broken iron, old shields, and stones. It gathered speed fast, wheels shrieking on rails.

Thordak grabbed the goblin on his shoulders and threw him into the wall.
“Risar!”

Risar was already moving.

He planted his shield against the front of the cart.

It was a terrible idea if done alone.

Thorgall hit the cart beside him, axe haft braced across the rim. MechaKirby slammed both metal hands into the back of Risar's shield. Thordak drove his warhammer down between the rails, head wedged against an old iron spike. The cart struck them with a crash that shook dust from the ceiling.

They slid.

Boots scraped. Metal screamed. Risar's shoulders burned. Thorgall snarled through his teeth. MechaKirby's joints clicked. Thordak's hammer gouged sparks from the rail.

The cart slowed.

Not enough.

"Leif!" Shenanigan shouted.

Leif saw it: a side catch on the left rail, dwarven-made, half buried under coal dust. He shot it.

The arrow struck the catch and knocked it sideways. A section of rail shifted with a deep clunk. The ore cart lurched, spilled half its load into a side chute, and lost its killing weight. Risar and Thorgall shoved together.

The cart stopped.

Shenanigan's sling cracked twice in the sudden silence. One bullet took a goblin in the wrist. The other struck the lever-puller in the forehead hard enough to drop him backward into his coal baskets.

"I am beginning to like not dying," Caleb said.

"Keep practicing," his spellbook said.

The goblins who could still move ran.

Thordak started after them, then stopped at the sound from ahead.

Boom.

Not a drum. A hammer.

Boom.

The forge door stood at the far end of the road, a great round slab of blackened stone banded with iron. It was partly open. Orange light pulsed through the gap.

Boom.

Thorgall's necklace brightened.

"Troll?" Risar asked.

"Something that remembers one," Thorgall said.

They reached the door and looked inside.

The great forge had once been magnificent.

Even ruined, it was magnificent.

Four chimney shafts climbed into darkness. Anvils stood on stone blocks carved with worker names. Channels ran in the floor where water could be released to cool metal. Racks for tongs, hammers, chisels, and molds lined the walls. At the center stood the great forge itself, an iron-bellied furnace shaped like a crouching boar, its mouth open and glowing.

Something had chained itself to the furnace.

It had been an ogre once, perhaps. Or part ogre, part troll, part ritual mistake. Its gray-green skin split around iron staples. One arm ended in a forge hammer too large for a human to lift. The other hand held a chain wrapped around the furnace throat. Every time it struck the floor with the hammer, the forge boar's eyes glowed brighter.

Around it, goblins shoveled stolen charcoal and broken dwarf furniture into the fire.

The iron heart, Caleb thought.

The creature raised its hammer.

Boom.

A crack shot across the forge floor toward the nearest water channel.

MechaKirby stepped forward. "If it breaks the channels, the forge may overheat or collapse."

“How do we stop it?” Thordak asked.

“Remove its rhythm.”

Thordak’s eyes narrowed. “Everyone heard that?”

They had.

This time the plan came fast because no one tried to own all of it.

Leif shot the goblins at the bellows, not to kill first but to make them duck and stop feeding the fire. Shenanigan vanished along the left wall, then reappeared above a tool rack and kicked chisels down into a clattering rain. Steve sent a sheet of frost across one water channel, not enough to freeze it shut, but enough to make the next hammer crack veer away from it. Caleb and his spellbook read the forge marks, shouting warnings whenever the creature’s blows threatened a named anvil or old pressure stone.

Risar and Thorgall took the center.

The forge beast swung.

Risar met the hammer with his shield at an angle, not stopping it, turning it. Thorgall struck the hammer haft as it passed, driving it lower. The head smashed into the floor and stuck in a crack.

“Now!” Thorgall shouted.

Thordak breathed fire.

Not everywhere. Not wild.

He sent it low, at Risar’s chosen angle, across the chain around the furnace throat. Risar answered with lightning from his own jaws, blue-white over red, and for a heartbeat fire and lightning braided together around the iron links. The chain glowed.

MechaKirby raised one hand. A ward snapped into place between the heat and the old racks.

Caleb shouted, “Left pin!”

Shenanigan dropped from the tool rack and kicked a locking pin out of the chain bracket.

The chain sprang loose.

The forge beast roared.

Freed from the wrong rhythm, the furnace gave a sound like an old dwarf clearing his throat.

Water surged through the floor channels.

Steam exploded around the beast's feet. The hammer came free, but the creature slipped, and Leif's next arrow struck the raw iron staple at its shoulder. Thorgall's daneaxe followed. It had no new rune, no old name from the forge. It had only steel, strength, grief, and the right opening.

The creature staggered.

Risar stepped into its reach and lifted his shield over Thorgall's exposed side as the hammer fell again. The blow drove Risar to one knee.

Thordak caught his shoulder from behind.

"Up," Thordak said.

Risar rose.

Together they drove forward.

The forge beast fell backward into the steam, not dead yet, but beaten loose from the furnace. The goblins fled through coal chutes and side doors. One stopped long enough to throw down his shovel first.

That one lived.

When the beast tried to rise, Thorgall stood over it. The necklace blazed. The creature's wounds smoked and tried to knit.

"Fire," Thorgall said.

Thordak was there.

So was Steve, sending frost around the edges to keep the old forge from catching.

So was Caleb, shouting which carved stones could bear heat and which could not.

So was Risar, shield raised over them.

The forge beast burned in controlled flame, contained cold, and Thorgall's final axe stroke.

When it ended, the great furnace's glow settled from angry orange to steady red.

MechaKirby touched the furnace side.

“Still sound,” he said.

From somewhere inside the old forge, a small drawer clicked open.

No one moved.

Shenanigan peered at it. “That is either a thank you or a trap pretending to be polite.”

Leif studied the floor. “No new tracks. No wires.”

Inside the drawer lay a stone tablet covered in soot.

Caleb wiped it clean with shaking fingers. His spellbook went very still.

“What is it?” Steve asked.

Caleb read the first line.

“Emergency sealing order,” he said. “If lower delves wake against the hall, close the three hearts: water, forge, and gate.”

Thordak looked back the way they had come.

“Water,” he said. “Forge.”

Thorgall’s necklace pulsed toward the dark beyond the far forge door.

“Gate,” Thorgall said.

Chapter 7: The Gate That Dreamed

The far forge door opened onto stairs.

They went down.

No one liked that.

Hearthforge changed below the forge. Above, the halls had been wounded homes: cistern, hearth, road, forge. Below, the mountain felt older than the dwarves. The stairs narrowed and twisted through stone that had not been squared or polished. Dwarven marks appeared only where someone had carved warnings beside the path.

Caleb read one by lanternlight.

“Do not mine where the stone dreams.”

“Helpful time to mention that,” Shenanigan said.

The third heart was a gate, but not a gate with hinges.

They found it at the bottom of the stairs: a vertical seam in the living rock, taller than the forge door and black as night between two stone faces. Dwarven bands crossed it in three places, each band carved with runes and set with empty silver sockets. The horde had pried many sockets bare. In the gaps, green-black light breathed in and out.

Beyond the seam, something dreamed of opening.

Thorgall’s necklace burned so brightly that he tucked it inside his tunic and it still glowed through the cloth.

“This is the lower dark,” Steve whispered.

“One of its doors,” Caleb’s spellbook said. “Not all. Be grateful for limited disasters.”

The floor before the gate was crowded with enemies.

Not many. Enough.

Two orcs held shields painted with the mountain-mouth sign. A hobgoblin drummer stood behind them with no drum, only two stone mallets and a slab of rock. Three goblins crouched beside baskets of stolen silver. At the center, a thin figure in a ragged priest cloak pressed both hands against the lowest dwarven band.

The priest was not dead.

The ritual room had not held the only one.

He turned before they reached the bottom stair. His eyes were green-black from edge to edge.

“You closed my mouth,” he said in Common, voice dry and echoing. “You cooled my iron. You warmed my stolen room.”

Thordak stepped down the last stair. “Yes.”

“Then come close and close this.”

Every goblin beside the silver baskets began to shake. Even the shield-orcs looked afraid.

“He wants us near the gate,” Leif said.

“Yes,” MechaKirby said. “Because something will happen when the silver enters the sockets.”

The priest smiled.

The goblins grabbed handfuls of bent rings and coins.

Leif fired.

His arrow struck the first basket and spilled silver across the floor. Shenanigan’s sling took the second goblin in the hand. Steve spoke a word that turned the stone under the third goblin slick with frost, and the goblin slid into his own basket with a crash.

Then the shield-orcs charged.

Risar met one. Thorgall met the other. Their weapons rang against shields while Thordak moved toward the priest, not straight, not alone. He waited until MechaKirby lifted a ward, until Caleb shouted that the middle band was the weakest, until Leif forced the drummer to duck.

The stone mallets struck the slab.

Boom.

The gate breathed open a finger’s width.

Cold rolled out.

Not winter cold. Grave cold. Deep stone cold. The kind that had never seen the sun and hated being reminded it existed.

The priest laughed and pressed harder.

Thorgall roared.

For a moment he saw another mountain, another village, another failure. He saw his brother. He saw the name he had heard wrong for so long and the truth of it standing behind the gate like a shape too large for thought.

His axe rose.

The shield-orc in front of him braced.

Leif's voice cut through the cold. "Thorgall! Left knee!"

Thorgall did not ask why.

He struck low.

The orc's stance broke. Risar shoved his own enemy sideways into the opening Thorgall had made. Shenanigan's coin shot flashed between both orcs and struck the drummer's stone slab. It cracked across the middle, ruining the rhythm.

Thordak reached the priest.

The priest touched the lowest band with stolen silver.

Green-black light surged.

MechaKirby stepped into it.

His ward caught the surge and bent, shaking around him like glass in a storm. "Now would be preferable."

Caleb's spellbook shouted, "Buddy, middle band, third empty socket from the left!"

Caleb had one breath to choose.

Wand or hands.

He chose hands.

He dove for the spilled silver, grabbed the broken cup from the hearth chest, and slid it across the floor to Steve. "Clean one!"

Steve caught it, understood, and slammed the old dwarf cup into the empty socket.

The middle band flared blue-white.

The priest screamed.

Thordak hit him with the flat side of the warhammer and knocked him away from the gate. Risar and Thorgall drove both shield-orcs back. Leif put an arrow through the priest's sleeve, pinning him to the floor without killing him.

Shenanigan kicked the remaining basket of stolen silver down the stairs behind them.

The gate was still open.

Only a little.

Enough.

A hand formed in the darkness, huge and unfinished, made of stone, root, and old hunger.

It reached for Thorgall.

Thorgall could not move.

Not from fear. From recognition.

The hand knew him.

Risar saw it and threw himself forward. His shield struck the stone fingers. Fjorglimt blazed, lightning arcing from blade to shield rim to the gate band. It was not enough to break the hand. It was enough to make it pause.

“Little thunder,” Fjorglimt growled, “be the storm wall.”

“I am trying!”

“Then call the storm beside you.”

Risar understood.

“Thordak!”

Thordak turned from the priest.

No speech was needed.

Fire and lightning had braided in the forge. Here they did something stranger. Thordak called thunder into the stone beneath the gate, not a blast outward, but a rolling command through the old dwarven bands. Risar drove lightning through Fjorglimt into the same place. Steve and Caleb spoke the hearth and water words together, tying memory to force. MechaKirby held the ward. Leif shot silver away from goblin hands. Shenanigan dragged Thorgall by the back of his belt just far enough for him to breathe.

Thorgall breathed.

Then he struck the reaching hand.

His daneaxe bit deep into stone that should not have bled.

The hand recoiled.

The gate bands blazed.

“Close!” MechaKirby said, voice strained.

Everyone pushed.

Not physically. Not only. Every piece they had reclaimed pushed with them: clear water, warm hearth, steady forge, clean silver, broken rhythm, spoken names. The gate seam narrowed. The priest shrieked words that shook dust from the ceiling. Scowl’s hatred, Skrag’s fear, the goblin children’s crying, the dwarves’ lost homes, Thorgall’s grief, Thordak’s pride, all of it seemed to gather at the seam and decide what shape the story would take.

The seam shut.

The lowest band cracked.

Then the middle.

Then the highest.

Not broken open. Sealed.

The green-black light vanished.

Thorgall’s necklace went dark.

For the first time since the long hallway, truly dark.

The priest stared at it from the floor. Without the gate light, his eyes were only eyes: old, terrified, and empty.

Thorgall looked down at him.

“No more drums,” he said again.

This time it was not anger.

It was judgment.

Chapter 8: Holding Hearthforge

They did not call Hearthforge safe.

Not at first.

Safe was too large a word for halls that still held broken traps, prisoners, hidden side roads, and a sealed gate no one trusted enough to turn their back on. But the necklace was dark. The water ran clear. The forge breathed steady heat. The hearth held warmth without fire. The lower gate no longer dreamed aloud.

So they called it held.

That was enough to begin.

They spent the next hours doing unglamorous heroic work. They dragged benches across unsafe passages. They marked traps with chalk, moss, and broken spear shafts. They moved the surrendered remnants into the hearth hall and separated those who were frightened from those still watching for a chance to bite. They tied Scowl better. Shenanigan improved the knots and then improved them again because she did not trust the first improvement.

Leif and Thorgall checked every side passage that made the necklace stir. Most held only old bones, dead ash, or goblin trash. One held a living troll-thing no larger than a hound, pale and unfinished, gnawing at a broken drumstick. It hissed when it saw them.

Thorgall raised his axe.

Leif laid a hand on his arm. "Together."

They killed it quickly, with arrow, axe, and a burning brand from the forge. The necklace gave one last angry flare, then dimmed again.

Caleb counted the wand's remaining wildness by feel, not number. It still tingled at his belt, but less eagerly now. He had used it when the room needed wonder instead of flame. That felt important, even if he was not sure he could explain why.

Steve copied the hearth names onto a clean scrap of parchment. His handwriting shook at first, then steadied.

MechaKirby repaired what he could. Not everything. Not even close. But he reset two lamp brackets, braced the broken grate, and shaped bent iron into warning stakes. Every small repair made the halls feel less like enemy territory.

Risar stood watch at the ritual room doors for a while.

Not because the story had started there.

Because from that place he could see the long hallway, the ritual chamber, the hidden crack, and the path toward the cistern. A wall, Fjorglimt had said, chose where fear would enter. For this hour, fear would have to enter through him.

Thordak found him there near what passed for evening underground.

“I am going to send word,” Thordak said.

Risar nodded. “To Grimnar?”

“Yes.”

Thordak held the thought in his mind before shaping it into magic. The spell would carry only a short message. Not enough for all the truth. Not enough for the cistern, the hearth, the forge, the gate, the prisoners, the dead, the almost-dead things still sealed below. A Sending was a horn call, not a saga.

He chose the words carefully.

“Hearthforge outer halls held. Ritual stopped. Water, forge, hearth, gate secured. Bring dwarves, guards, healers. We will hold until you arrive. Come carefully.”

The magic left him like a breath through a door.

For a moment there was only the mountain.

Then Grimnar Ironvein’s voice answered in Thordak’s mind, old and rough and breaking around the edges.

“By every anvil under stone. Hold, friends. We come with dawn, shields, and tears. Tell the halls their children are coming home.”

Thordak closed his eyes.

When he opened them, Risar was watching him.

“He is coming,” Thordak said.

Risar smiled, tired and bright. “Then we hold.”

They held.

The night inside Hearthforge had no stars, but it had watches.

First watch belonged to Leif, Shenanigan, and MechaKirby. Leif heard a goblin try to sneak a knife from under a loose stone and stopped him with one soft word. Shenanigan found three more knives, one needle, and the surprisingly nice

spoon, which she insisted was not a weapon until everyone looked at her. MechaKirby stood by the gate stairs and listened to the sealed dark.

Second watch belonged to Risar, Thorgall, and Steve. Steve brewed bitter herbs in a dwarf pot they had cleaned three times. Risar drank without complaint. Thorgall did complain, which reassured everyone. The necklace stayed dark.

Third watch belonged to Thordak and Caleb.

They sat in the hearth hall while prisoners slept, children whimpered in dreams, and the moss around the cold fire glowed faintly.

“Did we win?” Caleb asked.

Thordak thought about the sealed gate. About the priest tied under MechaKirby’s ward. About the old dwarf names. About how many deeper roads they had blocked rather than explored.

“We won enough for tomorrow,” he said.

Caleb’s spellbook opened one eye-shaped clasp. “That is usually all history gives anyone, buddy.”

Near dawn, if dawn could be guessed through stone, the mountain gave a soft tremor.

Every hero woke.

Weapons lifted. Shields rose. Magic gathered.

Then they heard horns outside the cave mouth.

Not war horns.

Homecoming horns.

Chapter 9: Children of the Hall

Grimnar Ironvein entered Hearthforge with both hands on his axe and tears in his beard.

He was not alone.

Dwarves came behind him in mail, leather, travel cloaks, and work aprons hastily belted over armor. Some carried shields. Some carried lanterns. Some carried healer’s satchels, crowbars, ropes, empty stretchers, and old keys that might no

longer fit anything but had been brought because hope is stubborn. A few were young enough that they could not have remembered Hearthforge except through stories. Others stopped at the cave mouth and touched the wall before stepping inside.

“Our old stone home,” Grimnar said, voice rough with wonder. “Hearthforge.”

No one cheered at first.

The halls were too wounded for cheering.

Grimnar found Thordak in the ritual chamber and gripped his forearm hard enough to hurt.

“You said held,” the old dwarf said.

“Held,” Thordak answered. “Not healed.”

Grimnar looked past him at the broken drums, the cracked runes, the marked passages, the guarded prisoners, the tired heroes. “Held is a word my people have not had for this place in a long time.”

Then he bowed.

Not low. Not politely. Deeply.

The other dwarves saw and bowed with him.

Shenanigan, who had been awake too long, whispered, “I do not know what to do with my hands.”

“Do nothing,” Leif whispered back.

“Horrible.”

The return became work almost immediately. That was how the dwarves honored joy. They checked the cistern and wept when clear water ran. They entered the hearth hall and read the names Steve had copied, correcting two pronunciations and adding nine more from memory. They saw the forge and one elderly smith put both palms against the iron boar’s side, forehead bowed, while his shoulders shook.

At the sealed gate, Grimnar grew very still.

“We lost three delving crews holding this shut,” he said. “Before the horde. Before exile. We thought the seals would last longer.”

“They did,” MechaKirby said. “Long enough.”

Grimnar looked at him, then nodded as if that answer deserved a place in stone.

The prisoners were another matter.

No one pretended it was simple. Some had served the ritual. Some had only survived beside it. Scowl was taken under guard and did not stop glaring until a dwarf woman older than Grimnar looked him in the eye and said something in Dwarvish that made even Thordak glad he did not understand every word. The goblin children were fed. Skrag stayed close to Shenanigan until she told him that if he followed her any longer, she would put him to work.

He followed anyway.

By afternoon, Grimnar gathered the party in the forge.

Not the treasure room. Not a throne room. The forge.

“I promised riches and magic,” he said. “A poor promise, maybe, because it sounds like payment. This is not payment. Payment is too small for a home returned. But a promise made in exile must be kept in the hall if the hall returns.”

Dwarves brought the gifts one by one.

To Thordak they gave mail of mithral rings, light as river shine and edged with storm marks newly etched by Hearthforge hands. Grimnar held it up himself.

“For the one who could have broken every room with thunder, and learned when not to.”

Thordak bowed his head.

To Risar they brought a round shield of bright mithral, blue enamel, and guard-runes. It caught the forge light like sky between clouds.

Grimnar’s mouth twitched. “We heard you opened our ritual doors with your head.”

Risar closed his eyes. Shenanigan made a small delighted sound.

“A heroic method,” Grimnar said. “But my people beg you to use this next time. We have fewer good dragonborn skulls than good shields.”

The forge laughed.

Risar laughed too, and when he took the Shield of the Huskarl, the oath-rune along its rim brightened under his hand.

Fjorglimt hummed approvingly. “Better tool, little thunder.”

To Thorgall they gave a dwarven daneaxe with a hammer poll and a blade etched with a cracked mountain-rune. The red gem at his chest glowed once, not in warning, but recognition.

“Trollbane,” Grimnar said. “Not because a weapon makes a warrior brave. Because a brave warrior should have a weapon that knows his road.”

Thorgall took it with both hands.

To Shenanigan they gave a haversack fitted close to the back, with clever straps, hidden seams, and pockets that seemed to understand motion. Then a small belt pouch, heavier than it looked, with separate little channels inside.

“For someone who treats walls as suggestions,” Grimnar said. “And coins as ammunition, apparently.”

Shenanigan opened her mouth, closed it, opened it again. “I have never felt so understood.”

To Caleb they gave a mithral lens set into a wand-socket ring, delicate and precise, with tiny dwarven marks around the edge.

His spellbook leaned forward. “Oh. That is properly made.”

Caleb smiled. “Thank you?”

“Not you, buddy. Them.”

To MechaKirby they gave a rune core built like a small shield-shaped plate, fitted with blue-white stone and careful metal channels.

“For the guardian who stood in poisoned water and called it dirt,” Grimnar said.

MechaKirby accepted it. “It was also dirt.”

“Aye,” Grimnar said. “Sacred dirt now.”

To Steve they gave a runestone clasp for his spellbook, strong enough to protect pages from fire, water, and crushing stone. He traced the edge with gentle fingers.

“For the one who read names back to a stolen hearth,” Grimnar said.

Steve could not answer for a moment. Then he said, "I will keep them carefully."

To Leif they gave a quiver of dark leather, pale wood, and small sighting-runes.

"For the eye that saw the chain, the rail catch, the hand, and the safer shot," Grimnar said. "Some arrows kill. Better arrows tell friends where courage should land."

Leif slung it over his shoulder and nodded once, deeply.

There were other gifts too: silver returned where it could be returned, coin where it could not, letters of honor for those who had helped before, and smaller tokens promised for companions not present in the final clearing. Grimnar named Kris, Netheril, and Shadow among those remembered for the first push toward Hearthforge. The hall would not forget early courage because later courage had finished the road.

At last the gifts were done.

The forge grew quiet.

Grimnar turned toward the open door, where clear water could be heard far off, and the hearth hall beyond it glowed with returned lamps.

"Hearthforge is not healed," he said. "Not yet. Some lower roads will stay sealed. Some dead must be named. Some rooms must be cleaned by hands that know what they are touching. But the mountain did not wake. The horde does not hold our hearth. Our forge breathes."

He looked at the party.

"You have given us the work of living."

Outside, through halls that had carried drums, dwarven voices began to sing.

Not loudly. Not triumphantly. A work song at first, low and steady, the kind sung when lifting stone or hauling timber. More voices joined as it moved through the old rooms. The cistern gave it water. The forge gave it warmth. The hearth gave it names.

Thordak listened.

Risar stood beside him, new shield on his arm.

Thorgall's necklace stayed dark.

Caleb's wand rested quiet at his belt.

Shenanigan tried three different pockets in her new haversack and looked offended by how well each one worked.

Leif watched the hall entrances out of habit, but for the first time in Hearthforge his shoulders lowered.

Steve held his clasped spellbook as if it were a promise.

MechaKirby stood very still, blue optics reflecting forge light.

Thordak thought of the words he had sent to Grimnar: We will hold until you arrive.

They had.

Now, at last, Hearthforge could hold them back.