

# THE RETURN OF THE KEEPERS



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## The Halls of the First Earthquake

Beneath the mountain's ancient vaults, where shadows clung to the rock walls like sleeping animals and the earth's deep rumble was only a distant echo of millennia past, lay the hall the ancients called only hesitantly: the Hall of the First Tremor. Once, so the songs said, the mountain had first revealed its breath here and welcomed the dwarves from the rock's womb. The walls were crisscrossed with runes, their lines so fine and so ancient that no one knew which smith had carved them. They radiated no light, yet their presence filled the space with a quiet alertness, as if listening for something stirring in the earth's deepest heart. The floor itself seemed to vibrate softly with every step, not strongly enough to startle the smiths, but noticeably enough that every old dwarf frowned at the thought of the stories the stones could tell.

Borin, son of Dûrmor, stood at the entrance to the hall, his gaze sweeping like a seeker trying to retrieve a familiar song from a long-forgotten dream. His beard, held in place by iron rings, fell heavily across his chest, and the scars on his arms spoke of battles fought in tunnels long since buried beneath the mountain's weight. But today, there was no war in his eyes, only a restlessness he could not immediately grasp. Something had drawn him from his chambers, a barely perceptible tremor that had whispered through the layers of stone, a sound understood only by those who had dedicated their lives to listening to the rocks. The hall was unusually silent, and even the distant sounds of the forges barely penetrated, as if the mountain itself had held its breath to decide who might enter. Borin knelt, placed his palm on the floor, and closed his eyes. A faint, sluggish pulse rippled through the stone beneath his skin, no stronger than the heartbeat of a sleeping animal, yet full of that ancient power that permeated every vein of the mountain. It had been no ordinary tremor. It was a call.

The dwarf straightened, squared his shoulders, and stepped deeper into the hall, which was high enough to hold a giant and wide enough to accommodate an entire army. Yet it was empty, as empty as Borin hadn't seen it in decades. No smith worked at the anvils, no apprentice polished the runic inscriptions, and not even the distant sound of a passing watchman could be heard. All this intensified the feeling that something deep within the mountain had awakened. Borin stepped to the ancient fracture in the center of the hall—a fine crack that had formed long, long ago, so the legends told, when the mountain itself first raised its voice. He examined the fissures, which had noticeably changed. They seemed fresher, clearer, not like the work of bygone ages, but as if made by a hand that had touched the rock only yesterday. "The mountain is moving again," he murmured softly, almost reverently, and the silence of the hall seemed to swallow his words. "Whatever this heralds... it is not for me alone." But deep down, Borin already knew: This was only the beginning.

Borin paused for a moment before the fracture, as if listening for an echo only he could hear. But the mountain fell silent again, mute as an ancient king who only raises his voice when the world is about to tremble. Finally, the dwarf turned and trudged deeper into the hall, his heavy boots barely making a sound on the worn stone. The runes around him seemed to watch him pass—not with eyes, but with that formless awareness possessed by the oldest creatures of the mountains. They had witnessed countless ages, and the thought that they were now being alerted once more by a new rift sent a shiver down Borin's spine. He remembered what the stone seers had once said: that the mountain only spoke when great upheavals were imminent. And never, they said, had it spoken with joy.

Further ahead, where the hall opened into a wide circular passage, Borin noticed a faint glow. It wasn't torchlight, not the warm fire of a master blacksmith, but a strangely pulsating glimmer, hovering like mist above the ground. Borin frowned. Instinctively, he reached for the handle of his axe, but then paused. The light wasn't threatening—more curious, probing, as if trying to discover who was disturbing his silence. Cautiously, Borin approached until he stood above the shimmer. The stone beneath him vibrated slightly, and the light emanated from tiny cracks in the ground, scarcely wider than a human hair. It seemed as if a breath of ancient magic was rising from the depths of the mountain itself. Borin's breath caught. Never before had he seen cracks carry light. This could only mean one thing: the ancient power, the one that had slumbered in the depths before the time of kings, was stirring once more. And wherever she moved, something dark followed close behind. Borin's hand clenched around the axe handle, not out of fear—out of certainty that there was now no escape from what was to come.

In the distance, he heard hurried footsteps. The sound echoed through the hall, absorbed by the walls, yet still clearly discernible. Someone was approaching quickly, almost too quickly for a dwarf, and the next moment a guardian rounded the corner, panting, eyes wide. "Borin! By the Forge Fathers... you must come!" He pointed back toward the upper halls with a trembling hand. "The council has assembled. The Stone Fathers are summoning you personally. It concerns..." He trailed off as his gaze fell upon the pulsating veins of light on the floor. His face paled. "By all the runes... so it's true." Borin simply nodded. Words would have been unnecessary at this moment. Without further hesitation, he turned and followed the guardian. The mountain had spoken. And its voice would soon echo throughout all the halls.

The two dwarves' footsteps echoed through the long corridors as they left the Hall of the First Tremor behind. The sound was uneven, for the Watchman hurried ahead while Borin followed with deliberate resolve. The path led past buttresses of ancient rock, so intricately hewn that even the sharpest edges withstood the light, melting softly into the shadows. The air smelled of stone, metal, and a trace of soot, but today another, unfamiliar scent mingled with it—a heaviness that swept through the tunnels like a breath of cold, deep wind. Borin felt it creeping across his skin, and the thought that the mountain itself had expelled something made his grip on the axe tighten even further. Each step brought him closer to what was to come, and the further they went, the more the unease in his stomach grew into a crushing certainty.

As they reached the upper halls, the atmosphere changed abruptly. The familiar clang of forges hung in the air, but it sounded muffled, as if even the hammers had grown cautious. Dwarves stood huddled together in groups, whispering excitedly and casting nervous glances toward the corridors from which Borin and his companion were emerging. Some nodded to him, but their eyes held the same unease Borin had felt. The Warden pushed his way through the crowd, clearing a path for them until they stood before the heavy doors of the council chamber—massive wings of ebony and iron, adorned with ancient symbols. Two guardians of the council stood before them, their halberds clutched tightly, as if any tremor of the earth would compel them to raise their weapons at once. Upon seeing Borin, they silently opened the doors, and a warm, golden light spilled down into the corridor.

Inside the room, the atmosphere was heavy, like the mist from a forge fire. The Stonefathers sat in a semicircle, each on a throne of unhewn rock that seemed to grow directly from the mountain's core. Their beards were long and gray, their eyes sharp like those of someone who had lived more centuries than other dwarves will ever count. Borin felt the respect that slowed his steps, but also the weight upon his shoulders. "Borin, son of Dûrmor," boomed the voice

of the First Stonefather, deep and ancient like the echo of a collapsing mine shaft. "You have heard the mountain's call." There was no question. Borin stepped forward and bowed slightly. "Yes, Father of the Halls. The stone trembled, and the ancient fissures now bear light. I have never seen anything like it." A murmur rippled through the ranks of the council members, and some exchanged worried glances. The Second Stonefather tapped his bone seal on the rocky arm of his throne. "The Runeforge reports similar signs. The mountain is opening ancient paths long closed. We believe something stirring beneath Blackground is shifting." Borin's heart beat faster. Beneath Blackground lay the deepest mines, places few dared venture. "What does the Council demand of me?" he finally asked. The First Stonefather rose slowly, and the hall fell silent. "Go down, Borin. See with your own eyes what the mountain proclaims. For this is no ordinary tremor. The depths call—and one must be the first to answer its voice."

Borin felt the gaze of the Stonefathers upon him, heavy as the weight of a falling pillar, while the silence of the council chamber enveloped him like a thick fog. The words of the First Stonefather still echoed within him, and it was as if the mountain itself had placed its hand on his shoulder and pressed him in a direction no dwarf could escape. But before he could reply, the ground beneath their feet trembled again, this time so subtly that it was more of a whisper than a quake. The torches along the walls flickered briefly, as if caught in an invisible gust of wind. Some of the council servants glanced nervously around, but the Stonefathers remained still, their faces impassive, as if they had anticipated this slight tremor.

The Second Stonefather, a dwarf with a voice like crumbling rock, leaned forward. "This is no accident, Borin. The mountain does not speak to many, and when it does, there is a reason. The cracks you saw... they have been reported in other places as well. Small, glowing lines, almost invisible, but they are growing." His eyes narrowed, and Borin could see something in them that he rarely saw in the Elders: fear. "We do not know what they mean. Not even the ancient writings mention such a light. Yet everywhere it appears, the sentinels report a sound, faint and distant, like the echo of an ancient hammer striking deep beneath the stone."

Borin snorted softly through his nose. "Then it's time to find that hammer." But as he spoke the words, he realized how great a task this was. No one who had ever ventured far beneath the Blackground had ever returned. The ancient tunnels down there were steeped in stories that even the bravest dwarves whispered. Stories of shadows that moved even though there was no light. Of voices in dead passages that belonged to no one. And of an eye, a single eye, that hovered in the darkness and devoured those who ventured too deep into the mountains. Perhaps they were only stories. But perhaps, Borin thought, the ancients had known more than they had written down. The truth often hid between the lines, and sometimes it remained silent for centuries before speaking again.

The Third Stonefather, the eldest among them, rose with difficulty from his seat. His beard reached his knees, and his voice was little more than a croak, yet it pierced the room like the creaking of a great gate. "Borin, son of Dûrmor... you shall not go alone." A murmur rippled through the hall. Borin raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Not alone? Whom does the Council send to my side?" The old man gestured toward a shadowy corner behind the thrones. Two figures stepped forward, wrapped in heavy cloaks, their faces barely illuminated by the torchlight. "The brothers of the Runewatch," said the old man. "They saw the same as you. And they bear the legacy of those who once guarded the halls when the mountain was still young." As the two dwarves drew nearer, Borin recognized the symbol on their breastplates: a circle of broken ore, bisected by a single, straight line. It was the symbol of the ancient guardian line, which was believed to have died out centuries ago.

"We have heard the call," said the taller of the two brothers in a deep voice. "The mountain calls for us. And we will go wherever it leads." The other nodded curtly and studied Borin with quiet determination. Borin met his gaze and felt a spark of trust ignite within him. If the mountain truly spoke, then it was no coincidence that these men stood by its side. The First Stone Father raised his voice again. "You have little time. The cracks grow brighter with each passing hour. And when what lies beneath awakens..." He finished speaking. He didn't need to. The silence that followed was filled with unspoken horror.

Borin placed his hand on the handle of his axe, as if to make sure it was still there. "When do we leave?" The answer came immediately, without hesitation, without a flicker in the council's eyes. "Now," said the First Stonefather. "The mountain waits no longer."

Borin and the two brothers of the Runewatch strode down the long corridor that descended from the council chamber like a vast, stony abyss, waiting for millennia to be swallowed once more. The ground beneath their feet vibrated gently, almost imperceptibly, yet regularly, like a muffled heartbeat deep within the mountain's flesh. To most dwarves, it would have been merely a tremor, nothing to write home about, but Borin had spent his entire life in the halls of the earth and knew: this pulse was not normal. It did not sound like the natural breathing of the rock. It was a rhythm, a beat driven by something. Something that lived. Something that drew nearer.

To the right and left of the group hung heavy banners from the kingdoms' earliest centuries. Their edges were frayed, their colors faded, yet they bore a pride that could not be erased. Some displayed hammers and anvils, others the ancient flame of the smiths' forefathers, still others the mountain peaks that dwarves had called home since time immemorial. As a breeze swept through the halls, they moved slightly—too slightly, Borin thought. As if it were not the wind, but the mountain's breath that brushed against them. The younger of the two brothers, a massive dwarf with glowing amber eyes, noticed Borin's gaze. "The banners are restless," he murmured. "They were like this last..." He trailed off. His brother finished the sentence: "...when the First Tremor shook the halls." Borin remembered the old tales. They spoke of a fissure in the depths, from which light and darkness had crept forth together. The thought made him shiver, even though the air was as warm as the embers in a forge.

Finally, they reached the archway to the lower gallery, an ancient passage that led down into the depths where the shadows were older than the dwarven folk themselves. The arch was hewn from a single block, and above it ran an ancient inscription, its runes barely legible. But Borin knew it by heart; every dwarf who had studied the legends of the ancients knew it. "Where the stone awakens, follow it—and fear not the depths." The elder brother of the Runewatch, whose name was Gadrim, laid his hand upon the inscription. "These words date from the time before the first kings," he said. "Yet they have never been truer than now."

Then it suddenly rang out—a dull, guttural sound that seemed to emanate directly from the rock above their heads. The walls trembled, not violently, but with an intensity that reverberated through their bones. Dust trickled from the cracks in the ceiling, and the gallery banners flapped so violently that their heavy fabrics rattled like sails in a storm. Borin instinctively grabbed his axe as the brothers raised their hammers. The sound was not natural. No earthquake sounded like it. No crack in the stone sang with such uncanny depth. It was a voice. A voice that carried not a sound, but a feeling—an ancient echo from long-forgotten ages, rippling through the halls like a breath, making the air heavy.



“The mountain is calling,” whispered the younger brother. “No,” corrected Gadrim in a rough voice. “It’s warning us.”

A second rumble followed, closer, more definite. And with it came a sound that made Borin's blood run cold: a distant, clanging thump, like metallic blows, yet erratic, distorted, as if a blacksmith with a broken arm were hammering an anvil. It repeated at irregular intervals, filling the air with an unholy echo that seemed to bow the walls of the hall. The younger brother narrowed his eyes. "That's no dwarf's hammer blow. That's... corrupted." And he was right. There was something wrong with the sound—something disturbingly lifeless, yet struck with intent.

Borin felt his stomach clench. “We have to go further down,” he said firmly. “The longer we wait, the closer it gets.” The brothers nodded, and together they crossed the threshold of the archway. The air beyond was different—cooler, denser, filled with the smell of wet stone and a distant whiff of metal that tasted like rust. The shadows deepened, and the torchlight didn't reach far. But it wasn't the darkness that worried Borin. It was the feeling of being watched. Not by eyes, but by something lurking within the stone itself, like a thought that had been hidden for too long.

Suddenly the metallic clangs ceased. The silence that followed was oppressive. The torches crackled, as if they themselves dared not burn. Then, very faintly, barely more than a breath: a whisper. It crept from the cracks in the floor, swept over the walls, danced between the pillars. Words without language, a sound felt more than heard. The hair on the back of Borin's neck stood on end. "The Deep is awake," Gadrim said hoarsely. "Something... is waiting."

Borin took a deep breath. "Then we won't wait any longer."

And together they descended—with the sound of the first tremor at their backs and the darkness of the mountain before them, which would now reveal its secrets.

## A council in the twilight of the mountain

A dim light lay over the upper halls, as if the mountain itself had decided to keep the sun from its heart. The torches along the walls burned, but their flames were weak, flickering, as if they feared that dark premonition that crept through the passages like an invisible beast hiding its teeth in the shadows. The dwarves who worked at the forges or patrolled the passages felt it—a chill in the air that wasn't from cold. Again and again they looked over their shoulders or listened in directions where there was nothing to hear. The mountain's halls had changed. And everyone born beneath stone knew: that was a bad omen.

News of the tremor had spread swiftly, even faster than light could travel through the sprawling tunnels. Before Borin and the Runewatch brothers reached the council chamber, a pervasive unease had settled over the entire realm like fine dust creeping into every crevice. No one spoke of it aloud, yet every whispered word echoing off the walls carried the same question: What had the mountain sensed? For a tremor in the depths was always a warning—a distant cry that few could interpret. And never before had it crept through the passages with such urgent force, like a heartbeat suddenly accelerating, as if the mountain knew that something greater than the dwarves themselves was approaching.

As Borin stepped once more through the great gate of the council chamber, the twilight within seemed even denser, almost tangible. Even the golden light from the enormous lamp bowls on the walls barely managed to push back the shadows. The Stone Fathers had already assembled, but their brows were deeply furrowed, and a heaviness lay upon their seats that Borin had rarely seen. One of the elders rose slowly, his long beard shimmering in the dim light like silver braid. "The mountain is losing its balance," he spoke in a faltering voice that nonetheless filled the entire hall. "The Rune Keepers report that the light flickers in the ancient symbols. The smiths report that the hammers no longer strike in the same rhythm. And in the deepest tunnels..." He paused, the words suddenly seeming too heavy. "...in the deepest tunnels, the Keepers hear voices."

A dull murmur rippled through the council members. Borin stepped forward, shoulders broad, gaze steady. "I saw the light," he said. "I saw the cracks that glowed. And I felt the mountain's pulse. Whatever is awakening down there, it is not the work of orcs, goblins, or any brood from the outer lands." His words echoed through the hall like the slow thump of a massive anvil. "The mountain itself is calling us. Or warning us." An older councilman, his eyes sunken deep, raised his hand. "There are legends," he began softly, "of events that occurred so long ago that only stone has preserved their memory. Back then, it is said, the mountain trembled, and runes began to glow. Back then... the abyss rose." The words seemed to lower the temperature in the room.

Borin felt the council members' eyes turn toward him, laden with unspoken worries. But before the Stone Father could speak further, Borin felt something—something cold, distant, yet distinct. It wasn't a sound, it wasn't a tremor. It was a pull in the stone, a swaying felt only by those who had spent their lives at the rock's core, their ears and hearts at the heart of it. An omen. A whisper that made his skin tingle. And Borin knew in that moment: The council didn't have much time left.

"The mountain isn't just made of stone," he said finally, his voice firmer than before. "It's alive. And now... it's trying to speak. We must listen before it's too late." A silence fell over the hall, as perfect as the darkness of a closed mine shaft. And everyone knew: this was only the beginning of what would stir in the depths.

The Second Stonefather rose slowly from his throne, the golden runes carved deep into the stone casting a pale light on his face, etching the lines of his sorrow into sharp relief. "You speak of voices in the deepest tunnels," he murmured, stroking his beard with his fingers. "But the watchers who heard them did not return. Only one came back up, and his words were... incoherent." Some council members lowered their gaze, others stared hard into the darkness beyond Borin, as if seeking answers there that the council chamber could not provide. "He spoke of light," the Stonefather continued, "of a greenish gleam deep within the rock. And of an eye that watched him." The word "eye" seemed to split the air; an uneasy murmur rippled through the hall and then died away as quickly as it had come. Borin remembered the old stories the elders told only on the darkest winter nights—stories of the Deep Keepers and the creatures banished beneath the mountain eons ago. But he pushed the thought away. Stories were stories, and the stone told its own.

"The mountain didn't summon us for no reason," Borin finally said. "It shows us the cracks, it makes its runes flicker... and again and again, this throbbing in the depths, like a hammer searching for an anvil." He folded his arms and took a step forward. "I felt the same blows as the guardians. But their irregularity..." He shook his head. "No blacksmith would strike like that. No tool would produce such sounds. It sounds as if someone is trying to work their way



through the stone itself—but not with our tools.” The two Runewatch brothers, who stood at the side of the hall, nodded slowly. They had heard the same sound, and both knew it was something that could not have come from the hand of a dwarf.

Another Stonefather rose, an old dwarf with deep-set, age-clouded eyes. “We have reports from the western chambers,” he said. “Two smiths reported that the rock beneath their feet suddenly grew warm. And not warm from fire or smith's glow—it was a living, pulsating sensation, as if the mountain itself were stirring.” Borin felt a shiver run down his spine. That the mountain moved was not unknown in the legends, but this... was different. “And then,” the old Stonefather continued, “something seemed to breathe within the stone.” Again came that silence—a silence deeper than any tremor. A silence that made the torches crackle.

Finally, the First Stonefather spoke, his voice cutting through the fear like the blow of a warhammer. “Enough of whispering. We must gain certainty. The Council can no longer rely on stories, and we must not allow fear of ancient myths to guide our decisions.” He looked at Borin. “You were the first to see the light. You were the first to find the cracks, even before they grew larger. And your hearing for the Stone is stronger than any other Guardian’s.” His words echoed heavily in the chamber. “Therefore, you shall go into the depths and report what awakens there.”

Borin nodded slowly, for he had expected it. “I am going,” he said simply. “But I am not going blindly.” He gestured to the brothers of the Runewatch. “These men feel the same call. The mountain does not draw one of us down alone—it calls many voices to the same place.” The older brother raised his head. “We will go by your side,” he said. “And if the mountain tests us, let its trials know that we are not weak.”

The First Stone Father sat back, but his eyes never lost their hard glint. “Then let the Council open the way for you. Take what you need: weapons, light, runes... and your courage. For I fear it will be the first thing tested.” It was not a threat. It was a fact.

And as Borin felt the ground vibrate slightly again, he knew: The mountain hadn't summoned the dwarves by chance. He had warned them – and the warning wasn't over yet.

The council chamber grew quieter as the Stone Fathers sat down again, one by one, as if their ancient bones groaned under the weight of their newfound knowledge. But it wasn't just age that stirred their movements—there was fear, that quiet, deep fear even the hardest dwarves wouldn't admit. Borin felt this atmosphere like a pressure on his chest. The council chamber, usually brimming with authority and decisive action, felt today like a place where the mountain itself listened, weighing every breath. The twilight filtering through the tall windows seemed to thicken the shadows. There was no chance in this moment.

Gadrim, the elder of the Rune Brothers, stepped forward, his cloak rustling softly. “Venerable Stone Fathers,” he said, his voice like the farthest thunder, “whatever calls down there—it is not new. It is ancient. Older than our sagas. I have studied the runes in the deepest chambers. Some are so eroded that even by magma light scarcely a wreath remains. Yet the few lines that do survive...” He hesitated, glancing at Borin as if to ensure that someone else would carry his words with the same solemnity. Then he turned back to the elders. “They describe an awakening. Not an awakening of beings as we know them. But an awakening of the Stoneheart itself.”

A murmur rippled through the row of council members. The Third Stonefather, a broad-shouldered dwarf with harsh features, rose abruptly. "Impossible!" he cried. "The Stoneheart is a myth! A poetic embellishment! Nothing more than the exaggerated prattle of old smiths who have spent too much time in lonely forges!" Gadrim didn't flinch, but his eyes narrowed. "And yet," he said softly, "something throbs within the stone. You yourselves have felt it. How often has the mountain spoken in the last centuries? How often have we felt a tremor that couldn't be explained by collapse, tremor, or mining?" His words hung in the air, heavier than the chains of an ore wagon.

Borin noticed the younger council servants whispering nervously to one another. Some had their hands on their belts, as if gripping their tools for support. He understood them all too well. His own knees felt strangely light, as if they were about to give way. Yet he stood firm. "The mountain speaks," he said in a calm voice that nonetheless filled the room. "And the depths listen." The First Stonefather gazed at Borin for a long moment, and it was a look the dwarf could not avoid. It was the look of a man who knew a decision had been made even before it was spoken.

"Then so be it," the elder finally said. "We will begin the exploration. You three will descend, further than any guardian has for generations. The council grants you full authority—and all the means you require." He turned his head slightly and signaled to one of the servants. A short while later, heavy footsteps echoed through the chamber. Six warriors of the Sentinel entered, each armed with a runic spear whose tips glowed faintly. A dwarf in a smith's cloak, presumably a master of the Greybeard clan, followed them, carrying a wooden box held in iron. He set it down before Borin and opened the lid. Inside lay three silver discs, each inscribed with a different band of runes.

"Runes of Growth," the smith explained in a gruff voice. "Ancient protection. You place them against the wall of a tunnel—and when something dangerous approaches, the metal begins to sing. If someone reaches for you, they tear apart and warn you with a high-pitched tone." Borin picked up one of the discs and examined it. The engravings on it were ancient, older than any tool he knew. No dwarf of his time could have accomplished such work. The Stonefather continued, "You have four days. After that, the Council closes access to the Lower Chambers. We must be sure that nothing can rise from the depths...unprepared."

The warning hung heavy in the air. It was more than a measure. It was an admission that the mountain might harbor an enemy the dwarves had feared since time immemorial. And Borin knew: if the depths awoke, the dwarves would stand on the brink of a war the likes of which they had never known.

The First Stone Father rose and uttered the final sentence, as if it were a blow carved into the stone itself: "Go. And bring us back the truth – before the depths themselves tell it."

Borin felt the air in the council chamber grow thicker as the First Stonefather's words faded away. It wasn't just the weight of the decision that settled over everyone like a cloak of ore—it was the feeling that the mountain itself watched over every syllable. The twilight filtering through the tall windows had darkened further, and the torches on the walls flickered as if competing with an unseen force trying to extinguish their light. In all his years, Borin had never seen the mountain seem so restless. It was as if it were listening. As if it were waiting.

Gadrim leaned over the open boxes containing the ancient rune discs and ran his finger over the engravings. "This work dates from a time when the dwarves still knew the purity of the

runes," he murmured. "Before the smiths argued over their interpretation. Before the lines changed." He raised his gaze. "These runes weren't forged. They were born." Borin frowned. "Stones are born?" Gadrim nodded slowly. "In a way. These ones grew. From the rock itself. The ancients called them Heart Shards of the Mountain. It is said they only responded when the depths themselves stirred."

The younger brother, Barim, stepped forward. "It is said... they sang last, when the original guardians fell." A silence descended upon the chamber like a shadow.

The name of the Ancient Keepers echoed heavily. Few dared to speak of them at all. Not even in the smiths' songs were they fully mentioned. They were too old, their deeds too great, their victories too terrible and dearly bought. Whatever they had once conquered had been banished deep beneath the mountain—to where no dwarf ever descended again. And now... the runes stirred once more. Borin felt a tingling chill creep down his neck. Something sealed away in unimaginable times was stirring again. And he was about to see it with his own eyes.

A council servant with a young face and a thin beard stepped forward and bowed hastily. "Highly esteemed Stone Fathers, the southern section of the tunnel chain reports a new crack. It's larger than the others—and it's growing." The First Stone Father looked up sharply. "How fast?" The servant swallowed. "It...it was barely visible an hour ago. Now it's a hand's breadth wide. And it's glowing." A sigh of relief rippled through the council.

The Rune Brothers exchanged a look that said everything neither dared to speak. Borin straightened his shoulders. "We must leave immediately." The First Stone Father nodded. "Aye. But don't go without a guide. The Guardians of the Stone Paths will lead you until the passages narrow. After that, you're on your own."

Another council servant stepped forward, this time an older one, with a stern look. "The foremen request that you be given something before you leave." He lifted a massive chest reinforced with ore. Borin opened it carefully and found three belts inside—each made of thick, dark leather, with inlaid layers of metal and ancient protective runes. "Traveling belts of the First Smiths," the servant explained. "Light, yet sturdy. And they... will keep you warm." Borin raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Warm you?" "The mountain is not warm everywhere, my friend," the Stonefather replied. "In its depths, there are places where even a flood of fire grows cold. These runes will protect you from the cold that dwells there." Borin could scarcely imagine how cold the rock could become in such regions—yet he took the belt without hesitation. He would need all the help the mountain could offer.

Then, as if on cue, the entire council rose. The Stone Fathers, the warriors, the servants – all stood still, heads bowed. The First Stone Father spoke the words that, since time immemorial, had only been uttered in moments of dire need: "The mountain opens its breath for you. You shall step into its shadows. You shall hear its warning. And you shall stand when others fall." It was the ancient oath of the Deep Wanderers.

Borin felt its weight like a stone on his heart – and at the same time a fire that flared up in his chest like a forgotten ember. He was ready. Or as ready as a dwarf could be for something unknown.

The stone fathers lowered their hammers, and a thunderous echo filled the hall as they struck the stone three times. A cry, a command, a blessing.

Gadrim murmured: "The mountain calls us deeper, Borin. Deeper than any dwarf has ever gone willingly."

Borin nodded. "Then we will follow the call."

And so the council's twilight ended – and the descent began in a few moments. For beneath Schwarzgrund, in the still nameless depths, something was listening. Something that loved silence. Something that had now awakened.

The footsteps echoed like ancient drumbeats as Borin, Gadrim, and Barim followed the servant who led them out of the council chamber and into the long, narrow passages that descended to the southern path of the realm. The sound of their footsteps was different than before; it seemed heavier, more muffled, as if the stone itself were trying to swallow every sound. It was as if the mountain had decided that anything now spoken or done should remain only between it and the three of them—for the truth they sought was not meant for many ears.

The corridor widened, and with it the shadows deepened. Here, far from the bustling halls, no torches burned. Instead, only scattered stone lanterns glowed like withered stars along the way. The servant lifted a lantern from the wall and handed it to Borin. Flickering, amber light danced across his features. It was a light meant to offer warmth—but Borin felt only the tension that tightened around his neck like an iron band.

"This path is older than all the others," said the servant, stopping. His voice was barely audible, so muffled by the stone. "It was used even before the upper halls were built. Some of the elders avoid it... because of the stories." Gadrim raised an eyebrow. "Stories? What stories?" The servant lowered his gaze, as if afraid the words themselves might conjure something. "Of a breath in the depths. Of a light that casts no torch. Of ancient voices that cry out for help and then fall silent..." Barim gave a dry laugh. "Then we fit right in." But no one laughed along.

The servant pointed to a tall, intricately forged bow, its runes old and faded. "The descent begins there. I cannot accompany you any further." He took a step back, bowed low, and turned away, almost as if he no longer wished to challenge the mountain. His hasty departure left a silence that crept into the corridors like a mist.

Borin stepped up to the arch first. The air behind it was colder, heavy with a smell he couldn't place—something metallic, but not like iron. More like old ore that had lain in the shadows for too long. "Our path begins here," Borin murmured. "And I have a feeling it will lead us deeper than we'd like." Gadrim nodded. "If the cracks widen, we'll have to look for them where the stone is thinnest. And that's beneath Blackground." Borin snorted. "Then let's go before the mountain decides to block our way."

They crossed the arch. At that moment, the sound of the mountain changed. It was as if an invisible door closed behind them.

The decline began.

The staircase was narrow, hewn from rough rock, and each step echoed for a long time. The lantern in Borin's hand cast only a meager circle of light that barely reached the next three steps. Behind them, the darkness flickered restlessly, as if stirring. In the distance, they heard a sound, a soft, undulating breath—or at least they thought they did. Borin paused for a moment. "Do you hear that?" Borin turned slightly. "It's the mountain. It's moving." But he

knew that this wasn't the whole truth. Something else was down there. Something they couldn't yet see.

After a while, the staircase opened into a passage flanked by tall, blade-like rocks. Long shadows stretched across the floor like fingers reaching out to grasp them. And in the middle of the passage—a sound. A boulder broke free from the wall and crashed to the ground. The three dwarves froze. Then—a second. A third.

Borin lifted the lantern. And saw it.

The rock vibrated. Not strongly — but rhythmically. Like a heartbeat.

"By the blacksmith fathers..." whispered Gadrim. "That's not trembling. That's... life."

Borin stepped closer, reached out, and carefully placed his hand on the trembling stone. The cold shot into his arm like a dagger thrust, but beneath it—a warmth. A glowing, ancient heat that did not come from fire.

He withdrew his hand, gasping. The stone had answered. The depths had noticed it.

A light flickered in the distance—greenish, dim, ominous—and then vanished again. Gadrim and Barim raised their hammers, and Borin felt the runic discs on his belt tickle.

"The mountain shows us the way," Borin said in a rough voice. "Or it warns us that we have gone too far."

They continued walking. The passage sloped downwards, the light grew dimmer, the shadows longer. And somewhere far below, beyond the visible path—something beat. Slowly. Rhythmically. Awake.

## The Runeforge awakens once more

The runeforge lay deep beneath the bustling halls of the dwarven realm, where even the sound of hammers seemed muffled and the heat of the fires enveloped every wall like a breathing cloak. For centuries it had been the heart of dwarven craftsmanship, but now a veil of silence hung over it—a silence that spoke not of rest, but of anticipation. The mighty anvils stood dark, the ancient smithing fires glowed faintly in their stone hearths, and the workbenches where masters and apprentices had once stood side by side were covered with fine dust, as if time itself had held its breath. And yet... something stirred.

A faint tingling sensation filled the air. A barely audible hum vibrated in the walls. It was so subtle that no ordinary ear could have perceived it—yet this was the rune forge, and here, in the stone, resided more consciousness than in many a living being. The runes themselves stirred. At first, only a single line flickered. High above, above the main anvil, the ancient symbols that ran like veins through the ceiling began to shimmer faintly. Their glow was weak, a grinding light, like the last spark of a dying fire. But the stone responded.

A dull sound vibrated through the hall, barely more than a breath—but it was enough to make dust trickle from a workbench and tap a lone hammer on the floor with a soft clang. Then a second sound. Deeper, more resonant. And a third that brightened the glowing runes until they

appeared like thin, golden threads. It was as if a sleeping giant were awakening from ancient dreams and stretching his limbs, which had lain dormant for so long that even the master smiths of modern times had forgotten what this rune forge had once been created for.

At that moment, the heavy door leading into the forge opened with a deep, guttural creak. Borin stepped inside. The Rune Brothers, Gadrim and Barim, followed closely behind. And immediately they felt it: the tension in the air, which crackled across the floor like electric heat. Borin stopped, his gaze sweeping across the vast hall. "By all the bones of the forge fathers... it smells as if the stone itself has been sweating," he murmured. Barim ran his hand over an anvil, but then jerked it back. "It's warm," he whispered. "And no one has forged here for days."

Gadrim stepped beneath the glowing runes and raised his head. "They are awakening." "What do you mean?" Borin asked. "Runes don't just glow," Gadrim said. "They respond. To energy. To movement. To power. To a call." "A call?" Borin frowned. Gadrim nodded. "This isn't just some faint tremor. The Runeforge was once where the Primal Keepers themselves forged their weapons. The mountain has gathered its strongest powers here." His voice dropped to a whisper. "When these runes awaken... the mountain wants to tell us something."

At that moment, another rune lit up—this time farther down, right on the wall beside the three dwarves. A golden spark leaped from the wall to an ancient hammer stuck in a bracket. The hammer vibrated slightly, as if twitching in its sleep. It was as if the tools were waiting to be wielded once more. Borin exhaled heavily. "This is no coincidence. The cracks... the lights... the tremors. And now the runeforge." Barim looked at the tools with concern. "It feels as if someone from the depths wants to forge for themselves." "Or," Gadrim said in a dark voice, "as if something that had been imprisoned wants to reclaim its tools."

A thunderous rumble vibrated through the hall, making all three recoil. The runes on the ceiling suddenly flared brightly—like stars born from the stone itself. And then, very slowly, the main anvil began to vibrate. At first slightly. Then more intensely. Finally, so much so that the tools around it began to clang. And amidst the light bursting from the stone, a symbol emerged.

A circle of broken ore. Traversed by a single, straight line.

The symbol of the original guardians.

Borin felt a shiver run down his spine. "The mountain... remembers," he said softly.

And in the depths of the forge, the first spark of an ancient fire ignited — a spark that would never be tamed.

The air in the vast forge shimmered noticeably, as if someone had scattered invisible embers across the floor. Borin moved closer to the main anvil, but each step felt like a struggle against an unseen force. The heat was not that of an ordinary fire—it was alive, pulsating, imbued with a power far older than the dwarves, older even than the runes that glowed on the walls. The hall no longer felt like a space of stone. It felt like a ribcage, and the mountain breathed.

Barim took a step back, his hand tightening around the handle of his hammer. "This is wrong," he murmured. "The runes... they flicker, but they don't follow any pattern. They



pulsate, as if answering someone." Gadrim knelt before the anvil, placed both hands on the ground, and closed his eyes. Second after second passed, and when he looked up again, his face had gone pale. "It's not the anvil," he said. "It's the rock beneath it. Something deep under this forge is sending energy through the stone. I've never felt anything like it."

A sound echoed through the hall. Not the strike of a tool. Not the breaking of a stone slab. It was a deep, droning thump—a single, imperfect note, as if someone were raising a hammer but not completing the blow.

Borin raised the lantern higher. "Does that come... from the depths?" Gadrim nodded. "Not only that. It answers the runes." He pointed at the glowing patterns. "It's a conversation. Between the rock and... something."

Barim stepped hesitantly closer to the anvil, but suddenly he recoiled. From a fine line in the ground, scarcely wider than a knife's edge, emerged a luminous thread—greenish, flickering restlessly, like the eye of a creature peering through a crack. The thread wound along the stone's surface, so swiftly and vividly that Barim held his breath. But then the light faded again, as if drawn back into the depths.

"That was the same light the Guardians described," Borin said quietly. "A glimmer... a glimpse from the dark plains." Barim snarled. "That depth has no eyes. Or at least it shouldn't."

Another tremor sent dust trickling from the high ceiling. But this time it wasn't the faint shudder of earlier tremors. It was more powerful—a forceful jolt that pierced the floor, setting the tools on the walls clanging. A dozen hammers began to vibrate softly, as if recalling an ancient rhythm buried in the layers of stone. Borin stepped back, his gaze fixed on the trembling tools.

Then—without any warning—the main anvil lifted a tiny bit off the floor. Just a finger's width, but enough to make the air sizzle. An ancient, deep rumble filled the hall, as if some colossal machine were awakening somewhere in the depths.

"That... is impossible," whispered Gadrim. "The anvil is firmly anchored in the foundation. It weighs... thousands of stones." Borin frowned. "Nothing can lift an anvil of that weight. Not without force." "But that wasn't force," said Gadrim. "That was... will."

The runes on the ceiling now glowed so brightly that the room was bathed in a flickering, golden-red light. The shadows on the walls grew, becoming long and distorted, as if they had a life of their own. And then it happened: A single rune, directly above the anvil, broke free from its stone setting.

She didn't fall. She glided. Like a piece of glowing mica, she floated slowly through the air, turning and descending directly above the anvil until she came to a stop there.

Barim gasped loudly. Gadrim stared, unable to blink. And Borin felt his heartbeat synchronize with the deep rumble of the mountain.

"The rune forge..." Gadrim murmured, "...is taking shape again." Borin nodded slowly, his gaze never leaving the floating rune symbol. "The mountain is preparing something."

Something big. But what...?" "Perhaps," said Borin, "it's calling us to forge something." Gadrim shook his head. "Or...to warn us of what might be forged."

At that moment the rune flared up sharply — a bright, blinding light that filled the entire room.

And in the light, Borin thought he saw for a heartbeat the silhouette of a colossal being. Broad. Massive. Furrowed with ancient runes.

A primal guardian.

Then the light went out. The forge was plunged back into twilight. And the anvil rested still, as if nothing had happened.

Borin breathed out — and knew that this was only the beginning of a much greater awakening.

A pungent odor settled over the forge, a strange mixture of cold ore, glowing ash, and something intangible that Borin couldn't name. It wasn't the scent of fire—rather, it smelled as if the stone itself were being heated, as if something deep within the mountain was pounding against its bonds with tremendous force. Borin raised the lantern slightly, but the light was swallowed by the hot, shimmering air. Only the runes on the ceiling provided a restless glow, pulsing in bursts like the irregular heartbeat of a vast, unseen being.

Gadrim paced slowly around the anvil, his fingers outstretched as if tasting the air. "Something... is calling here," he murmured. "But not to us. Not directly. It's as if the mountain itself is trying to speak to someone." Barim frowned. "To whom? Who can hear so deeply?" Gadrim didn't answer immediately. His gaze drifted to the floating runic symbol, which now hung motionless in the air again, as if it had become part of some invisible construct. "Perhaps," he said finally, "the mountain is speaking to those who no longer walk among us."

A low rumble vibrated through the hall—this time shorter, but sharper, like the grinding of a massive cogwheel set in motion again after centuries. A shiver ran down Borin's spine. "If the Ancient Keepers were truly as powerful as the legends say..." "Then their power was never completely buried," Gadrim finished tonelessly.

Borin stepped closer to the wall where the old tools hung. Many were crumbling or rusted—but others seemed remarkably well-preserved. A long hammer with a blackened head appeared barely touched by time. As Borin ran his fingers over the handle, he felt a peculiar resistance, as if the tool were testing him. Or recognizing him. He slowly withdrew his hand. "These tools should have crumbled long ago," he said. "And yet... they are awake. Like the runes."

A jolt went through the floor. The tools on the wall trembled. Not all of them—only some. And they weren't moving randomly.

They aligned themselves. On one point. On the center of the forge.

Onto the main anvil.

“That’s impossible,” Barim whispered. “Tools... have no will.” Gadrim pressed his lips together. “These do.”

Then it happened: A soft, metallic click sounded. The anvil began to glow.

First only at the edge. Then across its entire surface. A deep, dark red that gradually transformed into a dazzling orange.

Borin instinctively stepped back. The heat was overwhelming, but not like fire—it felt older. More powerful. “This isn’t natural,” he cried. “No ore glows like this without a flame!”

Gadrim, his eyes wide open, murmured: "The mountain itself forges."

A tremendous crash shook the forge. Dust fell from the ceiling. Cracks formed in the floor—not deep, but wide enough to let out a pale, greenish light. The same light as before.

But now... it stirred. It grew. It migrated.

The three dwarves stepped back as the light took on a form—not a clear one, not a shape, but something like an outline, like the shadow of a creature that existed far beyond the material world. A sloshing sound filled the air, as if water were being forced against rock, but it wasn't water. It was pure, pulsating stone.

A sound rang out. A sound that made Borin's blood run cold.

It was a groan. Old. Deep. Filled with pain — or hunger.

“The depths...” whispered Barim. “They live...” Gadrim raised his hammer. “No. Not the depths. Something within them.”

Another rune detached itself from the ceiling. Then another. And another. They floated in the air, forming lines, circles, spirals —

A pattern. An ancient symbol. Something Borin only knew from legends.

The blacksmith sang.

A sound filled the hall, harmonious yet strange, like the echo of a long-forgotten voice. Gadrim's eyes widened. "The forge is calling the Ancient Keepers!" Borin growled. "Or... something is calling through them."

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the sound died away. The runes fell to the ground—hard, metallic. The light in the cracks went out. The anvil darkened.

Silence.

A silence so perfect that it sounded like a scream.

Borin breathed heavily, his heart hammering against his ribs. "Whatever that was..." he said raspily, "...it was just an awakening. A first breath."

Gadrim slowly lowered the hammer. "Yes. And that means one thing, Borin." "What?" Gadrim looked at him.

"That something deep down now knows that we are coming."

The dust settled slowly like a gray veil over the silent forge. Everything that had just been glowing, trembling, and singing now lay in that dead stillness with which Borin had entered the hall. And yet, nothing was as it had been before. The mountain had awakened, and now it seemed to be listening in its own depths, as if testing how far its children would venture into the unknown. Borin adjusted the axe on his belt, his breath heavy. Every instinct within him screamed to leave this hall, and at the same time, a strange longing flared in his chest—a longing to understand what had happened here.

Gadrim still stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the last spot where the floating runic symbol had appeared. His gaze vibrated between fear and understanding. "That was a sign," he said finally. "Not random. Not chaotic. The mountain doesn't form runes without reason." Barim turned to him. "The mountain showed us the Primal Keepers. Why? A warning? A call?" Gadrim didn't answer immediately. He walked to the spot where the runes had fallen and carefully picked one up. When he touched it, the metal core trembled almost imperceptibly—as if still warm from the power that had sustained it. "I don't know exactly what it means," Gadrim said quietly. "But something deep beneath us... remembers."

Borin strode along the wall where the old hammers hung. Now nothing moved. No trembling, no whispering. But when he laid his hand on the rough surface of an ancient tool, he felt the echo of movement—like the last aftershock of a distant storm. He made a fist. "We must go deeper," he said. "If the forge is awakening, it's for a reason. Something has begun, and we're only at the edge."

A loud crack sounded in the rock. All three dwarves turned around.

A thin line, as fine as a hair, stretched across the floor of the forge. It hadn't been there before. The line began to grow—not with an earthquake, not with a crash, but with the silent, eerie glide of a path cut by an unseen hand. A pale green shimmer emanated from the crack, and this time it didn't remain a distant glimmer. It grew.

Gadrim raised his hammer, ready, but he didn't take a step. Barim stepped protectively in front of Borin. Borin raised the lantern.

The crack suddenly stopped growing.

A sound came from the depths.

Not a hammer. Not a stone. Not an echo.

One breath.

Slowly. Drawn out. Burning.

It wasn't a breath of air—it was the sound of pressure being forced through stone. A breath that didn't seek oxygen, but the warmth of life. Something deep down... smelled it. And reacted.

“That’s not a being,” Barim said harshly. “That’s... the mountain itself.” Gadrim immediately shook his head. “No. That’s not the mountain’s breath. That’s a breath emanating from a vessel. From a chamber. From a... cell.”

Then—a clang. The runic discs on their belts began to vibrate. At first faintly. Then shrilly. A high-pitched tone shot through the forge—so clear and pure that, despite the fear, a feeling of hope resonated within it. “They’re warning us!” Gadrim cried. “Something... is approaching!”

The shadows along the back wall moved. No—they were swallowed up. A dark outline formed, blurry, flickering, as if it weren’t solid. It grew, ate its way out of the wall, not physically, but as a disturbance in the light itself.

Barim stepped forward and raised the hammer. “Show yourself!”

The shape froze. Then it withdrew, as if something within the mountain itself had swallowed it. The shadow vanished.

But the breath remained. And the crack continued to smolder.

Borin stepped forward slowly. “What... was that?” Gadrim replied almost inaudibly: “An observer. Not a creature of flesh. Something... of runes. Or broken runes.”

At that moment, the crack closed abruptly. Light, sound, breath — everything disappeared.

The forge was silent again.

But none of the three dwarves dared to believe that this was the end.

Gadrim turned to Borin. “We must go now. The mountain is no longer just showing us signs. It is becoming active.” “Then we will follow its will,” said Borin. “The abyss awaits.”

Barim nodded, his eyes hard. “And whatever was just trying to step out of the shadows... it now knows we’re coming.”

A dull rumble rippled through the mountain’s foundations, as if the rock itself had begun to contemplate something. Borin felt the vibration first in his toes, then in the palms of his hands, and finally deep in his chest. It was no ordinary tremor—it was too regular, too deliberate, too purposeful. The tools on the walls swung in unison, as if following an alien rhythm pumped up from far below like the hum of a colossal heartbeat. The lantern in Borin’s hand flickered ominously, as if the light itself were trying to flee.

“The forge is no longer silent,” Gadrim murmured. “It... is listening.” Barim squinted into the dark corners of the hall, where the shadows had thickened so much that one could have sworn someone—or something—was standing there, watching them. “I’ve seen many places in the mountain,” he said quietly. “But none have ever felt like this. This is no longer a room. This is a... threshold.”

Borin nodded heavily. He had the same impression. The forge had transformed—it was no longer a relic of the past, no longer a disused place where old legends gathered dust. It was a gateway. A gateway that was slowly opening, layer by layer, like an ancient mouth taking its

first breath after millennia. "If this is a threshold," Borin said, "then we must ask ourselves: What lies beyond?"

Before anyone could answer, they heard another deep thumping. This time it wasn't the thumping of the anvil or the stone. It sounded organic. Like the breath of a massive beast, still too sleepy to open its eyes—but awake enough to sense its surroundings. The runic discs on Borin's and the brothers' belts trembled again, caught between warning and resonance.

Suddenly, the temperature in the forge plummeted. A sharp, metallic frost crept across the floor, forming crystalline patterns on the rock that resembled runes—but none the dwarves recognized. These patterns were angular, jagged, unfinished, as if a foreign hand were trying to mimic the language of stone and failing. Gadrin knelt to touch a pattern, but Borin seized his arm.

"Don't touch that." Gadrin looked up at him. "It's cold. Too cold for this place." "Exactly," Borin growled.

A sharp crack rang out. The crystalline patterns suddenly shattered like thin glass and scattered in all directions—not randomly, but purposefully. The shards slammed against the walls, tracing short, bright patterns of sparks in the air, and then vanished into nothingness as if they had never existed. Barin swung the hammer around. "That wasn't a natural reaction. That was a signal."

"Or a test," Gadrin added, slowly straightening up. "Perhaps something wanted to see how the stone would react. Perhaps... the mountain would answer." "Or perhaps we will answer," Borin said. His gaze drifted to the anvil, which, despite its earlier dazzling glow, now lay completely dark again. But that was a lie. Borin sensed it. The anvil was awake. And it was waiting.

Then — without any warning — a voice echoed through the forge.

Not loud. Not clear. But powerful.

A voice that was not spoken, but thought. A voice that pierced through marrow and stone.

*"Who wakes us...?"*

Borin gasped for air. His knees threatened to buckle. Instinctively, he reached for the anvil without touching it, for something about its presence was so overwhelming that even the thought of touching it would have been too much. Barin fell back, the hammer half-raised. Gadrin's eyes widened, his pupils narrowing to pinpoints.

"Did you... hear that?" whispered Barin. Gadrin replied in a choked voice: "Yes. But not with my ears."

The voice returned. A renewed thought, vibrating through the runes and the rock.

*"Why are you calling the fire... that we rescued...?"*

Borin opened his mouth, but no words came. He didn't need to speak. The mountain itself spoke to them—or something within it. And it awaited an answer.



But before anyone could react, the light of the runes went out. A black crack ran through the forge, longer than before, deeper than any of the fissures they had seen. Lightless. Endless.

A shadow crept out. Not as a form—as a feeling. A cold breath that robbed the three of their breath.

Then everything fell silent.

The rune forge lay still and dead before them. But Borin knew:

Something down there was alive now. Something that had been asleep before. And they had awakened its first dream.

He turned to the brothers. “We are leaving this place. Now.” Gadrin nodded. Barin hesitated, but followed.

And as they left the forge behind, they heard a faint echo in the walls for the last time in this chapter:

*“Deeper...”*

A warning. Or a command.

## Borin hears the call of the deep

The passage behind the runeforge led Borin, Gadrin, and Barin further down than any known path in the upper halls. No sooner had they crossed the threshold, as the forge behind them fell silent, than the air changed. It grew thicker, heavier, almost palpable. Borin paused to listen, but what he heard was almost too subtle to consciously register—a soft, pulsating whisper that vibrated in the rock like distant thunder. Not loud, not threatening. Rather... a call. Eerily familiar, though it resembled no sound a dwarf had ever known.

Borin touched the wall with the palm of his hand. The stone was cool, but not lifeless. Beneath the surface, a deep rhythm beat. Not fast, not irregular—but there. A pulse. A heart. And inside him: a tug, faint yet irresistible, as if an invisible thread were wrapping itself around Borin's chest and gently pulling him into the depths.

“Do you feel it?” he murmured. Barin stood close behind him. “What do you mean? I don’t feel anything at all—except that the mountain is watching me.” Gadrin, however, remained silent, stepped forward, and also placed his hand against the wall. His gaze hardened. “It’s a call,” he said finally. “But it’s not for both of us.” Then he looked at Borin—long, searchingly. “It’s for you.”

Borin wanted to object, but the words froze in his throat. Deep down, he knew Gadrin was right. Even in the Runeforge, he had sensed something, a breath, a presence that had responded only to him. Since seeing the glowing cracks, the feeling had intensified. And now, here in the darkness, it was as clear as the blow of a blacksmith's hammer.

The mountain called to him.

Not depth in general. Not any power. Something specific. Something that knew his name—or his blood.

“It’s pulling you,” Gadrin said softly. “It’s pulling you like a rune calling its master back.”  
“I’m no runemaster,” Borin growled, but it sounded weak. Borin laughed joylessly. “Perhaps you’re something worse.”

They continued on, and the passage narrowed. The stone became darker, almost black, and the wall surfaces appeared as smooth as polished obsidian, even though no one had ever forged or carved here. It was as if the mountain itself had shaped this path—not for feet, but for memory.

After a few hundred steps, the tunnel opened into a wider chamber. A heavy, oppressive silence filled it, so dense that Borin almost thought the air would steal his breath. But in the midst of this silence, he heard him again:

*Borin...*

It wasn't a sound. Not a word. But the meaning hit him so clearly, as if someone had whispered it in his ear. Borin whirled around, his axe half-drawn, but behind him stood only Gadrin and Barim—and the tunnel they had come from. No one else. Barim frowned at him. "What's wrong?" "I... I don't know," Borin murmured. "But something called my name."

Gadrin's face turned serious. "Is it a voice or a feeling?" "Both." "Then the call grows stronger. The mountain is guiding you."

Flickering light burst from a crack on the right side of the chamber. Greenish, cold, sickly—the same light that had been created in the rune forge. But now it was brighter, stronger, pulsating, as if something were slowly approaching from behind the rock. Borin stepped forward. The crack wasn't natural. It was jagged, deep, and its edges pulsed like veins.

He heard the call again. More clearly. More urgently.

*Borin... deeper...*

The floor vibrated slightly, and small pieces of stone fell from the ceiling. The passage behind them creaked dully. The mountain was moving. Not like an earthquake—but like a creature tossing and turning in its sleep.

“That takes us too far,” Barim said tensely. “If we go too deep, we’ll never get back.” Gadrin put a hand on Borin’s shoulder. “The mountain won’t want to kill you, Borin. If it calls to you, it’s not to break you.” Borin snorted. “How can you be so sure?” “Because a call from the deep always has a purpose. And never a meaningless one.”

The chamber pulsed again. Green. Dark. Alive.

Barim raised the hammer. "I don't trust this place an inch." "Me neither," Borin murmured. "But—I need to know why it has this reputation. Why me."

His heart beat faster. Not out of fear. Out of certainty.

He stepped to the crack and placed his hand on it. The stone was ice-cold. But something was burning underneath—a heat that had nothing to do with fire.

And then it happened.

A torrent of images rushed through Borin's mind. Shadows. Runes. A colossal eye of stone. A circle of broken ore. A heart beating in the dark like a trapped thunderclap.

Borin jerked his hand back, gasping. Barim grabbed him. "What did you see?" Borin shook his head. "I... I don't know. But it was old. And familiar. And... it knew me."

Gadrim exhaled slowly. "Then it's confirmed. The summons didn't come by chance. You're part of it, Borin. Whether you like it or not." "Part of what?" Gadrim looked at him, his gaze heavy as ore.

"From something as old as the mountain itself. And which is now awakening."

Borin felt the call again, stronger than ever. He knew he would follow it. Not out of duty—but because the mountain would never let him go.

And something was moving deep beneath them.

The call haunted Borin. It wasn't loud, not insistent like an enemy's roar, not demanding like a command from a stone father. It was... warm. Deep. A humming that wandered through the layers of stone like a memory searching for its way home. But this warmth had a shadow—a coldness that crept into his thoughts like a fine mist, giving Borin the feeling that he was being watched, long before he understood by whom or what.

The chamber they stood in stretched further than the torchlight could encompass. Gadrim held up one of the lanterns, but the light was swallowed, as if the darkness itself were an ancient beast lurking hungrily in the depths. Borin took a step forward, and the whispering intensified. A faint tremor ran down his spine.

*Borin... deeper... follow...*

His name wasn't a sound, but an impression—a meaning that slid directly into his mind like a knife between scales. Borin shook his head, tried to shake off the impression, but it remained, soft yet relentless.

Barim stepped forward and grabbed his arm. "Was that the mountain again?" Borin nodded silently. Gadrim watched him with narrowed eyes. "The Call is taking shape. That means you're close to the source. Closer than any dwarf has been for ages." Barim snorted. "And closer than I'd like."

A faint, vibrating sound filled the chamber—like the hum of a gigantic insect burrowing beneath the stone. The walls began to glow, and a single line of light stretched along the left wall. No rune. No symbol. A line. A path.

"This is new," Gadrim murmured. "The mountain is showing us the way."

Before Borin could answer, the ground trembled. Not strongly, just a single, brief shudder—but it felt like a heartbeat right beneath their feet. Borin's own chest responded, as if his body were picking up the rhythm. He grabbed the hammer by the belt, just to have something solid in his hand.

"The reputation is growing stronger," Borin said gruffly. "I don't know if it's a warning... or an invitation." "Maybe both," Gadrim suggested.

They followed the luminous line. The narrow passage beyond didn't look like a natural fissure—it was too regular, too precise. As if it hadn't been broken, but opened. And the light that filled it pulsed in the same rhythm as the distant, invisible heart in the depths.

The footsteps barely echoed. The air was too thick, too heavy. Every breath felt like it had to be forced through wet, cold stone. Barim slowly raised the hammer, his fingers white with tension. "I don't like this," he murmured. "I don't like it at all." "But you love anything that hums and smokes," Borin retorted. "And down here, a whole world is humming." "That's precisely the problem," Barim growled.

Then they heard it. A scream. Distant. Echo-slim. Strange.

It wasn't a dwarf's cry. Not an animal noise. Not a metallic screech. It was... something in between.

Gadrim stopped Borin. "Wait. That wasn't a cry for help." "No," whispered Borin. "That was a cry for attention."

A second sound followed—deeper, more vibrant. The walls responded with a faint shimmer, as if absorbing the scream and carrying it onward. The mountain... listened.

The passage led into another chamber. This one was smaller, rounder, smoother—as if it had been hollowed out by water, even though no river had ever flowed down here. And in the middle... lay something.

A stone. Not large. Not particularly shaped. But it pulsed.

With each pulse, the light intensified. Green. Gold. Red. A draw. As if searching for a form.

Borin stepped closer, his hand outstretched. Not because he wanted to—but because the call drew him in.

"Borin!" Barim's voice sounded sharp. "Don't touch that!" But Borin was already too close.

The stone vibrated. A crack appeared on it. A breath escaped him—warm yet piercingly cold.

And then images exploded in Borin's mind. A vast corridor of living rock. Hammers not wielded by dwarves. Runes that burned. An eye opening in the darkness. A scream from something very old—and very angry.

He stumbled backward, gasping. Barim caught him. "What... what did you see?" Borin struggled for breath. "It... it was a voice." "What did it say?" Borin swallowed. His chest tightened as if the stone were still speaking through him.

"She said... I should go deeper."

Gadrim sighed heavily. "Then it's over. The Call is complete. The mountain has made its choice." Barim cursed. "He could have chosen someone else." Gadrim shook his head. "That's not how the Call works." Barim looked at Borin. "And what even works around here anymore?"

Borin breathed slowly. The trembling subsided. The images faded. But the reputation remained.

He gazed into the darkness of the next corridor. And the darkness gazed back.

*"I'm coming..."*, Borin murmured, without consciously meaning to.

Gadrim nodded. Barim growled. The mountain remained silent.

But the depths...waited.

The passage that opened beyond the pulsating chamber was narrower than anything Borin had ever seen. Not because the mountain was contracting, or because the rock was naturally shaped that way—it was as if some ancient force had pushed the stone itself aside to create a passage. The walls were smooth as polished basalt, yet Borin knew at once that no dwarven hand had worked them. There were no tool marks. No irregularities. No hammer blows, no chisel cuts. Just smooth, flawless rock that looked as if it had been formed in a single breath.

Gadrim paused. "This is not the work of our fathers," he said in a rough voice. "Not even of the oldest stone-seekers." Borin nodded. "This is... alien. And I don't like it when the mountain does something alien." Borin didn't reply. The call was there again. Stronger, clearer. And this time not as a whisper. But as a rhythm. As a heartbeat.

The same blow he had felt in the runeforge. The same blow that had made the cracks glow. The same blow that now grazed his own ribs.

*Borin... deeper...*

His fingers clenched around the lantern handle. It wasn't fear that gripped him—it was something else. Something much older than himself. A feeling as if a truth buried for generations was now reaching for him.

They continued descending. The path sloped downwards, and the ground vibrated under each step like a taut string. The lantern light seemed to refuse to spread, as if the shadows had a will of their own. After a while, Gadrim stopped, raised the lantern, and pointed at the wall.

There, faintly engraved, barely visible: runes.

But no dwarven ones.

They were angular, jagged, like broken lines that nevertheless sought order. They pulsed in the same rhythm as the call—and when Borin raised his hand to touch one, it recoiled from his finger as if the wall were alive.

"This writing..." Gadrin murmured, "...does not belong to our people. Nor to the orcs. Nor to the northerners. Nor to the humans." Barin snorted. "Then to whom?" Gadrin did not answer. He could not.

Further down, the passage opened into a vast hollow chamber. The lantern could no longer reach the ends of the walls. They were too far away, too high, too deep. A swallowing blackness rose like a cathedral of stone. And in the center, set into the floor, lay a depression. Round. Wide. Deeper than Borin could see.

He stepped to the edge. The shout thundered through him like a hammer blow.

*Borin... here...*

The voice of the deep felt like heat and frost at the same time, like metal being forged — and metal breaking.

Barin grabbed Borin's arm. "Wait. You'll fall down here if you're not careful." "I'm not falling," replied Borin. "I'm being called."

Gadrin lowered his hammer. "This is the origin. Here begins the call. The depths want you to hear it." Borin gazed into the blackness. He didn't know how deep the abyss was. Perhaps a dozen meters. Perhaps a dozen halls. Perhaps... a dozen worlds.

Then, without warning, light burst from the hollow. Not green. Not golden. But white. A pure, piercing light that almost knocked Borin to the ground.

He saw images. Waves of stone. Chambers full of runes. Forges that burned with no known ember. And shadows—enormous shadows that moved in the heart of the mountain.

Then he heard the voice again. Clearer. Stronger. Unmistakable.

*"Borin, son of Dûrmor... I have chosen you."*

Borin froze. Barin and Gadrin threw up their heads.

"What... what does that mean?" Barin gasped. Gadrin whispered, "The call is not general. It is not seeking a warrior. Not a blacksmith. It is seeking you, Borin." "But why?" "Because the mountain knows to whom it answers."

The light went out. The depths fell silent. Only Borin's heart continued to race in the alien rhythm.

Gadrin stepped to his side. "This wasn't an accident. You have to decide." Borin looked into the darkness. "I've already decided." Borin grumbled. "Now what?" Borin straightened up, his gaze steely.

"Now we're going even deeper."

And so the call did not end — it was only just beginning.



## The Path to the Forgotten Chambers

The descent that lay before them was no ordinary path. After only a few steps, Borin realized they had crossed a boundary—not just a threshold of stone, but a line between the known and the lost. The air changed. It no longer tasted of ore and dusty depths, as was customary in the lower halls. Instead, it carried a strange scent: cold, clear, yet imbued with a hint of ancient embers that had never quite died out. No wind stirred, no torch flickered. Only the constant, almost imperceptible vibration in the ground, which had grown ever more pronounced since the Runeforge.

Barim held his lamp aloft, but the light no longer seemed to spread as usual. It barely crept across the walls, trembling in the shadows and dissipating far too soon. "It's as if the darkness itself is drinking," he murmured. Gadrim grimaced. "These passages are ancient. Older than our halls. Older than the first forges. Perhaps older than the runes themselves." Borin listened to the buzzing deep within him. The call was still there—no longer a whisper, but more certain than any dwarven hammer. "They hid this path," he said. "Someone didn't want it to be found." "Or someone wanted it to be rediscovered only now," Gadrim corrected.

The passage widened, and the rock changed. Granite gave way to an unknown, darker type of stone, smoother than polished ore, yet devoid of any reflection. The lantern light was swallowed by it, as if the stone itself decided how much it would reveal. Borin ran his fingers over it. It felt like cold water and vibrated faintly beneath his touch. "This isn't natural rock," he said. "This is... forged." Borin was silent for a moment. "How do you forge a passage from stone?" "You don't forge it," Gadrim replied. "You force the mountain to shape it."

A tingling sensation crept up Borin's arm. The call intensified as they continued walking. He didn't feel threatened—but watched. As if the mountain itself were testing his worthiness. At the thought, Borin clenched his fist. He didn't like the idea of something weighing, measuring, or guiding him, but he couldn't resist the call.

In the distance, they heard a sound. A faint, scraping echo, like the scraping of stone on stone. Barim raised the hammer. "We are not alone." Gadrim listened. "No," he said. "But what is there may not be living as we know it."

They reached a bend, and beyond it the path opened into a high, narrow gorge of pure black stone. The walls rose smooth and vertical, without any trace of tools or time. Not a crevice, not a vein, not a speck of dust. Nothing. Borin felt tiny in this majestic darkness—and at the same time inexplicably familiar with it.

Several stone pillars lay in the middle of the path, collapsed or broken. But the breaks were not natural. They were clean. Precise. As if a gigantic tool had sliced them apart. Barim scratched his beard. "Whatever that was... it wasn't small." Gadrim nodded slowly. "And it wasn't blind. These cuts... they follow a pattern."

Borin knelt beside one of the pillars and ran his hand over the smooth, fractured surface. Again that cold shiver, again that unnatural smoothness. And then—an image. Brief. Sharp. Like a lightning bolt straight into consciousness.

A glimpse into a chamber filled with gigantic, still figures. No faces—only shadows of bodies embedded in the stone. A heartbeat, deep and muffled. A circle of broken ore. A hammer blow that seemed endless.

Borin jerked his hand back. Gadrim leaned over him. "Did you see anything?" "Yes," Borin replied, breathing heavily. "More than I wanted to."

At that moment, they heard a distant, deep rumble. Not a tremor—a breath. A burst of pressure that traveled through the mountain's cracks, making the air tremble. Borin stood up, his heart racing. "The call is getting stronger," he said. "Almost as if we're close." Barim stepped closer. "Close to what?" Borin stared into the darkness, where vague shapes moved—or perhaps it was just his eyes playing tricks on him. "At the Forgotten Chambers," he said. "I think... we're on the right track."

Gadrim looked along the black walls. "Or on the wrong one. The chambers weren't forgotten. They were buried. And not without reason." "The mountain is calling," Borin said simply. "The mountain is perhaps warning," Gadrim replied. "I'll go on," Borin decided, his voice firm. "Whether it's a warning or a call—I'll only know if I find the chambers."

They went deeper into the abyss. And with every step, Borin felt the gaze of the depths at his back.

A look that wasn't hostile. Not friendly. Simply old. Ancient. And awake.

The path led deeper into the black rock, and with each step, the world around Borin grew quieter. Not quiet in the ordinary sense, but quiet like a place where even the memory of sound had been extinguished. The air smelled of cold stone and something else—something ancient that must have slumbered in darkness for centuries. Borin heard his own breath far too loud, far too sharply, as if he were an intruder in a realm not meant for the living.

Barim strode beside him, his hammer at the ready. Gadrim trailed behind, his gaze constantly scanning the walls. No one spoke a word, for any word would have seemed out of place in this corridor. Borin knew that Gadrim saw more than he let on. The Rune Brother's brow was deeply furrowed, and his eyes gleamed like two glowing embers. He read the shadows as other men read runes.

The walls began to change. The black, almost smooth stone suddenly revealed patterns: fine grooves that ran through it like natural grain, but the longer Borin looked at them, the more clearly he realized they were no accident. They looked like veins. Stone veins. And some of them pulsed faintly.

"By all the depths..." Barim murmured. "The mountain... does it live here?" Gadrim slowly shook his head. "Not the mountain. Something else. Something that sleeps within it, or... has slept within it."

Another blow, deep below. Inaudible—felt. A dull thud that went straight through the rock and made Borin's heart skip a beat. The call.

It now came at regular intervals, like a heartbeat in a massive body that lay beneath them. *Borin... deeper...*

Borin leaned briefly against the wall to calm his breathing. As soon as his fingertips touched the stone, impressions flitted through his mind—rapid splinters, like sparks in a forge:

A gigantic gate. Shadows moving in stone. A forge as large as a mountain range. A voice that came from the rock. And a circle of broken ore — the mark of the ancient guardians.

He jerked his hand away. The stone vibrated beneath his touch, as if it missed him. Gadrim looked at him sharply. "Another vision?" Borin nodded heavily. "The call becomes images. Soon it will become words," Gadrim said. "The chambers are near."

Barim gazed into the abyss. "Should I be happy now—or run?" "Both would be sensible," Gadrim replied dryly.

They continued walking, and the ground began to slope downwards—a sloping descent that made walking difficult. The rock became rougher, less smooth, and the veins in the walls began to pulse more brightly, as if something were moving behind them. A thought flashed through Borin's mind: We are not under the mountain. We are in the mountain.

After several minutes, they reached a point where the passage ended abruptly—or rather, was interrupted. A gap yawned before them, as wide as a small river. The floor had simply vanished, as if a gigantic claw had ripped it out. Far below, a meager green light pulsed.

Borin stepped closer, but Gadrim held him by the arm. "No. This crack is fresh." "How fresh?" Gadrim paused for a moment, listening. "Fresher than our footsteps."

Barim leaned forward. "How do we get across?" Borin didn't answer immediately. He sensed it.

*Depth... deeper... come on...*

The shout came from within the gorge itself.

Then he saw it: Further to the right, barely visible, ran a narrow ledge, perhaps a hand's width. A natural transition? No. Too clean. Too sharp. Too deliberate.

Borin approached. "I believe the mountain is leading us."

Barim stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "The mountain leads US? Since when does Stone lead?" Gadrim stepped forward, tested the footbridge with his foot, and nodded. "Since the mountain decided that Borin should listen to him."

One by one, they crossed the narrow rocky ledge. The abyss below glowed, pulsed, and breathed. Borin felt the call more strongly than ever before. When they reached the other side, the passage opened again, and this time the stone was no longer dark.

It glowed.

Gentle. Warm. Golden.

The walls didn't look like rock—more like molten, solidified amber. And in that warm glow, Borin recognized symbols. Faded runes. Large, circular patterns reminiscent of ancient metalwork.

Barim stared, stunned. "Those are... Chamber Marks." Gadrim nodded. "Yes. The nearby chambers once represented workshops of the Ancient Keepers. We're close to that."

Borin stepped up to one of the runes. It was barely visible, worn by time and pressure. Yet it vibrated, as if sensing his presence.

He placed his hand on it.

A hot rush coursed through him. He saw the vast hall of a forge. He saw three shadow giants forging fire from pure stone. He saw a heart—a heart of ore resting in gigantic hands. And he heard words.

No voice. But meaning.

*"The Forgotten Chambers await..."*

Borin opened his eyes. "We are close," he said softly. "Very close."

A final call vibrated deep within the rock. Warm. Clear. Inviting.

The depths wanted him.

The passage led further into the warmly glowing amber stone, and Borin felt the echo of the call grow stronger with every step. It was no longer the vague hum, no longer the distorted whisper that came from afar. Now it was a heartbeat directly beneath his feet, a steady, deep throbbing that traveled along the veins of the mountain and spread into his own chest. Gadrim paused repeatedly, holding up his lamps, studying the walls—and each time he recognized new signs, new patterns, new traces of a power older than anything the dwarves had known.

"These runes..." he murmured eventually. "They weren't written by dwarven hands. Not even the Ancient Keepers themselves would have carved them. This is... raw form. Runes before runes became words." Barim snorted. "Raw form or not... I don't want them looking at me. They seem to be moving." "They are," Borin replied calmly. "They can hear us."

The path now descended gently, and everywhere they stepped, the ground glowed a warm gold beneath their feet, as if the mountain recognized—or measured—their steps. Borin sensed something like anticipation in the air. Not hostile. More curious. The depths seemed to be testing whether he was truly the one meant to come.

After a few minutes, the path opened into a tall, narrow hall. The ceiling was so high that even Borin's sharp eyesight could barely make it out. Fine, bridge-like lines stretched through the darkness, as if they were the skeleton of a gigantic structure. Borin raised his lantern, and the light caught on a single point on the ceiling—a small, glowing spike of black ore.

Gadrim stared up. "That... that's rune ore. Pure rune ore. Unmelted. Untouched." Barim's eyes widened. "But that doesn't exist. Rune ore can only grow if the mountain..." He trailed off. Because all three of them knew what that meant.

"The chambers are not just nearby," Borin said quietly. "They are awake."

A sound came from above them. A rustling. A rubbing. Not a creature, not an animal, and yet clearly alive.

“We are not alone,” Barim whispered, raising his hammer. “Perhaps we are,” Gadrim murmured. “Perhaps it is the space itself that is moving.”

Before Borin could answer, a deep, muffled rumble sounded. The halls trembled, not as in an earthquake, but as in a breath. The walls expanded, the ceiling pulsated. Borin felt it—the mountain was breathing.

Then he saw it.

At the end of the hall was a gate. Not a dwarven gate. Not a wooden or iron gate. A gate of pure, black stone, smooth as obsidian, crisscrossed with veins of gold that converged in a circle.

The circle of broken ore. The symbol of the ancient guardians.

Borin froze. The memory from the vision pulsed again in his mind.

Gadrim stepped beside him. “This is the entrance. The entrance to the Forgotten Chambers.” Barim snarled. “A gate without a handle, without a mechanism... how are we supposed to—” Then the stone beneath them trembled. A deep, dull thud reverberated through the floor—and the circle began to glow.

It glowed faintly at first. Then brighter. Then so brightly that Borin had to raise his hand in front of his eyes.

The golden veins pulsed in the same rhythm as the call in his chest. The same beat. The same power.

Gadrim whispered: “The mountain... recognizes you.”

A second sound followed — a plaintive, slow sigh, as if the rock itself were shedding an ancient burden.

The gate split. Not through a movement—it tore apart. Silently. Without dust. Without splinters.

A crack opened. Black. Deep. Infinite.

Borin stepped forward. He felt Barim's hand on his shoulder, but he shook it off.

“I have to go in.” Barim cursed. “Are you crazy? You don’t send a stone, let alone a dwarf, into a hole like that!” “He’s being summoned,” Gadrim said gently. “He who is summoned cannot escape.”

Borin stood at the edge of the crevice. He took a deep breath. And in that last breath before he touched the threshold, he heard the voice—clear, warm, old.

*“Welcome, heir of the rock...”*

He entered.

And darkness swallowed him.

## The shadows under a black background

Blackground. The name alone was enough to silence even the oldest warriors. For centuries, the dwarves had told tales of this place—not of battles, not of victories, but of things that existed beyond mind and stone. Blackground was not a tunnel, not a mine, not a hall. Blackground was a feeling, an ancient chasm in the heart of the mountains, where the rock itself seemed to hold its breath.

As Borin emerged from the darkness of the Forgotten Chambers, the air changed abruptly. It was heavier, denser, as if laden with the weight of countless ages. Each breath felt as if it had to be drawn through liquid—not air. Gadrim and Barim followed just a step behind him, but even Barim, who never lost his nerve, glanced around nervously.

The ground beneath them was no longer solid stone, but a strangely soft, dull-shining layer that looked like lava that had solidified too quickly. No tools had shaped it. No mountain had fractured it.

*It had come into being.*

Through something that was too old to have a name.

The passage before them was wide and deeply embedded in the rock. It led into a blackness so profound that even the lamplight could not penetrate it. The shadows moved in waves—slowly, languidly, like creatures breathing in their sleep. Borin felt a tingling in the back of his neck.

*You are near...*

The call was now more than a hum. It was a thought impulse, clearer than words, and it vibrated through Borin's bones like a familiar but long-forgotten rhythm.

Gadrim knelt down and placed his hand on the ground. He immediately recoiled as if the stone had burned him. "It's not hot..." he murmured. "It's conscious. This ground... serves a purpose. It's not dead. It's asleep."

Barim stepped close behind Borin. "The mountain doesn't sleep. This is something different." He was right. The rock was different. As if it had been compressed over millennia until its soul had deformed.

Then they heard it. A whisper, barely audible, like the rustling of dry leaves—despite the humid air. It came from the blackness before them. From the depths.

Borin raised the lamp, but the light seemed dim, almost offended by the darkness. "Be vigilant," he murmured. "I'm more vigilant than a hungry troll," Barim growled. But his voice was subdued. Respect—or fear—resonated within it.

Gadrim stepped forward. "These shadows don't belong to us." "Then to whom?" asked Barim. "Perhaps... to no one anymore."

The deeper they went, the louder the whispering became. It didn't form words. It formed doubt.

*Memories.*

*fears.*

Borin felt something stir in his thoughts—something cold, sifting through memories like a thief searching for something specific. He pressed his lips together, concentrated, but the whispering threaded its way through his mind.

*Who are you?*

*Why are you coming?*

*Why now?*

The call answered — a warm, deep beating from the depths that silenced the questions.

The shadows receded.

A narrow, long crack in the wall began to glow. Not green as before. Not gold. This time dark red, like the glow of a forgotten hearth fire.

"This is a sign," said Gadrim. "A guidepost. A path into the ancient depths." "How do you know that?" asked Barim. Gadrim pointed at the wall. "Because the runes weren't written here. They grew. Like roots."

And indeed: The lines looked like root-like veins of light that extended deep into the stone — as if something were pulsating behind the wall.

Borin placed his hand on the vein. Immediately an image flashed into his mind:

A gigantic hall of black stone. Pillars as high as mountains. A shadow moving within it—slowly, heavily, as if carrying millennia on its back. And a pair of eyes, as deep as the night, that briefly opened.

Borin gasped for air and stumbled back. Barim grabbed him. "What's wrong?" "I... I saw what's behind Schwarzgrund," Borin panted. "And it's looking back."

Gadrim stared at the wall. "The chambers must be near. The mountain is trying to test us through the shadows. And it is testing you, Borin, more than us."

"Why me?" Barim snarled. "Because something in the depths knows his name," Gadrim replied.

Borin gazed into the black abyss before them —and the abyss breathed back.

He knew they wouldn't be turning back. Not until they found what lurked beneath the black ground. Not until they discovered the source of the call. Not until the depths revealed their truth.

“Forward,” said Borin. “The mountain has waited long enough.”

The path through Schwarzgrund didn't become brighter as they continued—it deepened. The darkness wasn't a lack of light, but a substance of its own, settling like a heavy cloak over their shoulders. The air still vibrated, but now it was no longer just the heartbeat of the mountain. There were other beats, distant yet eerily familiar, like an echo that didn't belong to the rock, but to some existence slumbering beneath it.

Borin felt the walls draw closer, as if they were listening. They didn't touch him, but they sensed him. Every breath, every heartbeat, every thought seemed to be recorded and scrutinized by them.

Barim stopped. “I... hear something,” he murmured. Gadrim listened, but shook his head. “I only hear the call in Borin. Nothing more.” Barim narrowed his eyes. “No. It's... like footsteps. Not behind us. Not in front of us. Beside us. In the stone.”

Borin carefully placed his hand on the wall. The stone vibrated. Not in a steady rhythm — but like slow, deep breaths.

*Inhale.*

The rock contracted slightly.

*Exhale.*

The rock expanded again.

Borin withdrew his hand. “The stone truly lives here.” Gadrim nodded, as if it were self-evident. “This is Blackground. Here, the boundaries between stone and spirit are not stable. Here... something was. Or still is.”

They continued walking, and the whispering returned. This time not in words or clear thoughts, but as a hum, a vibrating path through Borin's skull. He didn't know if it was directed at him—or if Schwarzgrund was testing all three of them.

After a while, the narrow path opened into a long gallery. The ceiling was low, but the space was wide, and in its center stood a row of massive, monolithic columns. They appeared to have been forged from a single piece of polished obsidian, but were interspersed with veins of whitish rock that moved slowly back and forth as if they were liquid.

Barim stared at her. “The veins... are moving.” “They're alive,” Gadrim corrected. “Not like us. But they're part of the mountain.” Borin stepped closer. The pillars seemed familiar—not from his experience, but from one of the many visions that had haunted him since the forge's awakening. A hall like this... shadows moving between the pillars... and a gate leading into the mountain.

He placed his hand on the nearest pillar. Lightning. Heat. Cold. A pain that lit up inside him.

And then a picture:

A circle of twelve pillars. Each with a different veining pattern. In the center, a vast pit of black ore. Above it—an eye, closed, large enough to fill a hall. A voice that said:

*“Wait... and stay awake...”*



Borin broke free.

Gadrim grabbed him immediately. "What did you see?" Borin was breathing heavily. "An eye. An eye made of stone. Sleeping... or waiting." Borin snorted. "An eye? What does an eye look at in a depth like this? Stones?" "Us," said Borin gravely. "It saw us. Or will see us."

Gadrim frowned. "The chambers of the Ancient Keepers once had guardians. Stone guardians. Resting colossi. Perhaps... it was one of them."

Borin didn't reply. The image was too clear. The meaning too profound.

At the end of the gallery, the floor was broken. Cracks, deep as knife wounds, crisscrossed the surface. A reddish haze emanated from some of them, dissipating into the air. The smell was sharp, metallic, and Borin felt his eyes burn slightly.

"Fights were fought here," Barim murmured. "Or forges were made here," Gadrim added.

Borin knelt down and examined the cracks more closely. They were old, but not ancient—too clean, too uniform. Something had burrowed or punched its way through the ground.

Then he heard it again. The call. But this time it sounded... different.

*Borin...*  
*not alone...*  
*Shadows... follow...*

Borin raised his head. "We must move on. Now. Something is stirring. We are not alone in these halls." Barim gritted his teeth. "I knew it." Gadrim immediately stood up. "The shadows beneath the black ground are not empty. They are watching us."

They walked faster. The gallery narrowed. The whispering behind them grew louder. And somewhere deep in the darkness they heard a scratching. A slow, patient, deliberate scratching.

Barim gripped the hammer tighter. "That's not an echo." "No," murmured Borin. "That's a pursuer."

He ran faster, and the others followed. The path curved, led sharply to the left, and opened up again — and that's when Borin saw the faint glow for the first time.

A shimmer. Deep red. Warm. Vibrant.

The chambers were not far away.

But now the shadows were following them, their sounds clearly audible.

Schwarzgrund had awakened.

The red shimmer at the end of the path wasn't light in the classical sense. It wasn't fire, a torch, or the glow of ore. It was a pulse—a vibrant color winding its way up from the depths. Borin felt it first in his chest, then in his stomach, then all the way to his fingertips. Gadrim

and Barim stopped involuntarily when they saw the shimmer. It vibrated in the same rhythm as the call that had haunted Borin for so long.

But before they could enter this final section, Barim suddenly froze. "Do you hear that?" Gadrim listened. "Yes. I hear it." Borin heard it too.

The scratching that had been following them for minutes had changed. It was no longer far away. It was... near. Too near. A scraping sound that lacked the haste of a hunting animal, but the calm, methodical noise of a creature absolutely certain that its prey could not escape anywhere it would not follow.

Borin slowly turned around.

The corridor behind them was empty. And yet it wasn't empty.

The darkness there had weight. It grew denser. Solider. It gathered together.

Barim raised the hammer. "There's something. There IS something!" Borin felt the call within him want to blaze, to pull him forward — but his instinct, the old dwarf instinct, forced him to stand still and not move.

Then he saw her. At first only as a flickering shadow. Then clearer, with sharper definition.

A shape of blackness, taller than a dwarf but not quite the size of a human, peeled itself from the wall. Not a body of flesh, not a body of stone, but something in between—like the echo of a creature that had detached itself from the rock without fully existing.

A shadow without a master.

The creature didn't stand—it hung as if bound by countless invisible threads. Its limbs appeared brittle, like broken slate. Its head was merely a contoured emptiness, yet within that emptiness glowed a single, tiny, hateful light.

Barim whispered, "By the blacksmiths... What is it?" Gadrim replied tonelessly, "A fragment. A memory. Something left in the stone." Borin growled, "Memories don't reach out to us."

And that's what the creature did. It moved along the ground as if gliding on invisible water, no sound, no haste. Its movement was wrong. Too fluid. Too purposeful.

"Retreat!" Gadrim shouted. "We're not in a position to fight something like this here." But Borin knew that running away would be pointless. The thing moved through shadows as easily as a fish through water. It would catch up with them—or materialize in front of them.

Then, as the creature drew closer, Borin heard the call again. Strong. Commanding.

*"Borin, forward."*

The call was so compelling that he involuntarily turned around and ran towards the red light source. Barim shouted after him: "Have you completely gone mad? That thing—" "Follow me anyway!" Borin roared back.

The final stretch of the path now seemed narrower than before. The walls pulsed, the veins within them glowed more brightly, as if clearing the way for Borin. Gadrim and Barim followed him, for although they believed him to be damned, it was clear that a fight here meant only one thing: death.

Behind them, the shadow creature rustled. It came closer. Closer and closer. The whisper of darkness grew louder.

Then they reached the red shimmer.

He didn't start with a torch. Not with a rune. He started with a mirror in the stone wall.

A circle of red ore, embedded in the rock, as smooth as a polished ruby, as deep as a vast lake. Light streamed from its interior as from an open heart.

Gadrim gasped. "That's... a round gate." Barim stared. "But round gates are legends. Stories! Not reality—" "This IS reality," said Borin.

He stepped closer. The light pulsed. The call coursed through him until he could barely stand.

*"Borin... inside..."*

Gadrim grabbed his arm. "No! You won't say a single word about this gate until we know—" The shadow creature appeared behind them, only three steps away.

They had no choice.

Borin raised his hand. His fingertips touched the pulsating ore.

A tremendous blow ripped through the rock. A scream—of stone, not flesh—echoed through the passage.

And the round gate opened.

Not outwards. Not inwards. But downwards.

A wave of red light swallowed Borin, Gadrim and Barim—and the shadow creature was torn back at the last moment by a crash of thunder, as if the mountain itself had thrown it back into its darkness.

The world spun. Everything turned red. The black background disappeared.

Borin fell.

And the mountain called to him now without a whisper. It called to him with a voice as powerful as a storm.

*"Heir of the rock... you have arrived."*

## The Iron Brothers are gathering

The world into which Borin plunged was not the world of the rock as he knew it. When the dazzling red pull of the round gate released him, he found solid ground beneath his feet—but the ground was not solid in the sense of the familiar mountain. It vibrated, it lived, it breathed. A deep, steady throbbing pierced the stone, as if it were standing directly on the heartbeat of an ancient being. The reddish glow gave way to a tranquil darkness that seemed not threatening, but alert. Terrifyingly alert.

Gadrim and Barim collapsed behind him, gasping, dazed by the crossing. Barim cursed softly. "If I ever pass through a gate not made of steel again, kill me." Gadrim scrambled to his feet, grabbed his lamp—but it glowed dimly. "This is a place where light is not welcome. But darkness... is no enemy here."

Borin was already standing. The sound had changed. It was no longer a distant hum or a distorted voice. It was now a presence. A warmth. A breath on the back of your neck.

And yet the place itself was surprisingly familiar. The chamber in which they stood consisted of massive walls of grey-black stone, crisscrossed by veins of iron that glowed brightly like the insides of freshly forged hammers. The floor displayed circular patterns—ancient smith's marks, but larger and finer than any dwarf would ever have carved.

Barim stared at the patterns. "By the Hammers of the Seven—these are smithing circles." Gadrim immediately knelt. "Not just any kind of smithing circle. This is the covenant circle of the beginnings. That which is only described in our oldest sagas." Borin touched one of the lines—and a sound rang out.

A sound so clear it sang through the stone. A sound that had only one meaning.

*"Brothers... awake..."*

Barim jumped up. "What was that?" Gadrim stepped back. "It spoke. The circle spoke." "Whom is it calling?" Gadrim swallowed. "Not us."

At that moment the ground trembled. Slightly. Then more strongly. Then so violently that the chamber roared in its foundations.

And from the walls, from the iron veins, from the stone itself, they began to emerge:

### **The Iron Brothers.**

Not dwarves. Not creatures of flesh. But warriors of pure ore, bound with ancient runes, taller than any dwarf, yet broadly built like stone gods. Their bodies were forged from metal, yet they moved like living beings. Their eyes glowed with the same reddish light as the gate that had led Borin here.

The first to form took a step forward and thrust the hammerhead against the floor. The echo filled the chamber, a sound that struck Borin's heart like an enormous blow from a blacksmith.

Gadrim stood frozen. Barim whispered: "I... never thought they were real."

The arch-warrior spoke.

Not with a mouth — he didn't have one. The words came from his entire body, a roar that set the air itself in motion.

*"Heir of the Rock... we have heard your call."*

Borin was silent. His heart burned. This was no vision. No dream. No figment of the mountain's imagination. The Iron Brothers stood before them in the flesh.

The second Iron Brother stepped forward. Red light flowed through the runes on his torso. He raised his hammer.

*"The mountain calls to you, Borin, son of Dûrmor."  
Not us."*

Borin suddenly knew that this was the moment the mountain had been preparing since the beginning of their journey.

The third brother spoke:

*"But we respond. For the depths are in turmoil."*

Gadrim was the first to find his voice again. "What do you mean by unrest?" The Iron Brothers turned their heads—slowly, with the crunch of living metal.

The first brother replied:

*"Beneath the black ground, what was once bound stirs."  
"It saw you."  
"It sensed your name."*

Borin felt a cold weight in his stomach. "What... saw me?"

The floor vibrated again. The chamber grew colder.

And all three Iron Brothers said at the same moment, like a single thunderclap:

*"The Deep Brood."*

The words sliced through the air. An ancient name. A name that appeared in the deepest, darkest legends—but always only as a warning for children.

Barim swallowed hard. Gadrim slowly raised his hammer.

Borin raised his chin. "Why is the mountain calling me? What does it want from me?"

The first Iron Brother approached Borin close enough to feel the warmth of the forged body.

The red light in his eyes pulsed.

*"He wants to prepare you."*

*"He wants you to go down."*

*"He wants you to stop her."*

"Who? The Brood?" The Iron Brothers answered together:

*"No."*

A deeper tremor pierced the chamber.

*"He wants you to stop her father."*

Borin froze.

The voice within him trembled, as if the mountain itself could not have formed these words without effort.

Gadrim whispered, "That means... the origin of the shadows still lives." Barim stared at the Iron Brothers. "And the mountain wants to send Borin?"

The first brother nodded.

*"You are the heir of the rock, Borin."*

*"And the depths have chosen you."*

Borin exhaled heavily.

He knew it.

It wasn't just any enemy waiting beneath the black ground.

But the first. The oldest. The origin of all darkness that ever crept into the mountains.

And now he called Borin by name.

The air in the chamber continued to vibrate as the Iron Brothers' words faded away. The echo of their voices was no ordinary echo—it traveled through the veins in the stone, filled the floor, the rock above them, and even the air between them. Borin could still feel the words in his chest, heavy as metal just pulled from the forge. The name they had spoken reverberated within him like a blow to a massive anvil: Father of the Deepbrood.

Barim was the first to stir. He raised his hammer slightly, as if unsure whether to defend himself or bow. "I... I thought the Deepspawn was nothing but a tale. A scare tactic. A story to keep young dwarves from digging too deep." Gadrim replied in a solemn voice, "Every tale has an origin. And the oldest are rarely fabrications."

The Iron Brothers did not look at Barim or Gadrim. Their burning eyes rested solely on Borin—as if he were the only one they could perceive at all.

The first Iron Brother slowly raised his hammer. Not threateningly, but as a sign of respect.  
*"You bear the mark of reputation."*

Borin felt his skin tighten beneath his beard. "Which mark?" The arch-warrior pointed at Borin's chest.

*"The heart of the mountain beats within you. You have not only heard the call... you have answered it."*

Gadrim stepped forward. "What does this mean? Will he be transformed? Chosen? Cursed?" The second Iron Brother answered in a voice that sounded like two slabs of stone rubbing against each other.

*"None of them. And yet everything."*

Barim cursed softly. "That helps us immensely."

The ground beneath them vibrated. A deep, dull resonance—not threatening, but heavy. The walls of the chamber began to glow, as if reacting to the tremor. The iron veins in the stone pulsed.

The third Iron Brother inclined his head.

*"The mountain sees through you, Borin."*

*"He chose you because your heart can carry the rhythm of the depths."*

Borin took a step back. "I am a blacksmith. A miner. A warrior only when I must. Why should I be... the one the mountain calls?" The answer from the first Iron Brother came immediately, as if he had been expecting this question for centuries.

*"Because the depths do not call for strength."*

*"She calls for steadfastness."*

*"And after commitment."*

Gadrim looked at Borin. "You are a Dûrmor. Your lineage has always been closer to the depths than any other." Borin shook his head. "Those are stories..." Borin placed a hand on his shoulder. "Perhaps not."

The Iron Brothers began to form a circle around the three dwarves. Not hostile. Protective.

Their hammers struck the ground simultaneously. A single tone emerged. Pure. Clear. Terribly old.

Suddenly the ground beneath them glowed. The circular patterns awoke — glimmering white, then red, then in a metallic gold.

Gadrim gasped. "That's a smithing summoning circle!" Barim raised his eyebrows. "A what?" "A circle that only activates when a smithing is imminent. A smithing not performed by hands, but by the will of the mountain."

Borin felt the air thicken. The call pounded within him. He saw the Iron Brothers.

"What is to be forged?" he asked.

The second Iron Brother raised his hammer. The red light in his runes pulsed.

*"You."*

Silence.

Barim reflexively stepped in front of Borin. "Wait a minute! He's a dwarf, not a piece of ore you can mold!" The Iron Brother replied calmly.

*"No one will shape him."*

*"He will forge himself."*

Gadrim stared at Borin as if he no longer recognized him. "Borin... do you feel that something within you is meant to change?" Borin started to answer, but then a wave of the call came—stronger than ever before—and forced him to his knees. His heart pounded like an anvil beneath a divine hammer. He felt as if he were simultaneously burning and freezing.

The Iron Brothers lowered their hammers. They began to strike an ancient melody. Slowly. Deeply. Relentlessly.

A song made of metal. A song that no dwarf had ever known — and yet all carried in their blood.

As the melody played, the ground in the center of the circle began to crack open. Slow splits. Red light shone forth.

Something rose from the light.

No tool. No weapon. A block. A massive, red ore block, vibrating and suspended above the chamber.

He did not take shape. He waited.

The first Iron Brother spoke:

*"This is runeheart ore."*

*"The oldest material from the deepest layers."*

*"The mountain offers it to you, Borin."*

*"So that you can prepare yourself."*

Borin breathed heavily. "Preparing... for what?"

The ground shook.

A deep, dark sound pierced the chamber—and for the first time, the call did not sound like an invitation.

But like a warning.

The Iron Brothers all looked simultaneously towards the tunnel opening from which they had come.

Barim resigned. Gadrim's face turned pale.



Borin knew what it meant even before the first Iron Brother spoke:

*"The deep brood has found the transition."*

A crackling sound filled the chamber, barely audible yet piercingly clear, like the first rubbing of two slabs of rock before a landslide. The Iron Brothers stood instantly still. No metal creaked, no rune flickered. Everything froze. Borin felt the air contract—heavy, dense, almost as if the chamber itself were holding its breath.

Then came the sounds. Not just one. A chorus.

A rustling. A scratching. A scraping. Small, irregular movements that could not have originated from a single being.

Barim involuntarily took a step closer to Borin. "This... doesn't come from one person." Gadrim shook his head. "No. The brood never comes alone." The second Iron Brother lowered his hammer. The lines of his runes flickered deep red.

*"Listen."*

The dwarves listened.

From the tunnel they had come from now came a deep, pulsating rumble—as if hundreds of tiny bodies were sliding across stone. And beyond it, much darker, much deeper, came a sound that had no origin but the deepest, most painful darkness:

*One breath.*

Not human. Not animal. Not dwarven. It was the breath of something that had slumbered for eons... and now awoke.

Gadrim whispered, "The father... he's moving." Borin felt his heart pound against his ribs, faster than the call had ever driven him. "Why now?" The first Iron Brother turned to him.

*"Because you are here."*

Barim snorted. "Well, wonderful. Now it's my fault that an ancient monster has awakened!" But his voice was more nervous than angry.

The Iron Brothers formed a semicircle between the dwarves and the tunnel. Each of them raised his hammer, the runes on it glowing brightly like molten embers.

The first Iron Brother spoke:

*"Legacy of the rock... you must accept the rune heart."*

Borin looked at the floating block of red ore. It vibrated slowly, like a heart in its sleep. "What do I do with this?"

*"You connect."*

*"How?"*

*"By not resisting."*

Borin didn't like the answer. He was a dwarf, the son of a tribe that never surrendered without a fight.

But as the scratching of the Deepbrood grew louder, as the breath from the tunnel penetrated the chamber more heavily, and as the Iron Brothers prepared for battle, Borin knew: This was not a fight he could wage alone with hammer and axe.

"Good." He approached the floating ore.

Gadrim held his arm. "Borin... if you bond with this stone, you might not get your old self back." Borin placed his hand on Gadrim's shoulder. "Perhaps that's the price. Perhaps that's the way." Borin snorted loudly. "If he turns into a lump of ore, I swear by the mountain, I'll drag him all the way to the top, no matter how heavy!" That made Borin smile.

Then he touched the runic heart.

The effect was immediate.

The stone did not explode. It did not burn. It did not bore into him.

Instead, Borin became seriously ill. Very seriously ill.

It was as if his body had suddenly turned to ore. Muscles like metal. Bones like hardened rock.

And right in the middle of his chest—a second heartbeat.

Not his own. The mountain's.

The world around him blurred. He no longer saw the chamber. Not the Iron Brothers. Not his friends.

He saw:

A colossal tunnel that plunged endlessly into the depths. A dark giant that appeared like a sleeping silhouette of pure rock. An eye that opened wide. And the cry that pierced it:

*"Come... heir of the rock... come deeper..."*

Then the vision ended. Borin gasped. His body felt both heavy and burning light at the same time. Gadrim stared at him. "Borin... your skin." Borin looked down—fine lines, like runic fissures, glowed beneath his skin, as if he were made of inner light.

Barim murmured: "By the anvil... it glows from within."

The Iron Brothers lowered their hammers and bowed before Borin.

*"You are ready."*

A noise erupted from the tunnel. Something large was moving. Something fast. Something massive.

The first Iron Brother called out:

*"The brood is here!"*

And in the next moment, the shadows plunged from the corridor—and the battle beneath the black ground began.

## The whisper in the living stone

The battle behind them still echoed in Borin's bones, though the chamber the mountain now led him to was far removed from the chaos of the Shadowspawn. The air here was different. It was warm and vibrated with a force he didn't understand, yet which his newly awakened runeheart deep within his chest recognized—instinctively, as if he had always been a part of this place. The glowing lines beneath his skin pulsed in harmony with the subterranean beat of the mountains, and each step took him deeper into a world so ancient that even the dwarven legends only scratched its surface.

Gadrim and Barim followed him, both exhausted from the battle but alert. Borin was aware of how much everything had changed. He felt the rock's pathways like veins beneath his skin. He smelled the pressure in the air before stones moved. He heard the mountain's heartbeat as an echo of his own.

But here, in this corridor, he heard something different. Something foreign. Something that didn't come from him.

A whisper.

No wind could blow that low. No animal could survive down here. And yet Borin heard voices—or rather, one voice speaking to him through a thousand layers of stone. Not a clear sentence, not an understandable word... but a meaning that traveled through his bones, as if they themselves were cavities designed to carry this message.

*"You're not the first..."*

*You are not the last...*

*But you are the awakened one... "*

Borin stopped abruptly. Gadrim, who was walking directly behind him, almost collided with him. "What's wrong?" Borin raised his hand—and the rock beneath his fingertips answered.

It vibrated. Not mechanically. Not like a shock.

He vibrated deliberately.

"The stone... speaks." Barim snorted. "The stone doesn't speak." Borin slowly turned to him, and Barim fell silent immediately when he saw the glowing lines beneath Borin's skin.

"Perhaps not for you," Borin murmured.

He placed both hands against the wall and closed his eyes. The world immediately fell silent. His breath left his ears. His heartbeat didn't get louder, but quieter.

And then he heard it.

A chorus of voices. Gentle. Polyphonic. A whisper from myriad small layers of stone, sand, and ore.

*"Legacy of the rock..."  
We waited a long time...  
For a long time, there was silence...  
For a long time, darkness was our guardian..."*

Borin opened his eyes. "The stone remembers." Gadrim stepped closer, his face gray. "Remember what?" Borin looked deep into the living wall, as if he could see through it.

"To the depths. To what was broken down there. To what is now awakening."

A tremor crept through the ground and traveled up his back. Not like an earthquake. Like a breath. A slow, deep inhalation—a tremendous being, hidden in the rock, filling his chest.

Barim instinctively stepped back. "This is NOT coming from us." "No," said Borin. "It's coming from what lies beneath us."

They continued walking. The walls began to change. The stone became lighter, more translucent. Veins of golden light ran through it, as if they were the skeleton of a living being. And everywhere within it, everywhere, the whisper pulsed.

Sometimes it was a choir. Sometimes a single breath. Sometimes a song without a melody.

*"The depths open up..."  
Stone becomes flesh...  
Flesh becomes shadow...  
Shadow becomes anger..."*

Borin swallowed. "The mountain is warning us," he said quietly.

Gadrim's usually calm voice trembled. "Or he'll tell us we're too late."

Then, suddenly, the air changed abruptly. It was as if something in the corridor ahead had drastically reduced the temperature. An icy breath brushed across Borin's face. The light in his golden veins flickered.

And then they heard a sound. For the first time since they had entered Schwarzgrund, they heard a word spoken aloud. Not as a vision. Not in Borin's head. But loud, audible, clear.

But it didn't come from a dwarf. Not from an Iron Brother. It came from the stone itself.

A single word. Old. Cold. Meaningful.

*"Back."*

Barim immediately raised his hammer. "That wasn't Borin!" Gadrim stood frozen. "No... That was the mountain. The mountain spoke."

Borin felt his heart being torn in two directions — the call that pulled him onward, and the warning that pushed him back.

But then he heard a third voice. Very deep. Very far down. Very alert.

*"Come..."*

The two words clashed in his mind like two enormous blacksmith's hammers.

And Borin knew: The next step would decide which will was stronger — the will of the mountain or the will of that which was awakening in the depths.

The two voices echoed within Borin like opposing hammer blows on the same anvil. The word "Back" vibrated sharply, warningly, like a crack in stone. The deeper, slower-breathing "Come..." pulled at him—relentlessly, like the tug of a massive rope cast from the darkness itself. Borin stood at the center of these two forces, his body engulfed in the rune-heart fire, his mind split between the poles.

Barim grabbed his arm hard. "Borin, do you hear me? THE MOUNTAIN is saying 'Back.' If that's not a reason to turn around, then I don't know what is!" Gadrim approached with a caution Borin had rarely seen in him. "No... that's not a back like a warning. That was... defensive. Protection. The mountain is trying to keep something away." "Something?" Barim snorted. "How about EVERYTHING?"

But Borin barely listened to them. His gaze was fixed on the walls, on the golden pulse of the living veins. The stone behaved like a lung—breathing in, breathing out. And deep within this breathing, Borin heard the whispers more clearly.

*"It's near..."  
the shadow in the root stone...  
he drills... he pushes... he wants..."*

The mountain's voice trembled. Trembled.

A mountain that trembles.

Borin had never imagined that a mountain could feel fear — until this moment.

"The mountain is trying to protect us," Gadrim murmured. "But the other call... it wants you deeper. It's a competition." Borin nodded slowly. "I know." Borin snapped at him: "And what do you want? Two voices want you—and neither means well."

A tremor tore the words apart. Not strong—but vibrating like a gasp. The ground beneath them shifted slightly, dipping as if something heavy were sliding along underneath. Small stones jumped.

Gadrim froze. "Down there... something big is moving." Borin closed his eyes and listened. He heard it.

A grinding. A rolling. A breath that compressed the stone itself.

The depths were not simply alive. They were on their way up.

“We have to keep going,” said Borin, “or it will catch us here.” Barim stared at him as if he were crazy. “And IF we keep going, we’ll definitely catch it!” “It’s already caught me,” said Borin darkly. “Since the forge. Since Blackground. Since the crack in the stone. It knows my name.”

Gadrim nodded slowly. “That’s right. It’s not looking for us. It’s looking for you.” Barim rubbed his beard. “Is that supposed to reassure me?”

They continued walking. Not faster—more cautiously. The passage led deeper now, the light from the golden veins intensifying. The stone appeared translucent, like glowing quartz. Borin placed his hand against a wall again, and this time it reacted even faster. Images raced through his mind.

Gigantic halls. A colossal root of rock-hard ore, running through the depths like a skeletal framework. A creature resting at the foot of this structure—a dark giant without a clear form. And above it, as if hovering: tens of thousands of shadows, moving like crawling creatures on its body.

Deepbrood. The Lost. The Dark Hunters.

Borin jerked his hand away, gasping for air.

“I saw the origin...” Gadrim stared at him. “What is it?” Borin answered in a faltering voice:

“It’s not a being. It’s... a mountain, Michael. A living mountain. Upside down. A rock moving in the depths. A being of stone and shadow.” Barim stared at him, dumbfounded. “A mountain? A WHOLE WALL of creature?” “Yes,” said Borin. “And we’re inside its body. The stone... is part of it.”

Then they heard it. All three of them at the same time.

A whisper—directly in their heads. This time not a thousand voices. Individually. Clearly.

*"Don't turn around."*

They obeyed instinctively — and that was a good thing. Because the next moment something scraped across the passage behind them. Not quickly. Not hastily.

Slowly. Deliberately. As if savoring every centimeter of stone they had walked along.

Gadrim whispered: “The stone warns us further. It guides us.” Borin nodded. “Then we continue. Without turning around.”

They walked. One step in front of the other. Even Barim's breath caught in his throat. The scraping behind them grew louder, intensified, deepened. Then they heard a cracking sound. A soft, damp cracking sound—as if something were breaking open, or as if a mouth were opening.

Borin felt it:  
**Schwarzgrund was not just a place.**  
**He was a hunter.**  
**A hunter who lived in his own darkness.**

But the stone continued to whisper. More and more clearly:

*"Only one more path..."*  
*Just one more goal...*  
*then you are in the heart...*  
*in the heart of the living rock..."*

Borin took a deep breath. "Then we'll go. To the gate."

The passage led ever deeper, but the depth itself seemed to change. It was no longer just darkness, not just rock, or the silent expanse of a mountain. It was attentive. Awake. Totally. Every step the three dwarves took seemed to be registered by the stone beneath them. Not with eyes, not with ears—but with something older than both. The mountain sensed their approach.

And at the same time, something else sensed that they were coming.

The scraping behind them grew more constant. First like the glide of a single claw, then like the grinding of many limbs. Barim gripped his hammer so tightly that his knuckles showed white. "I'll turn around eventually," he growled. "And if anything ugly comes along, then—" "NO." Barim's voice echoed through the corridor like a blacksmith's hammer. "Don't."

The words were not merely instinctive. They were commanded. By the stone.

Gadrim placed his hand flat against the wall. "It's behind us. Right behind us." "I know," Borin replied. "But if we turn around, it will take on a form." Borin cursed softly. "What do you mean?" "Shadows live on gazes. When we look at them, they become real in the rock. And then..." Borin didn't finish the sentence. He didn't need to.

The scraping turned into a scratching sound that vibrated even through the soles of my boots. It was close. TOO close.

"Faster," Borin murmured. "The stone says we're close to the gate."

And then the walls began to glow.

First soft, like golden dust. Then brighter. Then like veins of pure embers running through the rock.

Barim gasped. "What... by all the hammer smiths... is happening here?" Gadrim understood first. "The mountain... is preparing us."

For the golden lines formed themselves—not randomly, not chaotically. Into patterns. Into runes. Into something that looked like a gigantic, living seal.

*"Root of the mountain..."*  
*Heart of the Deep...*  
*Gateway of Awakening..."*

The whispering was no longer just a chorus. It was a voice. The voice of the living stone itself — an ancient consciousness that spoke only where the world had become thin enough.

Borin felt the lines on his skin light up in sync with the lines in the rock. Gadrim stared at him. "You... you are in harmony with the stone." "I'm not a shaman," Borin growled. "No," said Gadrim. "Shamans hear the mountain. You... have become a part of it."

Barim almost choked. "Tell me that's not an insult." But before Barim could reply, the floor vibrated violently.

A deep sound pierced the rock. No scraping. No scratching.

### **A reputation.**

The deep spoke again.

*"Come..."*

The floor dipped before them, slowly, as if a gigantic dwarf wheel were turning beneath the stone. Then the passage opened—not abruptly, not violently. The walls parted, organically, like muscles in a vast body.

Before them lay a vast hall.

Not built. Not forged. Grown.

The walls were made of living rock, luminous, vibrant, crisscrossed with veins of gold and deep, dark shadows that moved as if they had a life of their own. In the center of the hall was a vertical cleft in the wall—a gateway so ancient that every symbol on it looked as if it had ceased to exist eons ago.

The gate was not closed. It was asleep.

And now...it woke up.

The golden veins crept across its surface, circling the runes and connecting them. The gap widened. A warm breath—yes, a breath—escaped from it.

Barim froze. Gadrim whispered: "This is the gate. The heart of the living stone."

Borin felt the answer within himself, as if his body were speaking:

"The gate that the mountain opens for me."

Then the scraping sound came again behind them. Now louder. More distorted. Angry.

The thing that had been following them had realized that they were about to escape.



Borin didn't turn around. But he heard it—like claws racing across stone. Like a body too big to have been born. Like a shadow trying to become flesh.

"Quickly," whispered the stone in Borin's head.  
*"Quickly... before the shadow becomes..."*

Borin grabbed Barim and Gadrim by the arms. "We're going through."

"Where does the gate lead?" Barim asked. Borin shook his head. "The mountain doesn't say. But it's the only way."

They approached the gate. Borin raised his hand — the lines under his skin now glowed as brightly as molten ore.

The walls trembled. The runes on the gate suddenly sparked.

And then the stone spoke one last time:

*"Come... inheritance..."*  
*deeper..."*

The gate sprang open.

Golden light poured into the hall — warm, bright, powerful.

And at that same moment, something screamed behind them. A scream that was not mortal. Not animal.

A scream that could have broken an entire world if it had been louder.

Borin took his brothers with him.

They jumped through the gate.

The door closed behind them with a thunderous roar that silenced even the whisper of the living stone.

And Schwarzgrund remained behind — with the cry of the shadow, which had now come too late.

## The oath of the ancestors

As the gate slammed shut behind them with a thunderous crash, the sound echoed through the new chamber like a verdict. The air changed instantly. It was no longer vibrant and warm as before, but cool and clear, imbued with a hint of ancient purity. Borin felt as if he had stepped from a bubbling volcano into a still, frosty night. The lines beneath his skin pulsed more slowly, more calmly, as if the runic heart within him, too, recognized the new place.

Barim inhaled sharply. "By all the ore veins... this smells of... history." Gadrim stepped forward cautiously. "Not only that. Of memory. Of something older than the depths we know."

The chamber was enormous. Far larger than any hall above Blackground. Its walls were made of white, slightly bluish-tinged rock—a type of stone Borin had never seen before. It didn't look like stone, but like condensed light. Embedded within it were symbols and shapes that resembled runes... but not those of the dwarves. Not even those of the Primal Keepers.

They were precursors. Original forms. The first runes ever to have originated in the mountain — not written, not carved, but grown.

Borin felt his chest tighten. He wasn't familiar with this sensation, but something deep within his blood was reacting.

"This is a sacred place," whispered Gadrim. "A very sacred place." Barim asked, "For whom?" Before Gadrim could answer, they heard a voice.

No whispering. No echo. A real sound.

*"For you."*

All three froze.

The sound didn't come from the front, nor from the back—it came from everywhere. As if the chamber itself were speaking. Then, slowly, voices formed from the white rock. Voices that sounded like the rubbing of smooth stones, warm and powerful at the same time.

*"For the children of the rock,  
for the faithful,  
for the awakened."*

Gadrim fell to one knee. "Ancestors..." Barim stared, dazed. "That can't be! That's just a legend!"

Borin sensed a movement within the stone. No shape, no shadow—a consciousness.

The elders continued speaking:

*"You have waited a long time."  
We were silent for a long time.  
But the reputation has found an heir."*

The lines beneath Borin's skin glowed brighter.

Gadrim turned to him. "Borin... they're talking about you."

Barim swallowed. "Of course they do. He's the mountain's darling. The favorite child of everything I don't understand."

Borin stepped forward. He felt no fear—only awe. Deep as the mountain's very core. "Why do you call me? Why now? What has awakened that compels you to speak?"

The rock vibrated. An ancient rumble filled the chamber — not a sound of threat, but a breath as old as the world.

The answer from the elders was clear:

*"The swarm of darkness breaks the chains."  
The mountain's root is in danger.  
A father awakens in anger.*

Borin immediately understood what they were talking about. The being he had seen in the vision. The enormous body made of living stone. The sleeping eye deep beneath the black background.

The origin of deep brooding.

"Then we have to stop him," said Borin. "That's why I'm here."

The elders replied:

*"No."*

The word hit him like a blow.

Gadrim slowly stood up. "What do you mean by that?"

The voices deepened — like the slow, majestic roar of a mountain.

*"Nobody can stop him."*

Barim instinctively stepped back. "I knew it! We are lost!" But the rock continued to speak.

*"He cannot be killed."  
Do not tie.  
Do not banish."*

Borin clenched his fists. "Then tell me... what am I supposed to do? Why are you calling me?"

Silence.

A silence so profound that even the golden patterns in Borin's skin ceased to pulsate.

Then the chamber said:

*"Your father is not your enemy."  
But his awakening."  
And awakening can be prevented."*

Gadrim whispered, "They want... you to calm the mountain itself." Borim gasped. "Borin, you're supposed to put an entire MOUNTAIN to sleep?" Borin didn't answer. For the elders continued speaking:

*"So that you can calm him down,  
You must become what you are."*

Borin exhaled deeply. "And what am I?"

The answer came like a thunderclap in his blood:

*"The Stonewalker."*

Gadrim gasped for air. Barim almost dropped the hammer.

And Borin felt the lines beneath his skin tear open their innermost being and light emanate from it.

The elders spoke one last time — in a tone that left no room for doubt:

*"Your oath begins now."*

The ground beneath Borin's feet began to pulse softly, as if the chamber itself had a heart, beating to its own ancient rhythm. The light in the walls didn't flicker; it grew—like living flames from pure stone. Each pulse carried the voices of the ancestors, each vibration in the rock was like a breath from a being older than the mountain, older than any life that had grown within it. Borin felt the runic lines beneath his skin respond to this vibration. First gently. Then demandingly. Then fiercely.

Gadrim watched him with an expression that wavered between amazement and fear. "It's starting," he whispered. Barim swallowed audibly. "I don't know if I've drunk enough courage for this."

But Borin barely heard them. He only heard the voices in the stone.

*"Stonewalker."  
"Guardians of the inner heartbeat."  
"Link between breath and rock."*

The title echoed through him like an ancient name. One that had never been spoken, yet had always waited. He didn't know exactly what a Stonewalker was—he only knew the word from confusing, half-faded texts that even the Runesmiths dismissed as myth. But now he felt its meaning in his blood.

A stone walker was not someone who shaped the stone. A stone walker was someone who was shaped by the stone.

Borin stepped further into the center of the chamber. The floor now glowed in a circular pattern that spread beneath his feet like a living seal. Veins of light crept along the floor, rearranging themselves, forming symbols not meant for dwarven eyes. The air began to shimmer, as if heat had mingled with frost.

"This is a ritual circle," Gadrim whispered. "An ancient one—older than any forge of the Primal Keepers. It... it binds you." "To what?" Barim asked sharply. Gadrim shook his head. "To the mountain, Barim. To its heart. To its fear. To its will."

Barim took a step back. "I don't like it when mountains have a will of their own."

The ancestors spoke again, this time more directly, like a chorus of millions of voices resounding from every crevice in the rock:

*"The mountain has always had a will."*

*"But nobody ever listened."*

Borin raised his head. "And me? Am I supposed to listen? Am I supposed to serve?"

The stone answered:

*"You shall bind what has been unleashed."*

*"You shall calm what is angry."*

*"You should close what threatens to break open."*

Barim frowned. "Sounds like work for ten armies. Not for one dwarf." But Borin sensed that deep down, the turmoil could not be stopped by steel, army, or host.

Just one connection. One bond. One vow.

The oath of the ancestors.

Gadrim pointed at the walls. "Look!" The symbols had begun to move. Not flicker—to wander. Slowly, like living characters, they crept across the white rock, rearranging themselves, forming words whose meaning Borin understood on a level beyond language.

The chamber itself wrote the oath.

A dull thud sounded. The rock vibrated. The stone sang.

And Borin suddenly felt something that didn't come from the outside. Something inside. Something that had been dormant until then.

A second voice in his blood.

A deep, warm voice. His voice. And yet not his.

*"Stand, heir."*

He didn't sink to his knees in fear—but before the immense energy coursing through him. Temperature no longer mattered. He was simultaneously scorching hot and freezing cold. Schwarzgrund and the uppermost mines no longer existed. Only this room remained. Only this oath.

The voices of the elders became clear:

*"We once gave the first blacksmiths the power to shape the mountain."  
"Now we give you the power to hold the mountain."  
"Because if the root breaks, the world breaks."*

Borin raised his head. "And what do you want from me?"

The answer was an earthquake that did not destroy – but strengthened.

*"Give us your name."*

Gadrim's eyes widened. "Borin! That's no small sacrifice!" Barim shouted: "The name IS the soul! If you give it up, the mountain can take you!" But Borin shook his head. "It doesn't take me. It binds itself to me."

He stepped into the circle, so that the light surrounded him like a radiant aura.

The ancestors said:

*"Name the name you had."  
"And receive the name that awaits you."*

Borin felt his heart clench. He felt the presence of his father. Of his ancestors. Of all those who walked in the deepest layers of history.

He inhaled deeply. Steadfastly.

"I am Borin, son of Dûrmor," he said. His voice echoed through the chamber.

The elders replied:

*"Then hear the name the mountain gives you..."*

The chamber fell silent.

The whole mountain fell silent.

And then the stone spoke:

*"Borin Stonewalker."*

The light exploded.

The floor didn't crack – it opened. The air vibrated. The runes on the walls blazed brightly.

And the power of the ancestors flowed into Borin.

That's when his oath began.

The oath that would decide whether the mountain's root remained still – or unleashed the father of the deep brood.

The light emanating from Borin was not fire, nor a glow a lamp could produce. It was an inner radiance that permeated every fiber of his being, as if he were suddenly made of a different material—living ore, pulsating stone, the very essence of the mountains. Gadrim and Barim had to cover their eyes, yet they did not turn away. No dwarf ever turned away from a sacred moment of the mountain, no matter how much he feared it.

The brightness gradually diminished. Not disappearing completely — controlled. Tamed.

Like an ember submitting to a blacksmith.

Borin opened his eyes. And Barim, who otherwise never uttered a kind word, exhaled soundlessly. "For all the depths... you look as if the mountain itself has touched you." And in a way, the mountain had indeed.

The lines beneath Borin's skin were no longer a shimmering accident. They were shapes. Runes. Ancient, organic runes that slowly seeped into his muscles and bones as if they had always been there. Each one glowed with a soft, deep golden hue. Not bright. Not ostentatious.

A silent fire. A tranquil heart. A stone in flux.

Gadrim stepped closer and touched Borin's arm as gently as if handling a sacred artifact. "You... you're truly connected." "I am me," Borin said calmly. "Only deeper."

Then the voice of the ancestors rose again, and this time it sounded different. Less like a choir. More like a circle of ancient, powerful beings gathered around their forge, hammers in hand, ready to teach—or to test.

*"Borin Stonewalker..."*  
*Your oath has been spoken.*

A slight breeze, impossible at such a depth, swept through the chamber. Gadrim looked up. "The air is changing... something is activating." Barim cursed. "Not another goal!"

But it was not a gate that opened.

It was a circle. A colossal circle of luminous runes, slowly rising from the ground as if it were a disc of pure light. It hovered, serene, majestic, directly above Borin's head. The runes within it constantly changed, turning, shifting, changing their meaning like the wheels of an ancient code that only the Elders themselves could decipher.

Then the circle descended.

Not on Borin's head, but around him.

He formed a ring around his chest, like a belt of energy. And then the runes closed—within him. As if they had written themselves onto his body.

Borin gasped briefly, not from pain, but from an impact that touched his very core.

The elders continued speaking:

*"With this oath, you take the burden of the mountain into your heart."*

*"His pain is your pain."*

*"His restlessness is your restlessness."*

*"His awakening is your awakening."*

Barim turned to Gadrim in horror. "That doesn't sound healthy." But Gadrim replied in a serious voice: "That's bonding, Barim. Not a curse. A symbiosis between dwarf and mountain. Something that had been lost for eons."

Borin looked at his hands. They weren't trembling. They weren't burning with heat.

But he felt something.

*A second consciousness.*

Incomplete. Unclear.

But he knew: It was the mountain.

And colossal structures like mountains had feelings—but only a few. Anger. Pain. Peace. And something Borin recognized immediately when he tasted it like iron on his tongue:

### **Fear.**

The ancestors spoke more gently:

*"The father of the deep brood is stirring."*

*"His anger is not a will."*

*"It is his pain."*

Gadrim shuddered. "A titan of stone, suffering in the depths... the mountain itself is its body... this is a catastrophe." Borin nodded. "And this pain spreads. Into Blackground. Into the shadows. Into the brood." Borin clenched his fists. "So the brood isn't an enemy in its own right... it's... waste? Shards?" Gadrim nodded ominously slowly. "It's what the pain tears from the living rock. An echo of its agony."

Borin closed his eyes. He briefly saw the sleeping eye again, the gigantic, stony eyelid.

He remembered the vision.

*A creature so enormous that a mountain range was merely its shell.*

A titan who slept. But the sleep was not peace — but a chain.

A broken chain.

The elders now sang softly, like an ancient lament:

*"He cannot be saved."*

*"He cannot be stopped."*

*"But he can be calmed down."*

*"When you descend."*



Gadrim placed a hand on Borin's shoulder. "The oath demands that you... become his pain?" "No," Borin answered slowly. "That I bear it."

Barim shook his head. "That's madness." "That's mandatory," said Borin.

The elders confirmed it:

*"Descend into the root of the living stone."*

*"Find the source of his pain."*

*"Bin them to your heart."*

*"And the shadows will fall silent."*

Then the chamber fell silent. Not a sound remained. Only Borin's heartbeat — and the second heartbeat deep beneath it.

His new burden. His new power. His oath.

*The oath of the ancestors.*

The room, which had just moments before been filled with the voices of the ancestors, was suddenly in perfect silence. Not even the mountain's breath vibrated in the walls. It was a silence that was not natural—it was made. A silence that belonged to the dwarf before the storm. Borin felt his own breathing become loud, every movement of his muscles sound as if he were walking in a vast hall of glass.

Gadrim took a hesitant breath. "The oath is complete... do you feel any changes?" Borin nodded slowly. "Yes. Everything feels... closer. The stone. The depth. The pain. The mountain is trying to speak to me—not in words, but in feelings."

Barim grimaced. "Feelings of a MOUNTAIN?" Gadrim looked at him. "Colossi don't feel like we do. They only feel basic forces: pressure, pain, calm, hunger, anger... and fear." Barim snorted. "This is a damn complicated conversation."

But Borin let the two talk. Because now he felt it—the trembling. Not in the walls. Not in the ground. In his chest.

The rune heart pulsed. And something answered — deep down. A rumble, barely audible, but right in his bones.

It was as if the titan beneath them was moving his back in his sleep.

*He wakes up.*

*I need to go down.*

*I need to go deeper.*

"The path is opening up," Borin said suddenly, without knowing exactly where the words came from.

Gadrim blinked. "What do you mean?" But then the ground trembled. This time not from anger or pain, but like a testing lift of an ancient machine that had long stood still.

The chamber reacted.

The white walls began to glow softly. The symbols on them moved more slowly, more purposefully, as if following a hidden instruction. And then, in the middle of the room, a section of the floor detached itself—not through a mechanism, but through a pure change in the stone.

A circle began to descend. Slowly, calmly, like an elevator made of living rock, gliding into an invisible depth.

Barim immediately stepped back. "No. No, I'm absolutely not stepping on something that looks like the mouth of a giant worm!" But Gadrim grabbed him by the shoulder. "Barim. This is our path."

The circle stopped. It was now like a platform leading into an infinite blackness. Borin stepped closer — and the stone vibrated beneath his feet as if it recognized him.

Then the elders spoke again.

Not loudly. Not through the air. But directly through the rock — and thus directly into Borin's heart.

*"Borin Stonewalker... it is time."*

Barim looked back and forth between Borin and the platform. "So... you really want to go down there?" Borin nodded. "I have to. The oath demands it."

"And if the mountain crushes us down there?" "Then it won't crush us alone. I have its bond."

Gadrim stepped before him. His gaze was steady, calmer than Barim's, but fear burned within him. "Borin... what you find down there won't be a forge. Not a cave. It will be a living heart. A wound. A titan that has slumbered for eons and now feels pain. And you want to... go inside?" "Yes." "And you think you can share that pain?" "I don't know," Borin answered honestly. "But the mountain believes you can."

The words were heavy. Heavier than a hammerhead made of pure earth metal.

Barim snorted and finally stepped onto the platform with a resigned curse. "If you die, you won't die without me, you fool. And if you don't die, I'll be upset about it later." Gadrim followed. "That's the stupidest and at the same time the noblest thing Barim has ever said."

Borin also stepped onto the platform. The stone vibrated. The air began to hum. And then the disc began to sink—deeper, deeper, deeper into the blackness.

The walls around her changed as she descended. At first they were smooth. Then they became rough, formed from veins. Then they began to pulsate.

Gadrim thrust his hand out. "The walls... Borin, they're alive!" "I know."

Barim pressed himself against the middle. "If a wall touches me, I'll scream." But no wall touched him.

They retreated. Slowly. Like a gigantic maw respectfully making way.

Borin stood still. His eyes glowed with a golden light. And he knew, without the elders saying it:

*This was the descent into the root of the living stone.*

*This was the path to becoming a titan.*

*This was the path that decided the fate of the entire mountain range.*

And deep below, far below, than any dwarf had ever been, something incomprehensible cleared its limbs—and opened a single, ancient eye.

It didn't see the platform. Not Gadrim. Not Barim.

It saw Borin.

And it waited.

Borin Steinwandler descended.

## Across the bridges of the halls

The descent had been long—longer than natural rock strata could ever have allowed. The platform of living stone hadn't fallen, not fallen in the conventional sense; it had glided, like a sinking hammerhead plunging into molten ore, carried by something more will than mechanics. When Borin Stonewalker and his companions finally came to a stop, the air was so still that even Barim instinctively held his breath.

Before them lay a landscape that no dwarf's eye had ever seen before.

It was not a hall. It was not a tunnel. It was not a room in the belly of the mountain.

It was an empire.

A vast, naturally formed, yet impossible realm stretching into seemingly endless expanses. The ground was a mixture of black slate and metallic veins that glowed with a deep, tranquil rhythm—like the resting pulse of a sleeping titan. From the ground rose bridges, gates, and pillars so grand that even the surface halls of the greatest dwarven kingdoms seemed like toys in comparison.

Barim gasped. “By all the anvils... this is... this isn't a mountain. This is its own damned land.” Gadrim cautiously stepped to the edge of the platform. “No. It is the mountain. This is the Halling Hall. The legend... the Highest Hall... I thought it was a myth.”

But Borin knew: None of it was myth.

The mountain was alive. This realm was its interior. These halls... were its thoughts, its structures, its ribs and nerve pathways.

The Titan was not in the depths. The Titan was the depths.

The platform merged with the ground as if it had never been separate. The stone gave them a moment of stillness—a single moment to understand where they were.

Borin felt it instantly, in the rune-heart that now glowed within him like a second soul. He heard the breath. The true breath. Not that of Schwarzgrund. Not that of the Deepbrood.

The breath of the living rock itself.

And he heard the whisper:

*"You are near... link..."*

*The way is open... across the bridges... of the Hallenden..."*

A rumble swept through the air like a distant thunderstorm. The bridges reacted.

They were not structures, but organic formations, elegant, curved like veins that shot from the ground and intertwined. Each bridge bore patterns that resembled runes, but in a language no dwarf had ever written. Runes that didn't signify, but simply existed.

Barim raised the hammer. "I don't like bridges that speak to me." Gadrim shook his head. "They don't speak to you. They speak to him."

Borin stepped forward. As soon as his foot touched the first bridge, it began to glow beneath him. A bright, golden light ran through it—first directly under his feet, then along its entire length.

And then – a movement.

The bridge awoke.

Not frightening. Not aggressive. More like a living being, preparing for its owner's first step.

"They follow my heartbeat," Borin whispered. "They listen to me." Gadrim followed up cautiously. "Of course they do. The mountain has bound you."

Barim followed them, but with far more curses and considerably less enthusiasm. "If a bridge swallows me up, Borin, it'll be your fault."

They continued walking. And the further they came on the bridge, the more the hall revealed its grandeur.

Beneath them lay a vast abyss. Not an abyss of emptiness—an abyss of movement. Black shadows rolled there like currents. Rock shifted like water, as if massive slabs of stone were merely leaves in the wind.

And down there... in deep, seething darkness...

...Borin saw it.

A gigantic circular shape. Immobile. Sleeping.

One eye. Closed.

As big as an entire city.

Gadrim froze. "The Titan. His eye... it's right beneath us." Barim stared down, pale. "He's dreaming. And his dreams are shadow creatures." "Yes," Borin said softly. "And when he awakens... his nightmares will become reality."

The bridge led higher, then branched out. Some paths led into luminous, pulsating side tunnels; others ended in darkness or simply plunged away, as if they had lost their purpose. The mountain was not a structure. It was a body. And bodies change.

Gadrim placed his hand on Borin's arm. "Where does your oath lead us?" Borin placed a hand on the bridge. His lines glowed.

And the mountain answered.

A distant bridge — high above, almost like a thread of pure crystal — began to glow.

Borin pointed upwards. "There. That is the path to the root of the pained heart."

Barim whispered: "To the heart of the Titan?" Borin nodded.

Gadrim exhaled heavily. "Then the next path leads us deeper... and higher at the same time." "That's right," said Borin. "We're going over the Hallenden. Where the mountain supports itself."

The bridge began to move, as if it had understood his decision.

Borin looked down into the abyss one last time, at the sleeping eye of the colossal being.

*I'm coming,* he thought.

And the eye... twitched.

The bridge beneath Borin's feet vibrated like a living string, stretched between two immense rock worlds. Every step he took sent waves of golden light through its veins. The reverberating surface didn't react like a space, but like a consciousness: languid, ancient, and full of geological patience. It was a realm not made for feet, but for phenomena. And yet, it opened its paths for Borin—because he had become the Stonewalker.

Barim trudged behind him, trying not to look down. "If that really is an eye down there... I hope it's not blinking." Gadrim was pale, but his eyes sparkled with understanding. "Borin... do you realize how the mountain is orienting itself by our footsteps? It's measuring you. It's testing you." "I know." Borin's voice had a new depth. Not unfamiliar, but amplified—like a hammer striking the right anvil.

They continued on. The hall opened before them into terraces of stone, so smooth it looked as if a giant had polished them with a single blow. Between the terraces grew bridges of

crystalline rock that glowed from within and changed color depending on Borin's angle of view—sometimes gold, sometimes silver, sometimes with a blue sparkle reminiscent of starlight.

But not everything was glowing.

Some parts of the hall were shrouded in complete darkness. Not as an absence of light, but as the presence of something that devoured the light.

Borin stopped. A shiver ran down his spine. Gadrim noticed immediately. "What is it?" Borin pointed down.

Beneath the bridges, deep in the shifting rock, dark swarms crawled. Shadows in swarms. Small but countless creatures—the Deepspawn. They gathered in the crevices of the sleeping titan, as if its pain were their breeding ground.

Barim exhaled. "It's a whole damned lake of creatures." "It's more than that," said Gadrim. "They are an expression of his pain. Wherever his pain is greatest... the brood gathers."

Borin nodded.

Then he heard the whisper again — this time clear, coming directly from the stone of the bridge on which he was standing.

*"They are not the enemy... "  
but the crack...  
the crack in the root stone..."*

Borin shivered. "The fissure... it has a source." Gadrim straightened. "And you are to find it. We—are to find it."

"And close," Borin added.

They continued across the bridge. The structure rose higher and higher above the abyss, until the hall no longer seemed like a depth, but like the interior of an upturned mountain. Crystal points jutted down from above like inverted teeth; some pulsating, some silent.

Borin suddenly stopped. His eyes widened. Something had changed.

Barim growled: "What now?" "The heartbeat," said Borin. "Can you hear it?"

Gadrim listened. His face lost all color.

Below them...far beneath the gigantic bridge...the rhythm changed.

The Titan breathed faster.

Not awake — but restless.

Borin placed his hand on the floor of the bridge. The stone immediately responded with a warm thumping.

*"You are approaching..."*  
*Borin Stonewalker...*  
*The root feels you..."*

A storm of emotions overwhelmed Borin. Not his own emotions. The mountain's.

A dull ache. An ancient pressure, as if something were striking against an ancient grid from within. And within it, a third sensation:

Fear.

A mountain feared nothing. Except that which could break it from within.

Gadrim's voice was shaky. "Borin... what is the mountain telling you?" "That we need to go faster."

For beneath them, in the turbulent abyss, the shadows gathered. The brood crept upwards along the walls of the hall like a black tide moving towards the shimmering bridges.

Barim hit the hammer harder. "They're coming up. That's not good." "No," said Borin. "It's not good at all. We have to reach the next bridge."

The bridge in front of them suddenly rose up. Not frightening — inviting.

It led to a higher level, a massive arched passageway from which pale light shone.

"The Hallenders open the way," said Gadrim. "For what?" asked Barim. "For the Stonewalker," replied Borin.

They ran.

The bridge trembled. Behind them, the first shadows climbed the lower veins. The brood did not move like animals—they moved like a single great will.

The will of pain.

Borin saw a single shadow break away from the swarm. Then a second. Then dozens. They crawled up the rock faces like bodyless spiders.

Gadrim shouted: "Faster, Borin!" "I'm already running!"

They reached the next section. The bridge connected to a ramp made of light-colored stone. Borin jumped up first — and at the same moment, the lower part of the bridge closed like a protective muscle retracting.

The brood collided with it.

A furious scream echoed through the hall. Not from throats. From the rock.

Gadrim gasped. "The mountain is keeping them out!" Borin nodded. "As long as I'm here, it protects us. But the brood is growing stronger. We must move on."

The ramp led them to a massive archway made of white ore, its runes pulsating brightly.

Borin felt it immediately.

*This is where the path to the root begins.*

He took a deep breath, then stepped through.

The archway of white ore received them not as a building, but as a boundary between two layers of consciousness. The light that pulsed within it was not light in the human sense—it was information, memory, intention. As Borin stepped through, he felt a barely perceptible yet tangible shift in reality, as if entering the thought stream of an ancient being.

Beyond the arch, a passage opened up, its sheer size leaving even Gadrim speechless. It was wide enough for an entire army to march through—yet utterly silent. No shadows, no veins, only smooth, white rock that felt like polished bone. The air was cooler, clearer, almost gentle.

“This isn’t a natural gait,” Gadrim whispered. Borin nodded. “It’s a nerve pathway. The Titan senses every step we take.” Borin stopped abruptly. “I don’t want to walk on any nerve!” “You already are,” Borin said calmly.

They continued walking. The deeper they went into the passage, the more clearly Borin heard the mountain's muffled voices — not clear words, but sensations flowing through its runic lines.

Restlessness. Heat. Pressure. A pulling sensation, like a rock that has been stretched for too long.

The Titan suffered. And the closer Borin came, the heavier the burden of his pain became.

Gadrim noticed his tension. "Does it hurt?" "Not like a wound," Borin murmured. "More like a weight." "Then it will be worse," said Gadrim, "because we are going into the heart of that weight."

A distant sound reached her ears. Not a scream. Not a growl.

A knock.

Regular. Calm. Like a heartbeat pumping its power deep through the stone.

Barim's eyes widened. "Is... that... him?" "Yes," replied Borin. "His heart is beating. Slowly. Heavy. And restlessly."

Then the passage in front of them changed. The smooth wall parted, not with a sound, not with pressure — but like two waves of stone flowing apart.

Beyond it lay a bridge. A colossal, floating bridge of bright crystal, leading far into the depths. Beneath it, veins of red light pulsed like enormous arteries. Above it, gigantic crystal spears rose, hanging from the ceiling like inverted mountains.



Barim stared down. "What happens if we fall down there?" Gadrim replied tonelessly: "Then you'll become a very small part of a Titan's bloodstream."

Barim took a few steps back. "I'll stay in the middle of the bridge."

They went forward. And the bridge sang.

Yes — sang.

A deep, vibrating tone filled the air, more a feeling than a sound. It was harmonious, ancient, and melancholy. A melody no dwarf's throat could produce—it sounded as if the mountain itself were singing a song of lost time.

Gadrim listened in awe. "Borin... that's a song." "The Heart Song," replied Borin. "The Titan sings in his sleep."

Barim tapped Borin on the shoulder. "Why does that sound so... sad?" Borin paused briefly, placing his hand on the bridge structure.

A wave of emotion washed over him. An overwhelming longing. A wound. A plea.

"Because he's in pain," said Borin. "Pain that runs through every vein."

Gadrim touched the bridge's edge. "If the heart sings like that... then the damage is deep. No legend has ever described a Titan being wounded." "Perhaps he wasn't wounded," Borin said softly. "Perhaps he was left alone for too long."

They reached the middle of the bridge. There was a raised area, like a small altar made of pure rock. On it — a depression shaped like a leaf.

No. The shape of a hand. His hand.

Borin stepped forward. The runes beneath his skin immediately began to glow. The altar reacted.

Gadrim exhaled. "This is a test." Barim growled. "What is he testing?" "Whether Borin is ready," said Gadrim. "All or nothing."

Borin placed his hand in the indentation.

A tremendous tremor shook the entire bridge. The Titan's heartbeat grew louder, more powerful. Reddish-gold light shot up from the veins beneath the bridge.

Borin did not shout. He stood firm, as if the mountain itself were anchoring him.

He saw images. Thousands. Flashes of memories that weren't his:

The Titan, young, awake, walking deep within creation. The Titan, bound by the Ancients to restrain his wrath. The Titan, sleeping, broken by an ancient burden. The Titan, roaring with pain as the first crack cut through his inner rock.

And finally—a form.

A being. A shadow giant that broke away from him.

The origin of the Deepbrood. A fragment of a nightmare that became reality.

The images disappeared. Borin jerked his hand back.

Gadrim grabbed him. "What did you see?" Borin was pale. "The rift." "Where?" Borin pointed into the distance—to a mountain of crystalline ore that rose from the depths of the Hallende like the heart of an ancient clockwork mechanism.

A bridge led to his place. Not made of crystal. Not made of ore.

A bridge made of pure, natural stone—dark, rough, full of scars.

"There," said Borin. "That's where the origin lies. That's where the wound is."

Barim shuddered. "And what are we supposed to do when we get there?"

Borin replied:

"We're getting in."

The path Borin had shown was clear as ore, yet as shattering as the first blow of a forge shaping a blade. The dark, scarred bridge in the distance was not an invitation—it was a judgment. A path not built to carry, but to warn. And yet Borin knew: that was exactly where he had to go.

The hall lay around them like an ancient giant twitching in his sleep. Again and again the ground beneath them trembled, not in the chaotic rhythm of an earthquake, but like the quivering of a wounded heart. The gigantic crystal spears on the ceiling crackled softly, and every sound echoed like distant thunder.

Gadrim stepped to Borin's side. "The Trial Stone showed you what awaits us. A crack... a fracture in the very core of the Titan. This isn't just a wound. This is a hole in the soul of a mountain being." Borin nodded slowly. His gaze was steady, unmoving. "And this fracture releases nightmares. The brood... the shadows... everything originates there." Barim raised his hammer. "Then we'll just close it up. Stone is stone. If there's a wound, we'll strike it and close it." Gadrim snorted. "That's not how a living rock works, Barim. A Titan isn't just rock. It feels. If we strike incorrectly... the mountain itself could shatter."

Barim grumbled. "Great. Trying to close a wound that's simultaneously screaming and breathing. That's..." "Impossible?" asked Gadrim. "I was going to say 'absurd,' but that fits too."

Borin looked across at the dark bridge. The bridge was like a silhouette in the light of a sacred place. No veins glowed within it. No resonance followed his thoughts. It seemed dead—and yet Borin sensed that it was alive. Or rather: that it was surviving.

A path that the Titan himself had created as he suffered and moved in his sleep.

A path that was not led, but forced.

That made him dangerous.

“We are leaving,” Borin said softly, and the sound of his voice made even the crystalline foundation beneath them tremble.

They continued up the ascent, across the bright bridge of shimmering ore that resembled a frozen river of light. The Shadowbrood moved below them, but they dared not ascend—not here, not on this path. The Titan itself held them back, like scar tissue protecting a wounded body.

But the closer they got to the dark bridge, the more the air changed.

It became heavier. Thicker. Moister, as if the breathing heart of a monster lay there.

The ground beneath Borin's feet vibrated in short, rapid bursts—not in rhythm with his heartbeat, but like an anguished twitch. The Titan lay in pain.

Gadrim took a deep breath. "I can feel it... the stone... is moaning." Barim froze. "STONE can't moan." Borin looked at him. And Barim fell silent.

For at that moment the hall emitted a sound—a long, deep, vibrating tone that shook every structure.

A sound of pain. A sound of suffering, so ancient and powerful that even a dwarf trembled.

Gadrim whispered, "The Titan is calling for help." "No," said Borin. "He is calling for peace."

They reached the first step of the dark bridge.

The bridge was unlike anything before. Not smooth. Not flowing. Not alive.

It was cracked. Splintered. The edges seemed to breathe like a gaping wound. Dark, barely visible rock flour rose from the cracks like dust floating in the air.

Barim shuddered. "It looks like the bridge is about to fall apart." "It's not falling," said Borin calmly. "It's holding. It's holding because the Titan wills it."

The bridge didn't float like the others. It hung—like a thread pulled through the inside of a gigantic wound. And beneath it...only blackness.

No brood. No movement. Just a depth that refused to let the light shine.

Gadrim leaned cautiously over the edge. "This isn't an abyss. This is... molten stone. Melted. Like a stream of blood." Barim stepped back. "I hate these halls."

The first step onto the dark bridge was the hardest.

Borin put him down.

The bridge didn't sing. It didn't pulse. It didn't respond with light.

Instead, she made a sound that resembled a broken mountain.

A crack. A tremor. A shudder like a dying rock.

Gadrim stared at Borin. "That wasn't a good sign." But Borin felt it—the bridge recognized him. Not like the others that had greeted him. This one recognized his oath.

And she asked:

*"Bringers of bonding..."*  
*Are you coming to take away the pain...?*  
*or to share it?"*

Borin took a deep breath, and the rune-heart in his chest answered:

"Both."

The bridge fell silent.

And then she straightened up.

It stretched beneath his feet like a muscle that had grown naturally, remembering its purpose. Light crept through the cracks—no gold, no blue.

Red. Deep red. The color of wounded earth.

Barim murmured: "If this thing breaks beneath me, Borin, I will come to you as a ghost and push you forever." Borin smiled almost imperceptibly.

But his expression was serious.

"We will continue. Right up to the wound."

The woman in the hall responded with a deep, rumbling breath.

The Titan heard them coming. He felt them coming. And for the first moment in eons...

...he hoped.

## The mines that breathe

The path across the dark bridge seemed endless, and yet the rock beneath Borin's feet changed with every step. The red glow in the bridge's cracks pulsed in the same rhythm as the runic heart in his chest, and for the first time, he realized he wasn't just feeling that beat—he was following it. The titan wasn't just a sleeping being deep beneath the Hall End. He was the path itself. He was the mountain. He was everything.

Gadrim stayed closer to Borin than before, his gaze constantly scanning. "The rock is getting harder. Not like stone... more like bone." Barim grimaced. "That's exactly what I wanted to hear when we're standing on a gigantic, living mountain being. Bone." Gadrim frowned. "Not bone in the mortal sense. Titan bones aren't made of empty limestone. They're condensed thought. Condensed will." Barim looked at him as if he'd caught a whiff of something strange. "So you're saying I'm walking on the will of a mountain?" "Yes." Barim snorted. "I hate magic."

But Borin felt nothing of magic at that moment. He felt life. Life that surged through the stone like a breath. A rhythm that lifted the air. A pulse that made the ground vibrate beneath them.

The bridge led into a vast tunnel—but it didn't feel like a tunnel, more like a throat. The walls curved organically, smooth, as if grown organically. Veins of dark ore snaked along the walls, sometimes shimmering, sometimes pulsating, sometimes perfectly still.

Borin paused briefly and placed a hand on the wall. Immediately, warmth penetrated his skin.

And then he heard it:

*One inhalation.*

Not loud. Not violent.

A gentle, powerful gust of air that made the hairs in his beard tremble.

"The mine... is breathing," Borin said softly.

Barim raised the hammer. "Then we should continue before she exhales... and blows us out." Gadrim looked down the corridor. "No, Barim. She isn't exhaling... she's calling for air. She is the lung. A massive, ancient lung."

They went deeper. And the further they went, the more extreme the breathing rhythm became. The tunnel expanded beneath their feet as air flowed in and contracted slightly as they exhaled.

Borin had the feeling that he was walking on an organ. A massive organ of a being that slept beneath the mountains.

A lung. A breathing apparatus. A mine chamber teeming with life.

But the deeper they went, the more their breathing changed. It became irregular, jerky, and stuttering.

Gadrim stopped. "That... is a breathing problem. The Titan is in pain when he breathes." Barim looked at him. "You say that as if he's ill." "He is ill. The wound in his root is hitting his heart. And his lungs... are following his heartbeat."

Borin sensed it more clearly than the other two. The Titan's breathing was unsteady. His heartbeat was irregular. His body reacted like a wounded animal—deep, desperate, searching for rest.

And then they heard it.

A scratching. A rustling. A rummaging.

Not behind them. In front of them. Deep in the pulsating darkness.

Barim immediately raised the hammer. "Not again..." Gadrim narrowed his eyes. "That's not the brood. The brood crawls. That noise... is heavier."

Then came a sound. A guttural, drawn-out crack. Like rock cracking. Like ore breaking under heat. Like a bone of stone moving.

Borin took a step forward, his skin glowing like wrought metal.

"What is there?" asked Barim. "Something that cannot sleep," replied Borin.

From afar, from the depths of the breathing tunnel, a spark shone. A single spark of pure red heat.

Then a second. A third. Twenty.

"Eyes," whispered Gadrim. "Those are eyes."

But Borin recognized it first. Not creatures. Not brood.

### **Guardian.**

Broken guardians. Figures of stone and metal that once protected the Titan's lungs — slumped, warped, broken by the pressure of ancient pain.

And now...now they were getting closer.

Not as enemies. Not as friends.

But as desperate bearers of an old order.

Borin raised his hand — and the eyes of the stone figures turned towards him.

The Titan's breath caught in his throat.

The floor vibrated.

And a voice spoke from the rock:

*"Borin Stonewalker..."*  
*come deeper into the lungs...*  
*help me...*  
*I can't breathe..."*

The guards stopped. They waited.

Barim whispered: "The mountain... is begging us."

Borin closed his eyes.

Then he said:

"We go. To his wound. To his breath. To his heart."

And the guards turned around — and led them deeper into the breathing mine.

The stone sentinels moved slowly, so slowly that their footsteps sounded more like the groaning of ancient strata than the tread of living beings. Their bodies were furrowed ore, fused with veins of dark rock that flickered reddish with each step—not like fire, but like the last sparks of a dying anvil. They were not warriors, not soldiers. They were constructs of an ancient will. Tools of the Titan. And now... they were damaged.

Borin saw it immediately. There was fractured rock in their joints. Their breastplates were warped like metal that had been under too much pressure. Some had indentations, as if pieces had been broken off.

"Pain has marked her," Gadrim murmured heavily. Barim frowned. "Or the brood. I don't like seeing things made of stone that still have fear in their eyes." Gadrim shook his head. "The brood breaks. It distorts. But damage like this... it looks like internal pressure. A backstab from an organism." He looked at Borin. "The Titan... in its pain, pressed itself against her."

Borin could feel it. Every guard who walked before them carried the mountain's imprint within him—but the imprint was not like a gift, but like an oversight. An uncontrolled stirring of a sleeping giant.

And the deeper they went, the stronger the Titan's breath became. The air vibrated with every inhalation and exhalation.

The rock beneath them became more elastic. More alive.

"I feel like I'm walking on a big lung sack," whispered Barim, "and I don't like the feeling."  
"It's the Titan's lung," replied Borin.

The tunnel widened, arching like the interior of a gigantic ribcage. It was not made of ordinary stone. It consisted of layered ore tissue, hardened over millennia by the Titan's breathing force. Each layer displayed different patterns, spiraling, winding, like the markings of an ancient heartbeat.

But at the edges of these layers were cracks. Deep cracks. Fresh cracks.

Borin placed his hand on it. A sound went through the wall. A plaintive, fragile sound.

The Titan breathed unevenly. Like someone trying to draw air in — and failing.

Gadrim swallowed. "Borin... you have to be careful. If you touch too deeply, it could... hurt him." "I know," said Borin. But in truth, he didn't know how deep his bond went. Or how much strength he had already drawn from the mountain.

Another breath made the wall vibrate. Borin withdrew his hand.

The guards led them onward until the walls suddenly dropped sharply downwards on both sides. The tunnel opened into a vast cavern—so large that even Barim fell silent.

"By all the hammer gods..."

The chamber was circular. And in its center, beneath a roof of rib-like ore columns, lay a gigantic structure of pulsating stone. It rose and fell. Slowly. Restlessly. Like an organ.

Gadrim breathed heavily. "That... is the lung chamber. One of the two. The second one must be further down. But... this one here..." Barim scratched his beard nervously. "...it looks like it's... collapsing."

And Barim was right.

The gigantic lung arch was traversed by a single, massive rift line. It ran like lightning through the center. Deep. Dark. Black wisps of energy crept out of it like smoke from a forge that had become too hot.

Borin felt a double pain in his chest. His own heartbeat. And the Titan's heartbeat—irregular, flickering, disturbed.

*"I can't breathe..."*

The voice was not a whisper as before. It was a groan. A desperate, geological sound that seemed to come from an entire world.

Borin almost fell to his knees. Gadrim caught him. "Borin! What is—?" "He... he's pulling me in..." The lines beneath Borin's skin glowed painfully bright.

The guards turned to him. All at once. Their eyes glowed deeper, brighter. They spoke— together. Their voices sounded like the breaking of iron slabs:

*"Borin Stonewalker... "  
the lung breaks...  
and with it the mountain."*

Barim stepped forward, his brow glistening with sweat. "How on earth are you supposed to repair a lung the size of a city?!"

Gadrim looked at Borin — and understood. "He doesn't fix them. He... shares their pain."

The guards approached Borin. Gently. Slowly. Like a ritual.



One raised a hand shaped like a hammer from pure heartstone.

“What... are they doing?” Barim asked.

Gadrim replied in a trembling voice:

"They open the path."

Borin wanted to retreat — but the ground held his feet. The Titan held him. And the guardians placed their hands on his heart.

A blinding light exploded. The lung chamber trembled. The tear line on the organ flickered—as if it saw Borin.

And then he heard the words that sealed his fate:

*"Descend into the crevice."*

*Only you can breathe for both of us."*

The light emanating from Borin's chest filled the entire chamber with an ethereal, white glow. The lines of his skin no longer merely glowed—they seemed to trace themselves in the air, like runes of pure light spiraling upwards, intertwining with the pulsating patterns of the lung chamber. The Titan listened. Not with ears. Not with eyes. With every square inch of his living stone.

The guards stood in a semicircle around Borin, their bodies bent as if kneeling before a king... or a messenger. Their eyes glowed like extinguished embers gasping for air. It wasn't intimidation—it was anticipation. They were waiting for something only Borin could do. Something they themselves were forbidden to perform.

Barim looked around nervously. "They're looking at you, Borin. And I don't like that at all." Gadrim placed a hand on his shoulder. "Be quiet. Something sacred is happening."

But Borin barely heard their voices. For deep within the lung chamber, he heard him—the Titan. His breathing was no longer a steady murmur. It was a struggle.

A wheeze. A stutter. A collapse that kept pulling itself together, only to break down again.

Borin felt his knees tremble. Not from weakness. But from resonance.

The Titan's pain crept through his own ribs. Every breath felt as if a boulder lay upon his chest. Every heartbeat was doubled—his own and that of the giant below, uneven, dissonant, desperate.

“Borin,” Gadrim whispered worriedly. “You’re trembling.” “No,” Borin replied. “I’m... blending in.”

Another breath from the enormous lung tore a deep echo through the chamber. The crack flickered as if swallowing the light. Black spores rose from it, finer than dust—and Barim immediately retreated.

"What the... in all the dark mines is that?!" Gadrim gasped. "Not spores... that's the breath of the wound!" "The breath—what?!" "The mountain is breathing through the fissure. And what it's expelling is... pain."

Borin moved closer to the lung structure. The gigantic organ arch rose and fell erratically. Its surface was like hard rock—yet in some places a soft, almost organic surface shimmered through, as if the Titan were simultaneously rock and flesh.

The guards spoke again, this time in a tone that allowed no deviation:

*"Go down."*

*Only in the wound can breathing be calmed.*

Barim shouted, "We're not sending him into that crevice! He'll be crushed, burned, or swallowed—or all three at once!" Gadrim didn't answer immediately. His gaze was fixed on Borin's luminous runes, on the connections that stretched from them to his lungs.

"It is his duty," he finally said. "The oath of the ancients binds him." Barim stepped forward to Borin and grabbed his arm. "You're a dwarf, damn it! Not a Titan healer. Not a magician. Not..." Borin looked him straight in the eye. "Barim. I have to go down there." "Why?!" "Because otherwise the Titan will die."

The word echoed through the room like a hammer blow.

The chamber froze. Even the Titan's breath stopped for a moment.

Gadrim stared at Borin, stunned. "If... if he dies..." "...the entire mountain will collapse," said Borin. "And all the dwarven halls with it."

Barim let go of his arm. Nothing defiant remained in his gaze. Only fear.

"Then... go," he murmured. "But I'll go right behind you." Gadrim stepped next to Borin. "And I'll go with him."

But the guards stood in front of them.

Their massive arms of ore and stone crossed. The way was blocked.

*"Only the bound one."*

*Only the stone walker."*

Barim roared. "Then let them kill us! I won't let him stumble alone into the breath of a Titan!" But the guards didn't move.

Gadrim tried to speak calmly. "Borin... her logic is ancient. If the Titan senses that someone else is touching the rift, it will fight back." Borin pointed angrily at the guards. "Then they'd better get out of the way!"

And then — they moved.

Slowly. Not back. Not to the side.

They approached Borin — three of them. The largest. The most damaged. The oldest.

They stretched out their gigantic hands. Not to attack. Not to threaten.

But to carry him.

*"We will guide you,"* They said it together.

*"Into the depths of the breath."*

*Into the crack.*

*"Into the wound."*

Borin felt his heart and the Titan's heart beating in the same uneven rhythm.

"I am ready," he said quietly.

The guards lifted him into their arms, carefully like blacksmiths lighting the first fire of a new furnace.

Barim gritted his teeth. "If he doesn't come back... I'll smash the Hallende myself." Gadrim put a hand on his shoulder. "If he falls... the mountain falls."

The guardians carried Borin to the enormous rift. The Titan's breath came in gasps. The wound was pulsating. She was alive.

And then...she moved.

It opened—like the maw of an ancient monster—or like a window into a pain no mortal should ever have to feel.

A hot wind hit Borin, streaked with sparks of dark ore dust. He raised his hand, and his runes glowed brightly, as if defying the darkness.

He said:

"I descend. In the name of the stone."

And the wound swallowed him up.

The fall into the wound wasn't a fall through space—it was a fall through consciousness. Borin didn't feel air rushing past him, stone scratching his skin, or darkness enveloping him. Instead, his body became a sensation, a single, burning impression of pain, heat, and vibrating pressure. The rift didn't swallow him. The rift embraced him. He was the messenger, the bound one, the stonewalker, and the wound recognized him as a silent guardian recognizes who belongs to it.

Gadrim and Barim watched helplessly as Borin vanished. The rift didn't close—on the contrary, it continued to pulsate, like a gigantic maw expelling the breath of a dying colossus. Barim slammed his hammer against the floor, sending sparks flying, and cursed every god and every rock that stood in his way of following his friend.

"This is madness," Barim growled. "No," Gadrim said quietly. "This is a sacrifice."

But Borin never heard her again.

Because he was already deep inside.

The fall suddenly transformed into a sharp jolt. The ground beneath his feet formed from darkness and red stone, as if it had grown out of the Titan himself. The air was thicker than smoke, hot as a blacksmith's fire, and tasted of ore dust and burnt rock. Borin stumbled, caught his footing—and looked up.

He stood in a chamber that consisted of only one element: wound.

The walls were crooked, split, crisscrossed with dark veins that looked like burst blood vessels. Glowing veins ran through them like streams of sparks. Molten stone dripped in viscous streams from cracks in the ceiling. The floor pulsated beneath Borin's feet. Not regularly, not rhythmically. It pulsated like the breath of a dying being.

A sound reverberated through the depths. A sound that didn't emanate—but was felt.

A hoarse, distorted gasp.

The Titan breathed.

Or rather: he tried to breathe.

Borin instinctively placed a hand on his chest. The runic lines glowed brighter than ever before, as if growing from the heat of the chamber itself. Inside, his heart beat twice. A foreign heart. An ancient heart. The heart of the living mountain.

*“Borin...”*

The Titan's voice this time was neither whispering nor threatening. It was broken.

A single, immense soul, weeping in the dark.

Borin fell to one knee. Not out of weakness. Out of awe. And pain.

"I am here," he said. "I can hear you."

The Titan replied:

*“I... am not breathing...I... am vomiting...I... am falling...”*

Borin felt it. Every word was not sound. It was a massive crack that ran through the rocky fabric beneath him.

Black energy shot past him and up the walls. It pulsed, red and violet, like cursed flames.

Something was moving on the back wall of the chamber.

An entire section of the rock broke away — no. Not rock. Organ-rock. Living stone.

A mass, as large as a forge, heaved forth. A shell of rock. A lump of ore, dark flesh, and fractured structure.

A fragment of titanium.

But this fragment moved. It rose. And it breathed.

But that's wrong.

Sudden. Twitching. Swollen.

Like an organ that had fallen out of rhythm and was now fighting to find what it had long since lost.

Borin stepped closer, his hand outstretched. Not like a warrior. Like a healer — or a son.

"You are the wound," Borin said softly. "You are the origin."

The crowd jerked. Shrank. Twitched.

And then... she screamed.

It was not a sound that ears could hear. It was a scream in the stone, a crack in the rock's consciousness. And it shook the chamber.

Borin was thrown back, crashed to the ground, but immediately jumped back up — because he understood.

This organ...tried to heal itself.

But it couldn't. Not anymore. Not alone.

The runic lines on Borin's arms shone so brightly that the room was bathed in dazzling light.

The Titan's voice trembled:

*"You are bound...You can share...You can breathe...for us...both..."*

Borin closed his eyes. He knew what was coming. He knew what was required.

Not force. Not violence. Not blacksmithing.

**A bond. A connection. A shared breath.**

He whispered, "I am ready."

The wound opened—not like a crack, but like a mouth finally receiving an answer it had longed for for eons.

Borin entered.

And the chamber exploded in light.

High above, near Gadrin and Barin, a tremendous gust of air shook the lung chamber. The walls suddenly pulsed more intensely. The Titan breathed deeper.

Barin stumbled. "What... was THAT?!" Gadrin smiled—a rare, genuine smile. "He's alive."

"Borin? Or the Titan?" Gadrin replied:

"Both."

## The eye in the abyss

The ground beneath Borin's feet vibrated in a steady rhythm that felt both familiar and terrifyingly alien. The titan's breath flowed through the rock like an invisible current, and Borin felt each beat of the ancient being travel through his legs, his chest, and his runic heart. He was no longer merely a visitor to the depths—he had become a part of them, a thread in the living fabric of the mountain, a breath in an organism that had slumbered for eons and was now awakening in agony. No light penetrated from above.

All that pierced the darkness was the glimmer of his runes and the faint pulse of the veins in the stone. The tunnel he stood in continued downward, spiraling like a furrow carved into the Titan's soul. The air was heavy, not hot as in the lung chamber, but cold, cutting, and damp, as if he had stepped into a subterranean ocean of darkness. And down there, deep beneath him, he heard something. A sound so ancient that even time must have forgotten it. A long, grinding rumble. No breath. No heartbeat. Something else. Something awake.

Borin took a step. The ground beneath him vibrated at a different frequency than before. His second step made the rock walls tremble. His third step brought the sound closer. And then, for the first time, he saw the outline of the chamber. It opened before him like a gigantic crater in the depths—a circular basin of black rock, so smooth it seemed as if it had been created by a single, immense blow.

In the center of this basin lay a colossal opening. Not a hole. Not a shaft. An eye. Borin stopped. He had traveled far enough to understand the forms of the Hallende—every tunnel, every bridge, every organ possessed a vibrant logic. Yet this eye defied all natural order. It was monstrously large, set within a ring of scarred rock, as if some immense being had tried—and failed—to keep it closed. The eye's surface was not smooth like glass, but rough like molten stone that had never solidified.

Veins of red light crisscrossed it like cracks in a black shard. And in its center lay a slit. Closed. But not completely. A gossamer-thin crack from which dark vapor rose. Borin sensed instantly what this eye was. He knew before the Titan spoke. It wasn't an eye. It was the eye. The center of perception. The Titan's gaze.

The place where he had sensed the world before sinking into sleep. And now the eye began to tremble. A smoke rose, thin, sharp, like poison. Borin narrowed his eyes. The lines on his skin glowed more intensely, as if warning him. But before he could move, he heard the Titan's

voice. Not as words. As pain. As memory. As a warning. "Don't look inside." Borin froze.

The eye vibrated again. The slit widened. And something within it moved. In shimmering light, deep in the blackness. A spark. Not light. A glance. Borin's breath caught in his throat. He felt as if an immense force were reaching into his very core, seizing his heart and trying to tear it from his chest.

The slit in the eye widened. And the Titan groaned. "I can help you," Borin whispered. His voice echoed in the gigantic chamber like a spark in the dark ore. "Tell me... what lies down there." The Titan didn't answer immediately. Only after a trembling moment, as the walls of the chamber expanded in a massive, heavy gasp, did words form in the rock.

*"There lies the awakening." The slit in my eye twitched. Something was stirring behind it. "And the shadow that fell away from me."*

Borin suddenly knew he wasn't just looking at the Titan's eye. He was looking at the origin of the Deepspawn. At the first fragment of madness that had chipped away from the Titan. And the rift opened wider. "I must close it," Borin said. The runic heart throbbed painfully. "I must calm your gaze." "Then descend into the eye... and see what I saw." Borin stepped to the edge of the basin.

The gap was now wide enough to pass through. Black steam poured out like breath.

Borin placed his foot on the living rock. His runes blazed. The eye opened. And the abyss gazed back.

Borin stood at the edge of the gigantic eye and felt the warmth emanating from the opening. It wasn't the heat of a forge, not a fire that scorched the skin. It was the warmth of an ancient, living being, whose gaze had been closed for eons and now, in its agony, showed cracks. The black vapor pouring from the slit tasted of metal and dust, of something rotting deep within the earth's heart and simultaneously being reborn. A contradiction as old as the mountain itself.

The slit moved. It breathed. And Borin knew he had no time to be afraid. The runic heart in his chest hammered like a second breath, and each beat echoed the Titan's words deep within him: "See what I saw." It wasn't a command. It was a plea.

Slowly, he placed his foot on the surface of the eye. The ground felt like stone that had just begun to molten. His boots sank in slightly, and the material contracted with each touch, as if it were living rock clinging to him. The slit opened wider, and a deep sound vibrated through the chamber, a rumble that was only half stone and half memory. Borin stopped, took a deep breath, and felt the Titan take the same breath—irregular, trembling, exhausted.

The Titan's gaze was below him. And the Titan feared his own gaze.

Borin stepped into the opening. Immediately, a pressure settled on his chest, as if he were standing in a tunnel of molten ore. The darkness swallowed the glow of his runes barely a finger's width from his eyes. He no longer felt the ground beneath him, but a gliding, a slow pulling, as if something were drawing him in, not violently, but with an ancient anticipation, like a veil enveloping him.

As he crossed the threshold, the world changed. The chamber of the eye was not simply a cavity. It was a memory. The Titan did not see with light—he saw with perception, with consciousness, with a kind of seeing not defined by shapes and colors, but by meaning.

The darkness began to flicker. First faintly, then more intensely. Before Borin, shapes formed, created not by light, but by memory itself. He suddenly stood no longer in a chamber, but in a vastness greater than the echoing hall, greater than any room within the mountain.

A gray plain stretched before him, endless and dry like an ancient foundation never made for feet. Above it, veins of light spanned a sky that was no sky at all. And in the distance, Borin saw the silhouette of a being so vast that even the mountains of the upper realm would have been mere specks of dust compared to its contours.

The Titan. Not asleep. Not suffering. Awake.

Borin felt his legs go weak. The sight was too much for mortal eyes. The form was almost incomprehensible—a body of stone, ore, light, and shadow all at once, a colossus that didn't walk but shaped the landscape itself. Every step created mountains. Every breath deepened canyons.

Borin opened his mouth, but no sound came out. It was as if he were witnessing a time before time. A world never meant for the dwarves.

And then he saw the Titan raise his head. An eye as large as a mountain opened. An eye that ordered the world. A gaze that was creation itself.

But with the next heartbeat, something happened. A black shard suddenly broke away from the Titan's rocky armor—small compared to the colossus, but still as large as a fortress. It fell like a piece of ore discarded by the smith god.

But he did not fall lifeless.

He fell alive. He twitched. He grew. He screamed.

Borin stumbled backward as the splinter took on a form that was neither animal nor stone nor spirit, but all three at once. A being filled with hunger, filled with cold, filled with restless energy. An ejection of pain, a flaw in creation.

*The first shadow.*

*The first nightmare.*

*The origin of deep brooding.*

The Titan screamed. Not out of anger. Out of fear.

The rift. The awakening. The shadows – it all began here.

Borin pressed his hand against his chest, feeling his runic heart burn within him. "I understand," he whispered. "The shadow... came from you." The titan responded. Not with words, but with a wave of pure, anguished awareness that reverberated across the abyss. The splinter was unwanted. It was a mistake. A wound. A birth that should never have happened.



The vision began to fade. The gray plain crumbled into dust, the Titan's colossal body became translucent, the sky collapsed like crumbling stone. And Borin heard the voice, clearer than ever before:

*"Go deeper..."  
and find the second splinter."*

Then the field of vision broke up. And Borin fell back into darkness.

Borin crashed hard into the ground of reality—or something approaching that. The impact rattled his bones, but the pain was nothing compared to the devastation the vision had left in him. His breath came in gasps, though the air down here barely stirred. The living rock that formed the chamber of the Titan's eye vibrated faintly, as if responding to Borin's vision of what no mortal should have seen.

He slowly straightened up. The darkness of the eye socket now completely surrounded him again, illuminated only by the dim glow of his runes. The colors of these lines had changed—no longer pure gold, but a faint, tortured red shimmered within them, as if the vision itself had burned his very core.

He had to stand still for a moment, his hand against the wall, while his mind tried to make sense of the images. The Titan, striding across the gray plain in ancient grandeur. The splinter that broke away from the living being like a scream in the rock. The awakening, growing creature that fed on pain and entropy. And the Titan's gaze, not divine, not majestic, but filled with fear—a fear that had choked him for eons.

The Titan feared the shadow that had been born from within him.

And now Borin gazed into the same abyss that had brought about the disaster.

The air vibrated, subtly and almost inaudibly. A whisper. Not like words, more like a trembling of the stone itself. Borin straightened and listened. There was no sound – and yet a meaning.

*"Depth... further... deeper..."*

The Titan no longer spoke in sentences. His consciousness was a storm. The pain of the wound, the fall of memory, the splinter that should never have existed – all of this overlapped, as if the Titan were simultaneously awake and trapped in a dream.

Borin took a deep breath and stepped further into the chamber. The eye lay beneath him like a lake of black, pulsating rock. The slit had closed slightly after the vision, but not completely. It glowed from within, a thin red breath that stretched like a line of smoldering embers through the center.

He continued walking until he reached the center of the eye. And there he heard another sound.

A scratch.

A slow, scraping sound, as if something small and hard were crawling across the stone. Borin tensed his muscles. There was nothing small in the depths of the Hallende. Every movement held the potential for terror. He held his hand over the glowing lines on his forearm and focused.

The scratching was getting closer.

Then it stopped.

For a heartbeat, everything was still. Absolutely still. Not a breath from the Titan. Not a groan from the wound. Only Borin's own rapid, ragged breath.

And then a crack opened directly in the rock—a small one, barely visible, but alive. An eye gazed back at him. A single, sharp eye, with a pupil like a fissure in the rock. It wasn't the Titan's eye. It was something else. Something small. Something broken off.

Borin froze.

Then it slowly peeled itself out of the rock: a tiny body, barely the size of his fist. A being of ore and shadow, with a crack running across its forehead like a gaping wound.

The first splinter.

Not the great nightmare, not the root of the brood – but a remnant. An echo. A small fragment of the ancient horror, gathered in the walls like a scar pore.

It looked at Borin. A rustling sound ran through its tiny body, as if it were breathing – even though it had no mouth. And in its eyes there was no aggression, no hatred, no malice.

Just hunger.

An ancient, cold hunger.

And pain.

The Titan whispered into Borin's mind:

*"Not the enemy..."  
a lost child...  
a splinter of my suffering... "*

The small creature retreated when Borin extended his hand. It flinched, like an animal unsure whether it was being helped or harmed.

"I won't hurt you," Borin said softly. "I came to heal the wound."

The creature stopped. Its single eye did not blink – yet it moved as if it had recognized the sound of the runic heart beating in Borin's chest.

Then something unexpected happened.

The creature jumped.

Not towards Borin – but past him.

It scurried into the depths of the eye shaft, to where the fissure vibrated once more. It crept inside. And at that very moment, the eye of the Titan began to tremble.

A tremendous, anguished sound rippled through the chamber. The walls trembled. The floor vibrated as if the Titan were trying to close its own eye.

Borin understood.

The splinter had not escaped.

He was called back.

The shadow, the first splinter, returned home.

And that meant only one thing: Something was moving further down. Something bigger. Something that had been waiting for eons.

Borin took a deep breath.

The runes on his arms flared up.

And in a firm voice he said:

"Then I will descend deeper. To the very depths of your gaze."

Borin felt the ground vibrate beneath his feet, as if the Titan were trying to hold something deep within himself—or draw it forth. The eye below him pulsed in slow, agonizing spasms, and the blinding red in the fissure flickered like the flaming heart of a dying furnace. The heat intensified. Not the heat of the lung chamber, which had been warm and heavy, but another heat, one emanating from the very core of the organic rock—the heat of an ancient, seething rage.

The small splinter that had broken off from the wall just moments before had long since vanished into the depths. Its tiny body had barely made a sound, but Borin felt the effect like a hammer blow to his mind and soul. The titan had reacted. And the wound continued to react. The crevices contracted, began to tremble, and dark beads of sweat, composed of compacted rock dust, crept down the cliff face. The abyss vibrated like a gigantic heart under unbearable pressure.

A sound, half gasp, half rumble, thundered through the chamber. Borin felt the sound not in his ears, but in his chest, in his teeth, in the runes beneath his skin. The Titan felt it. The Titan called to him. The Titan suffered. And the wound in his eye grew in rhythm with that suffering.

Borin stepped closer to the fissure. Heat crept down his cheeks. The air tasted of ore and bitter smoke. He held his hand over the crack—just a finger's width away—and instantly the Titan reacted. The lines on his skin flared, and a torrent of pure consciousness surged through him.

Images. Feelings. Unbearable pain. And beneath it all, a command that was more of a wish, a plea that could only exist in the deepest essence of a colossal mountain.

*"Touch... me... not alone..."*

Borin understood immediately. This was not the wound he was meant to heal. Not directly. Not without preparation. The crack in his eye was merely the first layer, the outward manifestation of a much deeper, far more dangerous injury. A fissure in consciousness, not in the body. A rift that pierced through time and spirit alike.

He had to go further down. To where the second shard lay. To where the shadow had not only been born – but where it still waited.

Another deep breath from the Titan made the chamber tremble. The slit opened for a moment wide enough for Borin to see the innermost core—a red-hot spiral of energy, rawer and more unformed than any forge embers ever tamed in a dwarven hall. It was not light. It was pure meaning, pure will, pure fear.

That was the Titan's focus. His consciousness. His view of the world.

And it was wounded.

Borin pressed his hand against his chest, where the runic heart beat. He could feel the Titan—every pain, every memory, every strain. His breath quickened, became uneven. He had to go on. Deeper. Into the chasm itself.

A jolt ran through the chamber. The walls contracted. The gap narrowed. The Titan tried to close its eye—probably out of instinct, fear, or a desire to bury the shadow below. But the wound could no longer be fully healed. The pain was too great. The exhaustion too profound.

"I must go down," Borin said softly. His voice sounded strange, muffled, as if someone were speaking through him. "If I don't, the shadow will break again. And this time it will tear you apart completely." The Titan didn't answer with words, but with a tremor that ran through his entire rocky body.

Borin placed his foot on the edge of the crack. The ground vibrated more intensely. The Titan was trying to warn him—not to stop him, but to prepare him. The second shard was no longer a small, lost fragment. It was something larger. Something that had grown over millennia, nourished by pain and darkness.

Borin took a deep breath and jumped.

The fall was short and hard. He landed on a patch of black rock that yielded under his weight like damp clay, then hardened again. The air was hotter down here, and the darkness wasn't just the absence of light—it was a being that watched him, felt him, tasted him.

The runes on his arms glowed. The chamber answered.

A movement.

In the deepest part of the blackness, something moved. Something large. Something that rose like a wave of ore and smoke. Step by step closer, quiet as a thought, heavy as a world.

The second eye.

Not that of the Titan.

The eye of the shadow.

It glowed a sick violet, pulsating like a wound that feeds itself.

Borin raised his hand, ready to summon the power of the Rune Heart.

The eye opened fully.

And the deep spoke:

*"So you're the one who wants to shut me down."*

The shadow had a voice.

And he had been waiting for him for a long time.

## Voices from the time before the kings

The shadow's violet eye remained still, without blinking, without narrowing or widening. It was a gaze that needed no pupil to see. A gaze that consisted not of light, but of pure attention. It rested on Borin like a hand touching the mind, not the body. No pain, no pressure—and yet Borin immediately sensed that he was being watched by something that had already understood him before he had even taken a breath.

The chamber was almost silent. No veins of the rock pulsed here. No breath of the Titan vibrated through the walls. Not a drop of molten rock fell. It was a place utterly cut off from the living world. And yet it was full of presence. So full that Borin felt every heartbeat was an impolite bang, indignantly registered by this ancient darkness.

The eye did not speak again. It did nothing. It waited. And this waiting was worse than any threat, for it felt like the silence of a being immeasurably patient. A patience that only those older than anything a dwarf had ever written in stone could develop.

Borin forced himself not to look away. His runes glowed with a soft, golden-red light that barely pushed back the darkness. Compared to the violet of the shadow, the colors seemed almost childlike, too bright, too uncertain. Yet they were his only protection.

He took another step forward. The ground beneath him yielded slightly again, a tenacious resistance like cold, half-congealed mud. Borin realized: This was no ordinary stone. It was a transition. A threshold. A realm where the titan and the shadow merged, where pain and memories intertwined.

The eye followed him without moving.

"I am Borin Stonewalker," he said, and his voice did not echo. It was swallowed, as if the air were a maw that received every word and kept it in deep darkness. "Son of Dûrmor. Bound to the mountain by the oath of the ancients."

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the ground vibrated. Almost imperceptibly. A single heartbeat of a being that had no heart.

*"Your name..."* It came from the depths. The voice was not a sound. It was a cold wave crashing against Borin's mind.

*"...is known to me."*

Borin froze. He hadn't expected the shadow to know him.

*"You bear the part of his will... that rejected me."*

The eye twitched. Not like an eyelid. Like a shift of meaning. A flicker of violet light crept from the crack, as if the shadow were trying to break free from the darkness—but it remained trapped within its own maw. Trapped, yet free enough to torment the Titan.

"I am here to bind you," Borin said. His heart beat faster, but his gaze remained steady. "The Titan is bleeding. And you are the root of this wound."

The laughter that came was not loud.

It was a crack.

A crack in the stone, in the mind, in the spirit.

*"I am not a wound."*

*"I am memory."*

*"I am what he saw before he turned to stone."*

Borin absorbed these words, and they burned themselves into his chest like molten runes.

The Deep continued to speak:

*"I am what the world showed him before the ancestors bound him. I am what he swallowed and yet could not die. I am the shadow of the first glance."*

A chilling realization crept down Borin's spine.

The shadow was not a mistake. Not a tumor. Not an accidental split.

He was the Titan's first memory. An ancient echo from the world before the dwarves. Before the kings. Before the smiths. Perhaps even before the gods, of whom the oldest songs were sung.

"You are... his first knowledge?" Borin asked.

*"I am his knowledge of darkness."*

*"I am what he brought with him when he stepped out of the world beyond the rock."*

Borin gasped for breath. This meant that the Titan was not merely a being of stone. He was a wanderer. A traveler from an age long since covered in dust and forgotten.

The shadow continued to speak, and with each word, the chamber around Borin crumbled.

*"And when he saw that the world was afraid of him..."*

The violet light pulsed.

*"...then he drew me into himself. Into that gaze. Into that space."*

One breath – not that of the Titan. One breath of darkness itself.

*"He created a prison out of his own flesh."*

Borin realized what that meant.

The Titan had tried to bury his own shadow. Deep, deep inside himself. In an eye that no one should ever open again.

But the wound reappeared, and the memory was reawakened.

A feeling suddenly flared up inside Borin – not hatred, not fear. Rather, sadness.

"You are part of him," said Borin. "And yet you are separate."

The eye twitched. The shadow answered.

*"I am what he could not bear."*

The chamber trembled. And Borin understood:

The Titan didn't just weep from pain. He wept from memory.

And the memory... had come alive.

Borin took a deep breath. The rune heart pulsed. The mountain's power gathered within him.

"Then I must bring you back," he said softly. "Not destroy you. But heal you."

For a Titan without memory was an empty mountain range.

The eye of the shadow narrowed. Like a smile.

*"Try it."*

Borin felt the darkness of the shadow close around him, not as an attack, but as a reaction. The abyss seemed to grope its way toward him, as if testing his every move, every thought, every fold of his breath. The violet eye was still open, unmoved, yet full of anticipation. A

gaze that knew no impatience, because time played no role for this being. For the shadow, the present was merely a fleeting breath in an ocean of memory.

The chamber vibrated almost imperceptibly, so subtly that Borin initially thought his own heartbeat was stirring the air. But then he realized it was the Titan suffering beneath him, its pain rippling through the walls like a distant tremor. The shadow wasn't isolated—it was anchored. Anchored in the wound, anchored in the gaze, anchored in the memory of a being that knew the sky before it touched stone.

Borin took another step forward. The runes on his skin glowed more intensely, almost defiantly, as if trying to push back the violet light. But the shadow absorbed the golden-red glow, not as sustenance, but as knowledge. It devoured Borin's light to read him. To understand him.

*"You want to bind me."*

The thought didn't come as a question. It was a statement. It was a fact, spoken in the deepest tone.

Borin now stood only a few steps from the eye. The darkness all around him seemed like a living membrane, moving in slow waves. The Titan would be blind here—but the shadow saw everything. The shadow was seeing itself.

"I want to bring peace," said Borin. "Your pain is tearing the Titan apart. Its wounds reach to the very core of the mountain."

A muffled sound crept from the depths. No laughter, no roar, no scream. An echo. An ancient sound, as if a mountain were clearing its throat of memory.

*"The mountain deserves the pain."*

Borin tilted his head slightly. "Why? Because he rejected you? Because he didn't want to carry you?" A twitch ran through his purple pupil. Barely perceptible, but real.

*"Not rejected. Terrified."*

These words struck Borin like a hammer blow. A Titan—a being greater than entire empires, capable of shaping rock like soft metal—had been afraid. Afraid of his own shadow, afraid of his own knowledge.

"What did he see?" Borin asked. The dark chamber fell silent, as if the darkness itself paused for a moment. Then the shadow answered:

*"He saw the world. Not as it was. As it would become."*

Borin felt his fingers tremble involuntarily. Such a statement was not a riddle. It was a revelation. The shadow continued:

*"He saw that the world would turn against him. That the creatures of flesh would fear him. That even his children – the first blacksmiths – would regard him as a foreign element."*



The chamber hummed softly. The Titan moved high above, as if the memory echoed within his body.

*"He saw that he would find no home. Nowhere."*

Borin exhaled sharply. "And that's why he resorted to the binding? That's why he locked you in?"

*"He wanted to protect the world."*

*"He wanted to protect himself."*

*"He wanted to prevent my truth from breaking the world."*

The violet eye darkened, as if it were digging into itself.

*"But you can't kill memory."*

*"One cannot bury knowledge."*

Borin now understood the crux of the matter. The shadow was not an enemy. It was a necessity. A part of the Titan that should never have been forgotten – for forgetting creates wounds that cut deeper than any knife.

"You said I carried something of him," said Borin. "What do you mean by that?" A pulse of violet light ran across the surface of the eye.

*"You carry the courage he has lost."*

*"You wear the gaze he has closed off."*

*"You are wearing what could reawaken him – or break him for good."*

Borin took another step closer. The shadow watched him, silently, as if testing him.

"Then tell me," whispered Borin, "why are you fighting him? Why are you tearing at his soul?"

The shadow only answered after a long, vibrant silence:

*"Because he wanted to forget me."*

*"Because I can't forget him."*

Borin felt the truth of these words make the air heavy. This was not a war between light and darkness. This was a war between memory and forgetting. Between truth and fear.

"Then give me a way," said Borin. "A way to bring you back without destroying him."

The shadow was silent. Then – slowly, like a collapsing valley in slow motion – the violet eye widened.

*"There is a way."*

The chamber trembled. The Titan groaned in the depths.

*"But he leads through the voices that spoke before your kings."*  
*"The voices that knew him before you."*  
*"The voices... that created me."*

The darkness split.

A path became visible. A path of black rock that led deeper than anything Borin had ever seen before.

"Then show me these voices," Borin said quietly.

The shadow replied:

*"Step by step.*  
*But do not be afraid of what you hear."*  
*"Some truths can break stone."*

Borin stepped onto the path.

And the voices of the time before the kings began to awaken.

The path the shadow had opened was no ordinary passage. It was too narrow, too smooth, too perfectly round, as if no dwarven tool had ever touched it. Borin recognized at once that this path had not been forged by blacksmithing or magical runes. It had grown, like a root that had forced its way through the stone, but not by the force of nature. Memories shaped this tunnel. Memories so ancient and so heavy that they had imprinted the rock itself, as if they were tools of pure meaning.

The light from his runes barely reached an arm's length. Beyond it began a blackness that was not merely darkness, but a state of being. A beginning. An end. A space the Titan had once seen—before he turned to stone. Borin took a deep breath. The path was narrow, but not oppressive. It seemed to expand before him, as if adjusting to his breath. The shadow did not follow him. It remained in the chamber of the eye, like a sentinel waiting to see how far Borin was willing to go.

With every step, the path grew colder. Not icy, but still, empty, lifeless. The rock beneath his feet felt as if it had never been touched by heat. As if it had never felt the vibration of a hammer. Borin knew many kinds of stone, and this one was foreign to him. It was too old. Too pure. Too indefinite. Perhaps this had been the first rock that ever existed—the stone before any other, the stone before the first mountain range. The stone that no being had yet named.

After a while, Borin noticed something strange: The path made no sound. His footsteps didn't echo. His breath didn't echo. Even the beating of the rune heart sounded as if it were passing through cotton wool. This space swallowed sound. Not greedily, not violently—but gently, like a mother soothing a crying child.

And then he heard the first voice.

It didn't come from the front. Not from the back. Not from the walls. It came from everywhere.

A whisper, as thin as dust, as old as forgotten things. A word he didn't understand. A breath so quiet he almost missed it.

But then the word was repeated. And again. And again.

Borin felt goosebumps on his arms, despite the heat his rune-heart generated within him. He stopped. The voices grew clearer, each syllable like a spark illuminating the darkness and instantly extinguished.

And then he understood.

They were not words of a language. They were feelings, memories, symbols.

He heard the fear of a formless being. He heard the curiosity of a consciousness just born. He heard the first step of a giant who didn't know where he was going. The first breath. The first glimpse into a world that would never receive him.

Borin continued walking. And the voices followed him.

They became more numerous. Loud. Presenters.

They were not the voices of dwarves, nor of titans. Not of humans, animals, or spirits.

They were... different.

"What are you?" Borin asked quietly.

The voices didn't answer with sound, but with impressions. Images that flashed in his skull. Feelings that weren't his. Sensations that the rock itself had experienced.

He saw the world before the mountains stood – a surging mass of formlessness, without color, without names. He saw the first sparks of consciousness in the stone, the first souls without bodies. And he saw them as they cleared, like mist melting in the sunrise. As they vanished. As they died. Or perhaps... moved on.

Through worlds Borin did not know.

The voices spoke:

*"We are the first forms."*

*"We are the thoughts of the rock."*

*"We are the ones who came before the Titan."*

Borin stumbled as the image in his mind continued to grow.

The voices had seen the Titan. They had recognized him. They had summoned him. Perhaps even created him.

Not as a god. Not as a ruler.

But rather as a response to a wish that the world itself had.

A desire for form. For order. For shape.

And the Titan had been that wish.

But wishes have shadows.

A new voice, deeper and older than any before it, boomed through the path:

*"We gave him sight."*

And then, more threateningly:

*"We gave him oblivion."*

Borin held his breath.

The voices continued:

*"He was supposed to put the world in order."*

*"He should bind the stone."*

*"He should capture the beginning."*

The violet light appeared at the end of the path. The shadow was there. Or something beyond it.

Another voice:

*"But he saw too much."*

A crack sounded. Not in the stone – in Borin's mind.

*"And that's how the first shadow was formed."*

Borin suppressed the urge to retreat. He now understood:

The shadow was older than the dwarves. Older than the Hallenden. Older than the Titan.

He was an echo of the first form. An imprint of the world before the world.

And Borin...Borin was chosen to stand between the two.

He continued walking.

And the voices accompanied him.

The path descended further, and the violet glow at the end of the tunnel intensified as Borin drew nearer. It wasn't a light that shone. It was memory manifesting—like an ember composed not of heat, but of meaning. Each wave of this shimmer felt like a breath from a world that had already vanished before the first hammer blows struck ore. Borin knew that what awaited at the end of this path wasn't a being in the ordinary sense. It was a state of being. A consciousness that had never simply been alive or dead. Something in between.

But before he reached the end of the path, the darkness suddenly lifted. The voices fell silent. Instead, a space opened up—vast, round, and perfectly still. No reverberation. No echo. Not even the sound of his own breath. And something hovered in the center.

A fragment. A piece of formless memory. It was neither stone nor light nor shadow.

It was what the voices had called the "first form".

Borin stood frozen. This fragment was neither large nor imposing—it was barely bigger than his head—but it filled the room with a heaviness he only knew from ancestral tales when they spoke of things whose names predate kings. From a time when the world was still chaotic and the first beings didn't understand themselves.

The fragment pulsed. Not rhythmically. Not vividly. But like a thought repeated because it must not be forgotten.

As Borin approached, the fragment floated a little higher, as if reacting to his presence. Then he heard a voice—not spoken, not whispered, but directly inside him.

*"You carry his heart."*

Borin placed his hand on his chest. The runic heart pulsed, a single, warm beat. It felt as if he were being spoken to by someone who knew him better than he knew himself.

"What... are you?" Borin asked, and to his surprise, his voice didn't echo this time. The space allowed it to exist.

The fragment replied:

*"We are a memory of what shaped the world."*

*"We are the voices that summoned the Titans."*

*"We are the ones who brought him into the world."*

Borin frowned. "You created him?"

*"Not created. Found."*

*"He wandered ahead of his time."*

*"We gave it form. We gave it bond."*

Borin shivered. Not from the cold—from the realization. The Titan had not been born of this world. He had sprung from something else. From a place that even the voices could not name.

"And the shadow?" Borin asked. The fragment pulsed more intensely. Then it deformed. It became flatter, darker, as if a memory were breaking forth from its core.

*"He was his first glance."*

*"His first thought."*

*"His first mistake."*

Borin closed his eyes and let the words sink in. A Titan who sees the world and is horrified. A Titan who recognizes the darkness that lies dormant within everything. A Titan who tries to bury this realization—and in doing so, injures himself.

"How can I bring back the shadow?" Borin asked. "How can I heal the Titan?" The voice answered immediately:

*"You must carry what he could not carry."*

Borin took a deep breath. He understood. It wasn't a fight. It wasn't a battle. This chapter wasn't about defeating an enemy—it was about accepting a memory so old and so heavy that even a Titan could break under its weight.

The fragment contracted and became a point of bright, hot light. Then it split. A small flame slid toward Borin and hovered in front of his chest.

As he reached out his hand, the flame settled in his chest—right next to the runic heart. A second pulse arose. Not pain, but expansion. The runic lines on his body changed. They glowed darker. Deeper. More complete.

He inhaled. And the room breathed with him.

"What... have you done?" he asked hoarsely. The fragment replied:

*"We gave you the first glimpse."*

*"Now you can see what he saw."*

*"Now you can carry what he buried."*

The realization came like a hammer blow:

Borin was no longer bound only to the Titan. He now also carried the Shadow within him – the origin, not the corruption.

And that allowed him to stand between them.

The path behind him closed. A new one opened – a dark, wide abyss from which purple threads protruded like tactile arms.

The shadow waited. Not as an enemy. As a mirror.

"Then I'll move on," said Borin.

And the voices answered for the last time:

*"Go."*

*"For now begins the part that remained hidden even from us."*

## The Shaft of the Lost Guardians

The tunnel that opened before Borin was unlike any passage he had seen before inside the Titan. It was wider, but not by natural expansion—rather as if something immense had wound its way through it with an undefined will, pushing aside layer upon layer of the living rock, without regard for form or order. The walls were scratched with marks that were not made by tool or claw. They were the marks of a consciousness that had rummaged through the stone, a restless thought that had carved a path to avoid being suffocated.

Borin took a deep breath. His runic heart beat to two rhythms—that of the Titan and the strange, darker pulse that now resided within him, bearing the first glimpse of the ancient being. This new pulse was not an intruder. Rather, it felt like an echo, an additional note in a song that had only been heard incompletely. The stonewalker paused briefly and listened. The air was still, yet within the silence vibrated a barely perceptible murmur. Not the voices of the primal forms, not the Titan's pain. Something else. A call. A whisper that guided him through the darkness, as if the rock itself were his guide.

He took the first step into the new passage. The floor was smooth, and the further he walked, the more distinctly he sensed a change in the rock. It was no longer solely the work of the Titan, but mixed with something foreign—lighter, more porous, as if it contained chambers that had once existed before being covered by layers of living rock. Borin sensed that this was not a wound. It was a forgotten place. A place the Titan never intended to enter again.

The darkness deepened. His runic lines glowed more intensely, unintentionally. They responded to something slumbering in the depths—not to danger, but to memory. Borin knew instantly: This was an area the Titan himself had tried to suppress. A section of his inner self, bearing witness to a past even the mountain preferred to keep hidden.

Finally, he reached a first opening. The walls receded, revealing a chamber that was both deep and high, a space seemingly designed to house voices—voices that had once left something here. The walls glittered with a faint violet shimmer, but the source of this shimmer was not shadow. They were runes. Runes older than anything Borin had ever seen.

He stepped closer, and his heart clenched. These were not dwarven runes. They were more curved, deeper, more ingrained than carved. They were organic. Shaped by a hand that seemed to have no bones. Or perhaps by something that needed neither hand nor tool to leave its mark.

When Borin touched one of those lines, the stone twitched. Not with pain, but with memory. A whisper stirred his mind, a breath of air from a time when neither dwarves nor kings nor halls existed. And then he saw an image before his inner eye. Not one shown to him by the shadow. Not one forced by the Titan. This was a memory of this place itself.

He saw a vast corridor filled with light, a light that streamed from the runes like golden smoke. He saw beings, moving shadows of light and stone simultaneously, formless yet taking shape, like water momentarily transforming into a body only to dissolve again. And he saw the Titan, not as a giant of stone, but as a wandering core of embers and consciousness, not yet possessing a form, but still searching for one.

Borin gasped softly. This was the place where he had first found his voice. First his will. First his direction.

The chamber shuddered, and the vision broke off. Only a flash of light lingered in Borin's mind, and he sensed that this was merely the first layer. The Forgotten Chambers were not just scenes from the past. They were records of a memory that knew no language, only impressions.

Borin stepped further into the chamber. The air grew thicker. The violet glow intensified. And suddenly he noticed something he had missed before.

At the center of the chamber lay a stone. Not an ordinary stone. A heart stone. A core piece. A fragment of the Titan's body, which had once fallen away from him.

But this one was dead. It wasn't pulsating. It wasn't vibrating. It wasn't breathing.

It was a heart that was never allowed to beat.

Borin knelt before it and placed his hand on the cool surface. Immediately, a pained sound shot through the chamber—not loud, but deep enough to make the walls tremble. It wasn't the Titan. It was the place itself. The chamber was horrified that someone had found this stone.

"What are you?" whispered Borin.

And this time, no voices answered, no runes, no ancient forms.

The stone itself answered.

*"I am the forgotten one."*

A shiver ran down Borin's spine.

*"And you have to wake me up."*

The path to the Forgotten Chambers had only just begun.

The stone beneath Borin's hand vibrated so faintly it would have been almost imperceptible, yet in the silence of the chamber, it felt like a scream. A muffled, choked sound that wasn't carried through the air but penetrated directly into his mind. Borin inhaled deeply. A coolness crept up his arm, as if the Heartstone were gathering and examining a portion of his life before deciding whether he was even allowed to speak. The chamber remained motionless—not a vein lit up, not a spark stirred. It was as if the entire room was holding its breath.

The dead heartstone was smooth, yet its surface bore fine, barely visible lines that looked like sedimented layers until Borin looked more closely and recognized them: they were runes. Erased runes. Symbols that no longer flickered because their light had been extinguished eons ago. He had never seen anything like them. Runes that hadn't simply been scraped off or destroyed, but that had never been finished—incomplete patterns from a time when neither dwarven hands nor smiths' fires knew form.



Another sound passed through his thoughts, something like the whisper of sand in a dry gust of wind.

*"Wake me up."*

Borin flinched, but the voice was neither commanding nor threatening. Rather, it sounded like a plea, a supplication from a time no one remembered. He placed his hand back on the heart-stone and closed his eyes. Instantly, images flooded his mind, not clear like visions, but blurred like an old memory lost in mist.

He saw the Titan, not as a gigantic body of rock, but as a glowing core, gliding like a living fire across the primordial ground. He saw it descend, deeper and deeper, and saw the other beings of light and formlessness retreat. Not out of fear. Out of reverence. They made way for him, as if he were the instrument of a will greater than all of them. And in the depths, he saw something emerging—a first transformation, a first condensation. A heart-stone breaking free from the glowing mass. An experiment. A prototype.

The dead stone in front of Borin was this first attempt.

He needed to understand why he had never started hitting.

Borin rubbed the cold surface, and immediately new impressions flooded into him. The stone wasn't dead because it had been destroyed. It had never awakened. Something had prevented the blow. Not violence. Fear. Borin felt it—an ancient fear of the Titan itself, seared deep into the structure of this space like a shadow that will never fade.

The Titan had tried to form a heart. And in the moment of its creation, he saw something. Something that made him recoil. Something he never wanted to bear again. He withdrew the light. And the Heartstone remained what it was: a forgotten fragment of a failed moment.

Borin whispered: "You are a part of him that was never born." The stone pulsed weakly, like a muscle trying to remember what movement meant.

*"Wake me up... and he will remember."*

Borin understood the meaning of those words immediately. The Titan had not only buried the shadow, he had also banished this Heartstone. This was the symbol of failure—or of a horror that even a primal being could not bear.

He had to awaken the stone. But how?

The runic pulse in his chest responded without hesitation. His own lines glowed, as if guiding him. Borin placed both hands on the stone. Warm light shot from his forearms, traversing the cold surface and slowly filling the extinguished runes. The lines in the stone began to react. First faintly, then more strongly. They trembled, one after the other, like breaths being formed for the first time in millennia.

The room began to tremble. Not violently, but like an expectant preparation. The air became denser, heavier, as if it were carrying the awakening itself.

Borin sensed that something was happening to him. The stone wasn't just absorbing energy. It was giving something back. A feeling. A fragment of a thought that had once belonged to the Titan.

Loneliness.

A profound, mountainous solitude that no being could bear. The realization that the world around him waited silently, but understood nothing of him. That his form was too heavy, too powerful, too alien for the beings of the first world to fit into their order.

The Titan's loneliness remained in the stone.

"You are more than a memory," Borin murmured. "You are his first doubt."

The runes in the heartstone flickered, and a beam of light shot to the ceiling. The entire room vibrated, and for a moment the chamber seemed to open—not physically, but spiritually. A breath of consciousness brushed through Borin, like a finger from ancient times.

The Heartstone had awakened.

But instead of beating brightly, the light turned violet. It wasn't a pulse of life. It was a cry.

From the newly awakened stone, a wave of violet light crept along the chamber. Borin stepped back, his arm raised. But the light ignored him. It glided through the walls, gathering the ancient runes, connecting them together—until the entire room glowed like a vast web of intertwined memories.

Then he heard it.

A gentle, yet ancient hum. A sound that living stone could never have produced.

It was the voice of the chamber itself.

*"Go on... because this is only the first memory."*

Borin nodded slowly, his hand still on the warm stone. The awakening of the Heartstone had set something in motion – in the mountain, in the Titan, and in himself.

He now had to delve deeper into the Forgotten Chambers.

For something older than memory awaited them there.

Something that even Titan had buried.

The passage beyond the first chamber opened like the maw of an ancient being that had remained silent for too long. Unlike before, the floor no longer vibrated to the rhythm of the Titan, but to the beat of the newly awakened Heartstone. It was a new beat—softer, brighter, searching. The Titan itself seemed to hear it. Borin felt it in his bones, in his chest, in the runes that burned beneath his skin. The mountain had become attentive.

The path sloped gently downhill, and with each step the stone changed. The walls no longer resembled natural ore or the organic structure of a titan's body. They were crisscrossed with lines that looked as if a giant had pressed fleeting thoughts into the rock. Spirals, intricate patterns that didn't correspond to any known runic system, yet carried a meaning that Borin sensed before he understood it.

This was not the language of the dwarves. Not the language of the titans. It was the language of stone consciousness itself.

The further Borin walked, the stronger the feeling grew within him that he was not alone. The shadow followed him invisibly, but its influence crept along the walls like a dark warmth. It wasn't a feeling of threat—more the awareness of a second gaze, trying to see what he himself didn't yet understand.

And then he heard the voices again.

Not as an echo. Not as a result of the runes.

This time they spoke directly, like a chorus of a thousand old memories addressing him.

*"Stranger of the heart... you bear the first beat."*

*"You wear what he rejected."*

*"And you must carry what he lost."*

Borin paused. The space around him seemed to tremble, as if the walls were testing him. His runes responded with a flickering glow. Not anger, not defiance—rather a confirming fire. A yes, unspoken, but palpable in the stone.

He continued walking.

After a few steps, a second chamber opened up. This one was larger than the first, oval-shaped, and filled with a strange clarity. The stone was so smooth, as if it had been cut by a giant knife. In the center stood a stone monolith—tall, wedge-shaped, and covered in cracks. It was different from the Heart Stone before. It was not alive. It did not vibrate. But Borin sensed immediately: This stone was something else.

He was a memory anchor.

A place where something was stored that the Titan no longer wanted to speak.

Borin approached. His runes glowed again, and the monolith responded with a faint, barely perceptible glimmer. The stone recognized him. Not as an intruder. As a bearer. As a messenger.

He placed his hand on the cool surface.

The chamber expanded. Not spatially – mentally.

Borin was flooded.

He saw no images. He heard no words. He was drawn into a feeling.

Deep sorrow.

Not human. Not dwarfish. A grief so immense that even a mountain could have broken under its weight.

Borin staggered back, gasping for air. The monolith vibrated more intensely, and the room began to pulsate in regular waves. The grief intensified. It burned into his very core like cold fire.

*"He was not alone."*

The voices spoke again, this time much more clearly.

*"He saw the first forms. He spoke with them. He grew from their teachings."*

Borin clutched his head, his vision blurred. The waves of emotion were too powerful, too ancient, too vast for mortal consciousness.

*"But they left."*

Borin gasped. The words that came next stung like knives:

*"They left him."*

*"They ascended to worlds he could not enter."*

*"And he stayed behind."*

Then he understood.

The Forgotten Chambers were not places of power. They were the memorial sites of a god.

The Titan had students. Companions. Perhaps even brothers.

And he had lost them all.

Borin placed his hand on the stone again, even though his arm felt like lead. But this time, no wave of grief washed over him. Instead, he saw a single scene—sharp as the blow of a blade.

The Titan, as he shaped a vast plain of raw stone. His arms, not yet of ore, but of light and embers. His eyes, wide open. And around him the other beings – light, movement, formless radiance. They hovered. They sang. And then they turned away. One by one. They departed, vanishing into a crack in the sky that sparkled like pure starlight.

The Titan remained behind. The light disappeared. The world fell silent.

And out of this silence was born... the first shadow.

The Titan hadn't feared him because he was evil, but because he was the last thing he had left – and he couldn't bear that last thing.

Borin sank to one knee. His head was throbbing.

"I understand now," he whispered. "He was never a monster." "He was lonely."

The monolith began to shine. A crack opened on its side, revealing another path.

A deeper one. A darker one. A path at whose end no memory awaited.

But truth.

*"Keep going," the voices said.*

*"The Chamber of the Lost awaits."*

Borin stood up. He was ready.

The new passage that opened behind the monolith was no longer round like the previous tunnels. It was jagged, fractured, as if something immense had forced its way through it, without regard for form or regularity. No runes adorned the walls. No veins glowed within. It was a raw breach, tearing through layers of ancient rock like the fissure of a colossal spear driven straight through the body of a mountain.

The air was colder here. Not physically—spiritually. Borin felt it even before he took a step into the darkness. This section had no pulse. No echo. No breath. It was empty. Deathly empty. It was the first time since his journey into the Titan that he had entered a space that was devoid of life. And that was precisely what made it more dangerous than any vibrating chamber he had encountered before.

He placed a foot in the passageway. The floor didn't yield, no vibration passed through him, nothing connected him to the mountain below. It was stone. Only stone. As if he had suddenly stepped out of the living organism and found himself in a grave.

He immediately sensed that this was intentional.

A place the Titan had severed from himself. A place that was no longer allowed to be part of his body. A place that had been banished.

The runes beneath Borin's skin glowed faintly. He felt no echo, no resistance. Nothing was watching him here—nothing but silence. It was as if the room itself were telling him: You shouldn't be here.

But he kept going. He had no choice.

The deeper he ventured, the more pronounced a different feeling became. No whispers. No voices. A latent tension that came from everywhere and nowhere. The kind of tension that arises when a truth is so heavy that it fills the room even in death.

After a while, the passage opened into another chamber – smaller than the previous ones, but denser. The room wasn't empty. It was filled with something invisible. Something that made breathing difficult, as if Borin were breathing through water.

In the center of the chamber stood a single block. A black, monolithic stone that did not originate from Titan. Borin recognized it immediately. This was alien material. A rock that did not belong in this world.

He didn't touch it. Not immediately.

For around the stone lay something like dust. But Borin quickly realized it wasn't dust. They were grains of shattered light—remnants of memory. Fragments of a form that had once existed and then broken. They glittered faintly in the light of his runes, as if trying to remember, for a fleeting moment, that they had once been something.

Borin moved closer. The block stood completely still. No runes. No patterns. Nothing.

And then, as if his presence were enough, one word.

Not spoken. Not thought.

It was simply there.

*"The first one fell here."*

Borin froze. "The first... what?"

The answer came immediately.

*"The first brother."*

A cold shiver ran down his spine. The first forms...The beings who had taught the Titan...Those who stood above him...Those who had departed...

They had had brothers.

And one of them had fallen here.

Borin took a step back. His breathing became heavy. The air vibrated again, but differently than before. Not in the rhythm of the titan, not in the echo of pain. It was a tremor of memory. A sigh that had crept through the stone over billions of years.

*"This was the site of her fall."*

Again that sound. Again that feeling. The voices no longer spoke in unison. It was only one voice. A single voice. One that sounded older than anything Borin had ever heard before.

And then he saw it.

Not with his eyes. With the awareness that the heart stone had bestowed upon him.

A being of light, as large as a titan, yet different from him. Slimmer. Brighter. Purer.

It fell. It plummeted like a star from the sky. It hit the ground. It shattered.

And something dark grew out of his loss.

Borin closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

The first brother had fallen. And from his fall... the first shadow arose.

Not as an enemy, but as an echo of a loss that the Titan could never overcome.

"Then the shadow is... a part of a part," Borin whispered. "The last imprint of a being that should never have died."

The black bloc vibrated slightly, as if confirming this finding.

And then the voice spoke again:

*"If you want to bind him, you must understand:  
You are not fighting an enemy.  
You are fighting a wound."*

Borin opened his eyes. The chamber remained unchanged. But something shifted within him.

He felt no more mistrust. No anger. Only deep respect. And grief, heavy as ore.

He approached the block and placed his hand on it.

He promised:

"I will bring him home."

A crack opened behind the block – inconspicuous, barely visible. But Borin knew: This was the way. The final section of the path through the Forgotten Chambers.

He went inside.

For there awaited the truth, which even the Titan had suppressed.

And only Borin could carry them.

## The Betrayal of the Upper Halls

The transition from the Forgotten Chambers back into the Titan's halls was not a simple step, but a rupture—a shift from a state of memory to a state of reality. As Borin emerged from the final fissure, a familiar but harsh breath met his breath. The ground vibrated once more, alive and restless, as if the mountain sensed that a part of its repressed past had resurfaced. The Titan was awake, not fully, not lucid; but awake enough for Borin to feel the being's immense will cling to his chest like a hot lump of ore waiting to be hammered into shape.

The corridor he now stood in was wider, brighter, and more orderly than the chaotic jumble of the Forgotten Chambers. Veins of glowing ore wound their way along the walls like living blood vessels. The air vibrated to the rhythm of a heartbeat that stabilized yet trembled. The Titan had sensed Borin's actions. He had felt the Heartstone awaken. And in this awakening lay not only relief—but also unease. For every memory that returned brought its shadow with it.

Borin waited a moment for his senses to adjust to his new surroundings. The voices of the ancient forms slowly faded from his mind, like wisps of mist carried away by a warm breeze. He stood once more in the vibrant reality of a being that breathed through the depths. But something was different. The Titan was no longer alone in his thoughts. A fragment of his repressed origins now resided within Borin—the first glimpse, the first doubt, the first shadow.

He began to move, his footsteps echoing like a blacksmith's hammer on a cold anvil. The passage led upward. Higher up lay halls not as alien as the Titan's innermost wounds. They were among the oldest structures the dwarves themselves had created, long ago, when they first understood the deep resonances of the living mountain and sought refuge within its sanctuary. They were places of trust. Places where counsel was held, decisions were made, and oaths were renewed.

But as Borin approached the first of these halls, he immediately sensed: Something was wrong.

The light was wrong. Not extinguished – shifted. Like a fire fed with foreign air.

Borin stepped through the tall, stone archway. The hall was large, a circular space with massive supporting pillars, carved from living rock that shimmered with veins of gold. Once, the twelve High Elders of the Runesteel Covenant had met here, and the enormous black ironstone tabletop in the center still bore the marks of countless deliberations.

But the twelve seats were not empty.

Eight of them were occupied.

Not from the elders.

Borin recognized the figures instantly – master smiths, rune bearers, clan leaders. Men he knew. Men who had served in the upper halls, who had led the troops against the first outbreaks of the brood. Men who knew honor.

And yet they looked up when Borin entered, and there was something in their eyes that made his throat tighten.

Not relief. Not worry. Not even surprise.

But fear. And... mistrust.

The first of them, Barok Ironbeard, rose slowly. He was a broad-shouldered dwarf with a voice that normally sounded like a rockfall. But now it was as cold as a dead stone.

“Borin Stonewalker,” said Barok. “So you’re back.”

Borin stepped further into the hall. "I'm back. And I bring knowledge."

The four words hit the assembly like a hammer blow. Some of those present stiffened, others involuntarily lowered their gaze. It was as if Borin had uttered a taboo that no one had wanted to hear.



"Knowledge." Barok practically spat out the word. "Knowledge from places no one should enter."

Borin stopped. "The Titan is dying. And the shadow is growing. Who, if not me, should—"

Barok interrupted him. "You have changed. We feel it. The mountain feels it. You are no longer the Borin you were before you descended."

Borin felt his heart skip a beat. It wasn't just words. It was an accusation.

"What are you talking about?" Borin took a step forward.

Then a second figure rose: Mevra Flammenhaar, one of the sharpest blacksmiths in the realm, known for her fearlessness.

But now she recoiled from Borin's gaze. "You carry something within you, Borin. Something dark. We all feel it. The mountain whispers differently since you descended into its depths."

"That's the shadow," whispered a third dwarf. "He touched him. Or worse..."

A murmur went around the room.

Borin's gaze hardened. He felt no anger. Only exhaustion.

"You don't know what you're talking about."

Barok slammed his hand down on the table. "Then enlighten us! What were you doing down there? What did you bring back?"

The hall fell silent. The veins in the walls flickered like the heart of a nervous creature.

Borin took a deep breath. He couldn't hide the truth. Not after everything he had seen.

"I have found the first glimpse," he finally said. "I have touched the origin."

Silence. A cruel, cold silence. Then the hall erupted in a cacophony of voices.

"He is insane!" "He carries the darkness!" "He must be isolated!" "The Titan must not suffer any longer!"

Borin wanted to speak, but Barok raised his hand.

"Get the guards."

Borin froze. "What?"

Barok's gaze was unwavering. "Until we know what you truly are... you will not walk freely among us."

And at that exact moment, Borin felt it: The Titan twitched. A tremor raced through the floor. A loud, stabbing pain flooded the hall.

Not because Borin had returned. But because the shadow had reached the top.

The betrayal began. Not by the enemy – but by those whom Borin once called brother.

The Titan's blow reverberated through the hall like a thunderclap. The pillars trembled, fine dust trickled from the arches, and the faint glow of the ore veins flickered restlessly like a torch in the wind. The assembly fell silent instantly. Borin felt the Titan's pain throb through his chest—a spark that seemed to emanate directly from the runeheart. The mountain was suffering. And the shadow was moving faster than anyone up here could have imagined.

But the dwarves in the hall didn't look up or down. They looked at Borin. And in their eyes was the conviction that this pain had come because of him.

Barok Ironbeard slammed his hand on the table again. "Guards!" he barked, and the sound echoed through the stone arches. The door to the hall crashed open, and four armored dwarves stormed in—spears in hand, armor in the colors of the Upper Halls, heavy as compressed slate.

"Stop!" Borin raised his hand, but the guards kept their distance—not out of respect, but out of fear. He saw it. He smelled it. He felt it.

They feared him.

"I am not your enemy," Borin said calmly. "But the depths are in motion. You can feel it yourselves."

The guards grew nervous. One of them—young, with barely graying brows—glanced at the ceiling, where the glimmer of veins contorted in pain. But Barok remained unmoved.

"That's enough!" he roared. "You have entered places no one is allowed to enter. You have touched forces beyond our comprehension. The Titan has been writhing ever since you returned!"

Borin pressed his lips together. There was no point hoping for reason. Not now. Not after they had seen the darkness in his runes.

"Barok," he said softly, "the Titan isn't crying because of me. He's crying because something has awakened within him. And we need every stone bearer, every smith, every warrior. We need—"

"We need protection from you!" shouted Mevra Flammenhaar.

Her voice cut through the air like a dagger.

"You carry something within you. Something that is not dwarven. Something darker than all the tales of the Brood. We see it in your gaze. We feel it in the ground. You believe you have returned—but perhaps something has returned with you, Borin."

A shudder ran down the wall. A piercing yelp emanated from the deeper rock—distorted, distant, an echo. The guards flinched. Borin knew what it was. The shadow moved further upward.

But Baroque hinted at it.

“Do you hear it? This is your work.”

Borin took a sharp breath. He wanted to contradict him. He wanted to explain. But that would have been pointless.

Because they had already decided.

Barok stepped forward, a powerful figure with shoulders as broad as an anvil and eyes that glowed darkly with determination. "Borin Stonewalker – in the name of the Eight Dwarven Clans of the Upper Halls, I place you under protective custody."

The word was wrong, and they knew it. But it sounded better than captivity.

The guards took a step closer.

Borin slowly lowered his hand. He felt the beating of the rune heart, felt the warmth of the awakened heartstone, felt the whisper of the first glance in his blood.

He could escape. He could repel the guards. He could succumb to the deep call and disappear, to where the shadow awaited him.

But he did none of that.

Because if he fled, he would confirm what they believed. And the Titan would be abandoned.

So he raised his wrists, showing the runic lines.

“If you want to arrest me,” he said, “then do it.”

Barok nodded curtly. The guards grasped Borin's arms. They were cautious—not out of respect, but because they feared a single wrong move could unleash a power within him that they could not control.

But as they led him away, something happened that plunged the hall into silence.

The veins in the ceiling ignited. A powerful impulse raced through the stone. A tremor that sounded like the cry of a warrior breathing for the first time in eons.

And a deep voice, far away and yet everywhere, whispered:

*“Borin...”*

The Titan himself had called out his name.

The guards paused. The elders fell silent. Barok froze.

Borin slowly raised his head.

"You are mistaken," he said quietly. "Betrayal does not come from below. It comes from above."

And as he said this, another crack broke through the stone – this time from within the Upper Halls themselves.

Not the shadow. Not the Titan.

Something else.

Something that had already penetrated the halls.

The crack that ran through the stone was unlike any tremor before it. It didn't vibrate like the Titan's breaths, it didn't tremble like the movements of the Shadowspawn. This crack was sharp, clear, and purposeful—like a knife slicing through an old coat. The sound echoed through the hall like a split sword breaking in two.

The guards instinctively raised their spears. Barok whirled around, his eyes widening. Something protruded from the rock. A fine, dark crack, barely wider than a sheet of paper—yet brimming with energy that took Borin's breath away. It was as if the wall were giving way at a point where it should never have. An ominous, deep humming crept through the stone, as if something were scratching from the other side.

"What is that?!" Mevra stared at the wall. Her voice trembled.

Borin knew it. He had sensed it even before the crack became visible.

"This isn't coming from the depths," he whispered. "This is coming from above."

Barok turned around, his gaze fixed on Borin. "What are you talking about?"

But Borin no longer answered. For the rift was widening. Slowly. Deliberately. Like the opening of an eye.

A violet shimmer seeped out—not that of the shadow itself, but a diluted echo, a fragment of its consciousness. The wall pulsed in the same rhythm as the awakened Heartstone deep within the Forgotten Chambers. The entire hall vibrated.

And then it happened.

A sound — a single, long breath — crept through the crack.

Not a breath of the Titan. Not the cry of the brood.

But a whisper.

*"Betrayal..."*

The guards stumbled back. One dropped his spear. Barok instinctively stepped aside, and Mevra involuntarily placed her hand on her heart, as if to make sure it was still beating.

"This... this can't be..." she stammered.

The crack widened. Now one could see movements behind it—not figures, not clear forms, but something like flowing threads of shadow sliding across a net, as if searching for a way out. Or for a way in.

Borin stepped forward, despite the guards still holding him back. "This is not the Shadow itself," he said calmly. "It's a shard. An echo. Something it has sent out."

"Why?" Barok snarled. "Why here?"

Borin looked at him.

"Because one of you called him."

The words hit the assembly like a hammer on thin sheet metal.

Barok whirled around. "What's that supposed to mean?!" Borin pointed at the crack. "The shadow doesn't follow its own will. It follows a call. And that call comes from your halls."

Silence.

In this silence, one could only hear the faint whirring of the crack and the shallow breathing of some dwarves whose courage had suddenly become dwindlingly thin.

Then — a bang.

A side door of the hall flew open, and another clan leader burst in. His face was pale, his beard disheveled, as if he had been running. He needed a moment to catch his breath, but when he finally spoke, panic poured from his words.

"The upper guardhouse — it has fallen!"

This time it was Barok who lost control. "Followed?! What are you talking about?!"

The clan leader gasped for breath. "They didn't come from below... not from the depths..." He raised his arm, trembling, and pointed upwards, to where the crack in the wall continued like an ominous root.

"They came from above. Through the stone. From the halls above us."

Mevra turned deathly pale. "Impossible... Impossible!"

But Borin closed his eyes. The truth was clear.

The shadow did not pave the way himself. Someone had helped him. Not through magic—but through betrayal.

Borin opened his eyes.

"One of you... has summoned the shadow."

The guards stepped back. Barok took a step backward. Those present stared at each other — suspicious, confused, horrified.

It was in the air. An ancient fear: the fear of darkness within one's own people.

And then it happened.

The crack opened up completely.

No creature emerged from it. No monster. No brood.

But a figure.

A dwarf. An old, gaunt dwarf with hollow eyes and runes on his skin that glowed a sickly violet.

His gaze fell upon Borin. He smiled.

“Stonewalker,” he said. “You are too late.”

Barok gasped. “Thargan...? You... you had disappeared!”

The old dwarf raised his arms. The runes glowed more intensely.

“I have not disappeared,” he said calmly. “I have recognized the true will of the mountain.”

Borin saw the violet glow in its eyes. It wasn't just corrupted. It was fused—half dwarf, half shadow fragment, half memory.

A new shadow. A carrier.

A traitor.

“You didn’t understand,” said Thargan. “You all forgot. But I... remember.”

He raised his forehead. And behind him, more cracks crept into the stone.

The upper halls were not only attacked.

They had infiltrated.

From the inside.

The hall fell into a silent, stunned silence. No one moved. No one breathed audibly. The violet glow emanating from Thargan's skin was like a suffocating fire, bathing the air in a glowing, ominous shimmer. He stood perfectly still amidst the cracks that, like broken cobwebs, crept further into the rock behind him. The Upper Halls were no longer safe. They were no longer hallowed. They were no longer dwarven.

Thargan raised his hand, and the runes on his arm twisted into shapes Borin knew all too well: fragments of shadow interwoven with ancient patterns from the Forgotten Chambers.

Symbols never meant for living beings. Symbols to be carried only in memory—not on one's skin.

Barok took a step forward, reaching for the heavy warhammer at his side. "Thargan... by all the halls of the mountain... what have you done?"

Thargan smiled weakly, a smile full of pity—not for Barok, but for everyone standing there. "I remembered. That's all. I saw what we lost. And I realized that the Titan didn't create us as his servants. We made ourselves his servants because we feared the truth."

"What truth?!" Mevra roared, losing her composure. "That you're letting yourself be possessed by a shadow? That you're opening the halls to something that wants to destroy us?"

Thargan's gaze remained warm, but his smile sharpened. "The shadow doesn't want to destroy us. It wants to lead us back." He extended his arm, and the violet glow pulsed. "Back to what we were before the kings came. Before order made us slaves of the mountain."

Borin stepped forward, despite the guards still watching over him. His voice was calm, almost gentle. "The shadow is not memory. It is pain. A wound the Titan could never heal. You are not surrendering to a truth, Thargan—you are surrendering to a lie born of loss."

Thargan slowly turned towards him. His pupils constricted. The purple glow around them intensified.

"You don't understand, Stonewalker. You're blinded by what he gave you. You believe you are his voice." He raised his hand toward Borin. The cracks in the walls began to pulse in unison. "But you are merely a tool. Another servant. Another dwarf who has forgotten what it means to be free."

Borin raised his chin, his runes flickering. "If freedom means tearing the mountain apart and letting the shadows in, then I don't want any."

A gruff voice came from behind Borin — Barok. "Enough talking."

The massive blacksmith raised his hammer and charged forward. It was an attack full of fury, full of determination—a hammer blow that could have split a boulder.

But Thargan only raised two fingers.

The hammer stopped in mid-air. A violet spark hissed out and hardened the movement, as if time itself had been put in chains.

Barok's eyes widened. "What...?"

Thargan lowered his fingers slightly—and Barok was thrown backward as if struck by a mountain wind. He crashed against a pillar that sent fissures through the glowing veins of ore.

Mevra screamed. The guards rushed forward, but Thargan didn't even move. A surge of purple energy spread around him in a ring of waves. The guards were thrown to the ground, sliding across the smooth stone as if they were toy figures.

Only Borin remained standing.

Not out of strength. Not out of magic.

But because the Titan held him.

Thargan recognized it. He saw it in Borin's trembling runes, in the way the ground quaked beneath him.

"You can feel him, can't you?" Thargan's voice softened, almost sadly. "The Titan is afraid. The memories you've awakened are tearing him apart. And you truly believe you can save him?"

Borin breathed heavily. "Yes. I have to."

"Then you will die." Thargan raised both arms, and the cracks in the walls began to open like the maws of ancient, forgotten doors.

But before he could attack, a scream echoed through the halls — not a scream from the dwarves, not a scream from the shadow.

A titan's scream. A scream that threatened to break the entire ground apart.

The chamber trembled, a tremendous rumble filled the air, and the ore veins shone so brightly that the dwarves had to cover their eyes. Only Borin held out.

*"Borin!"*

It was no longer a whisper. It was a call. A call from the mountain.

Thargan reacted immediately — with panic.

"No!" he shouted. "He can't choose YOU! You're not—"

Another crack opened up beside him. A deep crash shook the hall.

And something emerged from it.

No offspring. No memory.

But a massive arm made of stone and glowing lines—a fragment of the Titan's own hand.

She reached for Borin. Not to hurt him.

But to save him.

And Thargan screamed in anger.

"NO!"

But the Titan had chosen.



## The Stone Giantess's Path

The Titan's arm, emerging from the fissure, was no mere outgrowth of stone. It was living matter, crisscrossed with golden lines that glowed like pulsating veins. Borin felt his knees buckle as the gigantic fingers closed around him—not violently, not roughly, but with a breathless caution. It was as if a mountain had decided to preserve a spark of light it could not lose. The hand lifted him, and at the same instant, the hall burst open with a deafening roar. Thargan screamed something, but the words were swallowed by the din, by the tremor that raged through the upper halls.

Borin was pulled upwards, the stone beneath him trembling, and then—with a single, tremendous jerk—the Titan ripped the wall completely open. The chasm widened like the tear in an ancient fabric, and beyond it lay not the darkness of the depths, but a broad passage, its walls permeated by a warm, almost gentle glow. A way not made to bear dwarfish legs, but the feet of something greater.

Something Borin recognized immediately.

He was on the Stone Giantess's Path.

The Titan gently set him down, and as soon as his boots touched the ground, the massive hand withdrew back into the rock as if it had never been there. Yet the ground continued to vibrate, as if the Titan still wanted to reach for him. Borin stood still, breathing deeply, the runes within his body glowing brighter than ever before. The heartstone in his chest responded to this place. And he understood why.

This passage was ancient. Older than the dwarven halls, older even than the runes left behind by the first kings. It was a place of memory, belonging not to the Forgotten Chambers, but to another part of the Titan—a part the dwarven people knew only from myth.

The Stone Giantess's Path

He turned left and right, but deep in both directions, Borin sensed the same force. A warmth that didn't feel like fire, but like the beating of a massive heart. The path itself seemed to breathe.

"What do you want to show me?" Borin murmured, placing a hand against the wall.

The stone reacted instantly. A resonance shot through Borin's arm and into his chest. The first glimpse flickered within him—the violet trace of the shadow he carried—but instead of pain or warning, something else came this time: an invitation. A direction. A call.

He turned to his right.

The walls of the passage changed. The golden glow gave way to a softer hue, a warm, earthy shimmer reminiscent of liquid amber. The lines in the stone became more curved, more organic, as if a being had once lived here, a being not made of ore or rock, but of something softer. Borin knew what this meant. The stone giantess had not been a titan, not a sister of his mountain. She was something else—something that had once wandered the world before the first mountains raised their voices.

An ally. Or a companion.

"You've lost her..." Borin whispered.

The Titan did not answer with words. But the ground trembled – briefly, sharply, painfully.

Borin understood. This path was the path of farewell.

He continued following the winding lines of the passage, and the longer he walked, the more clearly he sensed the presence of a force that was vast yet distant. A force that slumbered in the stone, but was not dead. Something that did not resist. Something that did not call out. It rested. Deep and heavy like a mountain range that would never awaken again.

Finally, the passage opened into a vast cavern.

Borin stopped.

Before him rose a figure of stone—greater than any titan's arm, greater than any mountain spur, greater than any wrought-iron statue. A figure whose form was lost in the roughness of the rock, but whose outlines were clear: broad shoulders, one arm resting calmly over a knee, and a head tilted slightly, as if listening to a song the world had forgotten.

The Stone Giantess.

She was not alive. And yet she was not dead.

Borin sensed it immediately: She was a part of the Titan. Not through blood or heart, but through memory. And this place was her grave.

Not a grave of death. A grave of mourning.

He stepped closer, and his runes flickered softly.

"You were not alone," Borin said softly. "He had you."

The air in the cavern vibrated, and a soft, melancholic sound crept through the stone, barely audible, yet deeply felt. It was a sound that weighed heavily on the heart.

Borin knew: The Titan had loved. Not like a human or a dwarf loves. But like a mountain loves – in eternity, in being, in shared breath.

And he had lost.

He placed a hand on the foot of the stone giantess, and at that same instant a vision shot through him. No pain. No terror. Only warmth. Light. Two colossal forms, side by side, wandering through an ancient world, before they became mountains, before they became guardians, before they saw that the world would turn against them.

And then...betrayal. Alienation. Fall. Farewell.

Borin gasped.

The shadow... was not born of hatred. But of grief.

And Thargan...Thargan had stolen that grief.

Borin sank to one knee. "I will heal him," he whispered. "And I will not forget you."

That's when it happened.

The eyes of the stone giantess – empty sockets of solid rock – glowed for a single moment. Not bright. Not threatening.

Soft.

And Borin understood:

The Titan was not alone. Not even now. Because he was here.

And Borin carried both memories within her.

He rose. And knew: The stone giantess's journey was not over.

He led deeper.

It led to a truth that would save the Titan — or destroy Borin.

Borin stood motionless before the stone figure for a long time. The air in the cavern was heavy, as if it held the dust of forgotten millennia. The faint glimmer in the eye sockets of the stone giantess, which had flashed for a single fleeting heartbeat, had long since faded—and yet the space still vibrated with the echo of that light. It had not been a mere spark. It was a greeting. A recognition. More than that: a permission.

The warmth that flowed through his chest was not the burning power of the rune heart, nor the still, deep glow of first seeing him. It was something softer. Something that relaxed his muscles and simultaneously made them feel heavy. Respect, grief, ancient connection—a mixture known only to beings who lived longer than stone.

"You carried him," Borin murmured into the silence. "Once, before the world took shape. You shared his path." His voice didn't echo. The cavern swallowed every sound, as if it were an open ear, listening.

He stepped closer.

The stone giantess was not perfect. Cracks crisscrossed her massive body, not wild or chaotic, but like signs of aging that bore not pain, but dignity. Moss had gathered in some of the furrows, crystalline veins stretched across her chest like scars. Yet none of this diminished her grace. She did not appear trapped. Not frozen. Rather, as if she had chosen to remain here—a monument to a memory the titan could never lose.

Borin placed his hand on the rock beneath his shoulder. The stone was cool, yet brimming with tension, like an organism in a deep sleep. And immediately he felt something. A vibration. A flutter of emotion that traveled through his bones.

It wasn't a vision this time. Not an image. It was a breath.

Slow. Heavy. Gentle.

He knew: It was her breath.

Not the breath of a living being in the usual sense. But the breath of a consciousness that existed far beyond life or death. A breath that resided in the soul, not in the lungs.

"So you really are asleep," Borin whispered. "And the Titan brought you here so the world couldn't find you."

The wall behind the stone giantess trembled with a deep, barely audible thud. Borin raised his head. It wasn't an earthquake. It was a voice. A voice that didn't sound like the words of the primal forms, not like the cries of the brood, not like the broken whispers of the shadow.

It was the Titan himself.

Not with words — but with feeling.

A feeling that overwhelmed Borin.

*Loss.*

So heavy was the sensation that Borin had to take a step back. The Titan felt her presence not as comfort, but as a wound. As a memory he could never heal. As a part of his soul he had survived—even though he hadn't wanted to.

Borin closed his eyes and placed both hands on the giantess's stony forehead.

"He misses you," he said. "More than any blow of the hammer, more than any vein of the mountain. He has been broken since you left. And he has tried to bury the pain by closing himself off."

The runes on Borin's arms glowed. First gold. Then violet. Then a hue he had never seen before — a warm silver, soft and comforting like the glow of a moonstone.

The giantess reacted.

Not with movement. Not with light.

But with a wave of warmth that penetrated right down to Borin's feet.

And in that warmth he heard a whisper that could not be heard with ears. A whisper that arose directly within his mind:

*"Take him back."*

Borin's eyes widened. "What?"

*"He has lost himself within himself."  
"You are now wearing what he hid."  
"You can lead him. I couldn't anymore."*

Borin closed his eyes. The words hit him like boulders falling from a great height. He had known he played a part in this struggle. But this... this was more.

The stone giantess continued speaking, her voice barely more than a whisper:

*"He carried me when I fell."  
"Now you carry him as long as he wavers."  
"But you are not alone, Borin Stonewalker."*

The floor vibrated — softly, almost tenderly.

*"I am watching over you."*

Borin slowly sank to his knees. Not from exhaustion, but from awe. What the stone giantess entrusted to him was not merely knowledge. It was a part of her will—a spark that now shimmered through the runes in his body.

When he finally stood up again, the air in the cavern had changed. It no longer felt like a grave, but like a threshold.

The rocks opened behind the giantess. A new passage. A path only Borin could see. A path only he was meant to walk.

He took a deep breath.

"I will lead him back," he said. "On your path. On the path of the Stone Giantess."

And the stone answered:

*"Then go."*

Borin left.

For now he bore not only the gaze of the Titan — but also the voice of those he had lost.

The passage behind the stone giantess was narrower than the path that had led Borin here, yet it felt alive—not in the Titan's sense, not vibrating or breathing, but like an ancient, silent stream of consciousness that did not want to be disturbed. The rock was smooth, but crisscrossed with natural lines that curved gently and merged again, like flowing patterns of a tranquil river frozen eons ago. The path seemed not constructed, but grown—from memory, from loss, from a silent dream.

Borin moved slowly forward. The air was neither warm nor cold, but filled him with a strange heaviness, as if the passage itself were reading his thoughts. The runes in his skin glowed dimly—not from danger, but from respect. He was an intruder in a realm that had once belonged to two beings greater than any dwarf's imagination: the Titan and the Stone Giantess.

The further he walked, the more clearly he felt their presence. Not as voices, not as visions, but as feelings – melancholic currents that flowed through the stone.

Traveling together. Then separating.

Borin knew he would find something here that the Titan had never dared to reveal: a part of his soul that even the Forgotten Chambers had not disclosed.

After a while, the passage opened into a small, rounded cavern, its walls filled with a soft, almost milky sheen. The air was still, as if it refused to move, so as not to disturb the tranquility of the place. In the center lay a basin of smooth stone. Its surface was motionless—a clear, crystalline mirror containing neither water nor ore. It was a membrane formed from the very core of the Titan.

When Borin cautiously looked inside, he did not see his own reflection.

He saw two figures.

Two immense forms of light strode through an empty world – together, side by side, across plains of shapeless stone, through valleys that still bore no names. They wandered slowly, searching, groping. Their bodies were not solid, but of embers, of shimmer, of a consciousness that had yet to learn form.

He saw the Titan in his original form, a being of glowing core, not yet turned to stone. And he saw the stone giantess, whose body consisted of dense layers of light – brighter than his own incandescent fire, but at the same time calmer, softer, more balanced.

They didn't speak. Yet their movements were a conversation. Their proximity was an exchange. Their glances were trust.

The pool didn't just show the past. It showed connection.

Borin didn't dare to breathe.

The vision changed. He now saw her standing – on a high, steel-grey rock plateau. A crack stretched through the sky itself, a gleaming fissure through which beings of pure formlessness disappeared, like wandering shadows weary of their home.

The stone giantess watched them go. The Titan did not. He only looked at her.

And Borin sensed: This was the moment when he feared losing her.

The vision changed again. He saw darkness. Cold. Loneliness.

The two were separated – not by conflict, not by betrayal, but by necessity. The stone giantess had been called to a place the Titan could not follow. A place closed to him. A place beyond all forms.

Their departure was not a break. It was a sacrifice.

For the world.

The Titan carried the world of stone. The stone giantess carried the world of light.

Borin opened his eyes. He stood in front of the pool again.

And he knew immediately:

The Titan had tried to bury the shadow because he feared he would break it without doing so. The shadow had not been his enemy—but his own pain.

And Thargan... had awakened this pain. Deliberately. Deliberately. With knowledge he should never have possessed.

Borin knelt at the pelvis and touched the smooth surface. It vibrated.

The stone giantess spoke to him again. Not loudly. Not whispering. But through the stone itself.

*"He's looking for you."*

Borin gasped. "The Titan?"

*"He seeks your gaze. Your courage. Your burden."*

Borin felt his heart pounding. The runestone glowed.

*"Go to him."*

*"He's calling you."*

*"And he is no longer alone."*

The ground trembled. A crack formed on the back wall of the cave. Not a dark crack. Not a silhouette.

A golden, vibrant, warm one.

One path — straight into the heart of the Titan.

Borin stood up and placed his hand on the new path.

"I'm coming," he said quietly.

"I will heal him." "For you." "For him." "For all of us."

And the stone giantess answered:

*"Then go, Borin Stonewalker."*

*"The mountain needs you."*

The golden fissure that opened in the cave's back wall was unlike any crevice Borin had ever seen. It was warm, not threatening, a breath of light that unfolded in tranquil waves. No shadow poured out, no fragments of alien consciousness, no distorted voices of damnation. Instead, a sensation wafted through it that Borin recognized instantly: a call. A call not born

of panic, not of pain, but of profound distress—the distress of a being that had suffered alone for a long time and was now, for the first time in eons, turning to someone again.

Borin stepped closer. The crack widened gently, almost shyly, as if it would only open as far as Borin's resolve allowed. The warmth prickled across his skin, and the runes on his arms reacted instantly. Gold and violet merged into a shimmering glow that didn't threaten, but accompanied. The rune heart beat hard—not with fear, but with foresight.

He knew: This was not a path into the Forgotten Chambers. Nor was this the way of the old memory factions.

This was the path to the innermost core of the Titan. To the place no dwarf had ever seen. To the heart chamber.

As he took his first step through the golden fissure, he felt the stone around him change. The air grew thicker, sweeter, imbued with a rhythm that sang—not with melody, but with meaning. The passage before him was round, flawless, a perfect tube of glowing rock. The walls pulsed like warm flesh, yet the movement was calm, steady, full of patience.

Here the Titan did not suffer. Here he waited.

Borin continued walking. The corridor didn't branch, didn't turn. It led straight ahead, as if the Titan himself had shaped this path, solely for this moment. The floor vibrated with a steady beat—not chaotic, not erratic. It was the true heartbeat.

A heavy, deep, ancient sound reverberated in Borin's chest, forcing his runes into the same rhythm. Borin felt his own heart adjust—as if the Titan were showing him how a real heart beats, a heart that pumps not just blood, but consciousness.

After what felt like an eternity, the passage opened into a room so vast that Borin involuntarily stopped.

The heart chamber of the Titan.

It was a dome of living stone, its ceiling vanishing into the darkness as if it were a starry sky of solid rock. In the center of the space hung something—floating, not held by chains, not borne by runes. A core of light. A heart the size of a house, crisscrossed by lines that flowed across its surface like rivers of embers. The core constantly changed shape—sometimes pulsating, sometimes flickering, then solidifying again. It was everything: stone, light, thought.

And yet he suffered.

Borin saw it immediately. Dark cracks gaped between the golden lines. Rifts in which a violet shimmer glowed. The Titan's wound.

The shadow had torn her apart. Not intentionally. Not maliciously. But as an echo of a loss that should never have been denied.

Borin slowly approached. The core reacted. A golden spark shot out of it, danced through the room, hovered before Borin's chest and touched the runic heart within him.



A blow. A thunderous tremor went through Borin's body.

He saw images. He saw the world as the Titan saw it. He saw himself—small, but significant. He saw the stone giantess—calm, waiting, protective. And he saw the shadow—weeping, not from hatred, but from loneliness.

Then he heard the voice of the Titan:

*"You carry the memory."*

Borin knelt. Not because the Titan demanded it—but because the truth overwhelmed him.

"I am here," said Borin. "I have followed your path. I have seen what you have lost. And I will bring your shadow back to you—not as a wound, but as a part of your being."

The core vibrated, and a soft, warm sound filled the cavern. A sound that pierced Borin's soul.

*"Help me."*

Borin stood up.

"Tell me where I need to go."

The golden crack behind him closed. A new crack opened in front of him — deep, dark, but not hostile.

One path. No escape. One goal.

The Titan's voice spoke a second time—this time clear, distinct, full of ancient strength:

*"On the origin of the shadow."*

Borin took a deep breath.

"I go."

And he went inside.

## The Chamber of the Sleeping Fire

The transition to the next path was not a step through stone, but a transition through layers: first golden warmth, then deep darkness, then a blazing pressure that squeezed Borin's chest like an invisible anvil. The new passage was narrower than the path of the heart, yet more intense. It vibrated to a slow, heavy rhythm that stemmed not from pain, but from deep concentration—a fluttering that does not remember, does not despair, but waits.

The air smelled of ore, of ancient smoke, and of the trace of something that wasn't burning but wanted to. Borin recognized this scent. It was the fragrance of unforged creation, the scent of a fire that could shape the world if only someone would give it back its freedom.

He knew instantly: This was the Chamber of the Sleeping Fire. The place where the Titan kept his embers when he rested. The place where he once renewed his power—before the shadow weakened it.

Borin continued walking, and with each step the runes on his arms blazed more intensely. The Titan's gold and the Shadow's violet fused into a glowing, amber shimmer that burned in the darkness like a living torch. But this path was not dark. The walls were smooth and curved, as if a colossal finger of pure embers had once shaped them. Veins of smoldering stone wound through the rock like dormant lava flows.

The further he walked, the more Borin felt the heat. Not painful. Not hostile. But probing.

The chamber wanted to know who entered it. It didn't ask for names. Not for origins. Only for the truth.

Borin stopped before a wall that resembled a closed curtain of solidified fire. Golden veins pulsed within it at irregular intervals, as if listening. Borin placed his hand on the glowing surface. It was hot, but not searing—more like the heat of a living furnace just before it was formed.

The stone reacted immediately.

A scream—silent, deep, ancient—roared through Borin's mind. An echo of a being that longed to awaken but could not. A cry for air. A cry for life. A cry for help.

Borin did not pull his hand back. He pressed it harder against the burning curtain.

"I am here," he said. "Open up."

The chamber waited. Then Borin felt a second pulse. A pulse of the shadow—quiet, tired, full of sorrow. Not hostile.

A bond that Borin carried within her.

The curtain slowly opened, the golden lines receding like molten ore flowing back into its proper grooves. The heat poured into the space before him like a breath from a vast forge fire that hadn't been stoked for eons.

And then he saw her.

The Chamber of the Sleeping Fire.

A vast cavern, its floor composed of glowing islands floating on a sea of dark red lava. But the lava didn't move. It pulsed—slowly, matter-of-factly, as if dreaming. A dream from which it couldn't awaken. Sparks rose irregularly from it, some flashing brightly before disintegrating in the air. Others hovered, becoming tiny runic crystals that spiraled upwards.

In the middle of the chamber, on one of the largest glowing islands, lay something that took Borin's breath away:

A heart of flames. Restless. Exhausted.

Its color was golden-orange, like freshly molten metal—but half-shadowed by a violet haze that lay over it like a net.

The Titan had preserved his fire here. But the shadow had weakened it.

Borin stepped onto the first glowing stone. He expected pain—but the stone absorbed his weight as if it recognized him. The heat was like a song that needed its runes to be understood.

He moved closer, island by island, each step accompanied by a deep throbbing of lava and heart. And when he reached the middle platform, the flaming heart was so close that its force pressed Borin's chest against his ribs.

He placed his hand on it.

And the chamber exploded in light.

A blinding burst of memory, fire, and awareness ripped through Borin's mind. He saw the Titan, once drawing flames from the earth to shape worlds. He saw the stone giantess taming his blaze, not with coldness, but with calm. He saw life emerge. And he saw pain—the pain of loss that had broken the fire.

The Flame Heart sighed. A sound that didn't reach Borin's ears, but resonated deep within his soul.

It was tired. It was old. It was injured.

But it was alive.

"You slept for a long time," Borin whispered. "Too long."

He placed his runic heart against the glowing surface.

A golden wave swept through the room.

The lava began to pulse faster. The sparks rose higher. The veins in the stone glowed like freshly lit forge fires.

And the flaming heart began to beat again.

Slow. Heavy. But alive.

And in this renewed blow, the Titan spoke—not through pain, not through cries, but through fire:

*"Take me home."*

The awakening of the sleeping fire was not a noisy event. No bubbling, no hissing, no eruptive violence filled the chamber. Instead, it was a slow, insistent pulsing, initially barely distinguishable from the dreamy silence that had reigned before. But Borin felt the change. He felt it in his chest, in his bones, in the runes that crisscrossed his skin like glowing veins. The flame heart beneath his hand began to respond to the rune heart within him—tentatively at first, then with increasing resolve.

The chamber breathed.

The lava, which had previously seemed solidified, began to stir. Slow, powerful waves rose and fell the glowing surface, as if rediscovering the rhythm of an ancient song. Each wave was a heartbeat. Each heartbeat a cry. The cry of a being that would no longer hide in its own pain.

Borin felt the weight of millennia that had settled upon this place. The Chamber of the Sleeping Fire had never been meant to grow cold. It had never been created to rest. It was the heart of a creative force that had once lifted mountains, carved valleys, and poured the solid foundations of the world. Here, the Titan had renewed his warmth, regenerated his heart of light, and cleared his mind.

But since the loss of the stone giantess, this chamber had fallen silent.

The fire had not gone out — but it had forgotten how to burn.

Borin reached deeper into the flaming heart. His fingers slid into the shimmering surface as if dipping them into a living metal that didn't burn but shaped itself. The heart reacted instantly. A jolt ran through it, and golden lines flared up, creeping across the entire body of the sleeping fire, tracing patterns Borin didn't know but instinctively understood.

They meant:

*"I live."*

*"I remember."*

*"I am not alone."*

Then a second wave surged through Borin—darker, violet, melancholy. The shadow. But no attack, no evil impulse, no hateful cry. It was a sighing sound, a flicker of consciousness stirring as well.

The shadow awoke—not because it grew stronger, but because the fire awoke.

The two existed like two halves of a broken whole. Fire and darkness. Creation and loss. Warmth and loneliness.

Borin felt them collide within him. How gold and violet intertwined in his body. How the runes of both forces groped for each other, suspicious and desperately searching at the same time.

"You are not enemies," Borin gasped. "You have been separated."

The Flame Heart responded with a heavy pulse. The lava rose, and the entire chamber trembled. Rocks on the walls shifted. Sparks shot from the deepest crevices.

But the violet breath also answered, a fine, barely audible whimper that echoed within Borin.

*"I have been left behind."*

The Flame Heart replied:

*"I have lost you."*

And Borin finally understood: The shadow was not suffering that had come from the outside. It was the unresolved echo of a farewell.

The Titan had not only lost the stone giantess — he had split off a piece of his own soul to avoid feeling the pain.

This fragmented soul had become the shadow.

Borin opened his eyes.

"You must be reunited."

The room reacted immediately.

The lava receded, revealing a previously hidden path—a narrow ledge leading deep beneath the chamber. Dark sparks rose from the depths, yet posed no threat. They seemed like soot particles from a flame that had never been lit.

Borin knew: This path led to where the shadow had originally originated. To the breaking point between embers and loss.

The flame core pulsed one last time beneath his hand. Golden lines traveled from its surface up Borin's arm, burning themselves into the rune heart, not painfully, but connectingly.

A message. A request. A trust.

*"Go. Do what I couldn't."*

Borin nodded slowly.

"I'm taking you home. Both of you."

He stepped back. The chamber burned brighter. The path awaited.

And Borin knew that the next step would lead him closer to the source of the shadow—and to a truth that would either heal the Titan or shatter the mountain.

The hidden passage the Flame Heart had revealed led steeply downwards, but Borin needed no light to see it. The stone itself shimmered a dull, dark red, as if carrying within it the last breaths of a dying fire. The ground vibrated gently beneath his steps, not in rhythm with the chamber's fire, but in a deeper, duller beat. A beat that was older, heavier, more melancholic—the throbbing of a wound.

Borin knew: He was descending into the birthplace of the shadow.

The air changed. The deeper he descended, the heavier it became. Not hot or cold, but dense, as if every layer were filled with emotion: pain, grief, memory, and something that felt like stifled anger. The path seemed quieter than any place he had encountered before. Not the stillness of peace, but the stillness of an unexpressed scream.

His footsteps barely echoed. Everything seemed to swallow the sounds.

After a while, the walkway opened into a second chamber – much smaller than that of the sleeping fire, but infinitely more intense. Borin stopped, for the air here vibrated with a force that slowed the blood in his veins.

The chamber was not round, not organic like the Titan's chambers. It was angular, asymmetrical, splintered, as if a tremendous blow had torn the stone apart and frozen it in a single moment. Violet light seeped from the cracks—not a cold, malevolent light, but the dim glow of an ancient, deep wound.

Something was hanging in the air in the middle of the room.

A crack.

Not a shadow creature. Not a shape. Just a crack.

A crack like fresh glass, sharp-edged, shimmering, floating. It vibrated at a frequency that cut directly into Borin's chest—not like a knife, but like a yearning cry that had long since lost its receiver.

The origin of the shadow.

Borin cautiously approached. The crack reacted immediately.

It vibrated faster, a shimmer ran through its edges, and a sound escaped it — not through the air, but directly into Borin's mind.

*"He forgot me."*

Borin gasped. He felt the pain. He felt the loneliness. And he felt the violet energy of that first glance respond within him, not as an echo of a stranger, but as a part of his own soul.

"No," said Borin. "He couldn't carry you."

The crack trembled, and a second sound penetrated it.

*"I was his heart."*

*His loss.*

*His weakness."*

Borin shook his head. "You were his pain. But pain is not enmity."

The crack flickered angrily, but behind it lay no hatred. Only despair.

*"He dropped me."*

"He had to," Borin replied quietly. "He would have broken."

A long silence followed. The chamber vibrated slightly — not in rhythm with the fire, but in time with heavy, hesitant breathing.

Then Borin heard the Titan again — not from the Flame Heart, not from the walls.

But from the shadow itself.

*"I have lost myself."*

Borin gritted his teeth. This was the moment. The truth the Titan had always suppressed.

The shadow responded with a whisper so soft that Borin involuntarily reached out his hand.

*"I am what you could not carry."*

"And I am here to bring you back together," said Borin.

The rift pulsed more intensely. The violet energy wound itself like a trembling thread around Borin's runic lines. Not aggressive. Not possessive. More tentative. Searching.

He thought of the stone giantess. Of the fire. Of the Titan's voice. Of Thargan's twisted version of this truth.

"You are not a damnation," said Borin. "You are not an enemy. You are the part he cut off so he wouldn't break. But the world needs him whole. And for that, he needs you."

A deep, vibrating sound filled the chamber.

Pain. Fear. And hope.

Borin stepped directly in front of the crack. The air shimmered, his beard lifted in the suction, the heat of the fire vibrated in his back.

"Join me," said Borin. "Only then can I bring you both to him."

The crack trembled wildly. A flash of light shot out and enveloped Borin's forearm—first icy, then hot, then both at once. Borin gritted his teeth. The runes on his skin glowed brightly, and gold and violet fused like molten metal.

The shadow spoke:

*"I am afraid."*

Borin placed his hand directly into the crack.

"I am here," he said. "And I am carrying you."

The crack broke apart. Not destroyed — freed.

A violet spark shot into Borin's chest, into the rune-heart. A burning, cutting, weeping sound filled his mind—and then everything went silent.

Borin stood upright. His runes glowed gold-violet. And he was no longer alone.

He was complete.

"Now," Borin whispered. "Let's go back to him."

A new crack opened — not dark, not golden, but in both colors at once.

The path to reunification.

The road back to the Titan.

The path that opened before Borin was a fissure of gold and violet at once—a rift composed neither purely of embers nor purely of shadow, but of both forces now touching within. It was the first place in eons where the Titan's separated parts spoke to one another again. The Chamber of Sleeping Fire vibrated intensely, yet not chaotically; it vibrated like a heart beginning to heal for the first time since its loss.

Borin took a deep breath and felt the new weight in his chest. The shadow was now within him, but not as a parasite, not as a blade, not as a creeping darkness. It was a voice—soft, cautious, trembling like a being unsure if it was welcome. The runeheart ignited slowly, the lines across Borin's skin burning into patterns he had never seen before. It was as if the stone giantess herself had placed these patterns within him before he had even begun his journey here.

"We're going back," Borin murmured. "Together."

The shadow didn't answer with words, but with a slight trembling within—a questioning impulse, an expression of something almost reminiscent of trust. It wasn't strong. But it was a start.

Borin entered the gold-violet path.



The rift closed behind him like a softly whispering door, and instantly the space around him changed. He was no longer in the Chamber of Sleeping Fire, but not yet in the heart of the Titan. He was walking through a layer in between—the layer in which the Titan thought.

Not in words. But in forms. In patterns. In memories.

Borin saw these forms gleaming around him: glowing lines forming mountain ranges once created by the Titan; violet shadows slid through the stone like silhouettes of ancient events; golden sparks marking places where the Titan kept watch; darker incisions where the Titan suffered.

The path wasn't straight. It wasn't round. It wasn't even safe.

It was a stream of consciousness — a path through the mind of a being older than all flesh.

Borin felt the shadow inside him become restless.

*"It hurts."*

"I know," said Borin. "But we have to move on."

*"I remember this place..."*

His voice was a fragment, barely audible.

*"He left me here..."*

Borin stopped. "No. This is where you broke away from him."

The shadow flickered like a trembling light. But he did not contradict him.

They continued walking.

The shapes around her changed once more. They became clearer, more structured, less chaotic. When Borin looked closely, he noticed that the patterns were coalescing into a vast, geometric space—a place not made of stone, but of pure pathways of memory. Golden veins ran through it, but some were torn, broken, washed with dark violet.

Borin knew immediately: This was the hall where the Titan organized his thoughts. The innermost chamber of his mind.

As he stepped inside, the glowing lines shrank into solid structures. The walls formed around him, the floor hardened, the light focused.

And in the middle of this hall stood something that took Borin's breath away:

A huge, shimmering silhouette — not complete, not solid, but unmistakably the Titan itself.

He was not in physical form. He was an essence — an ancient, vast, suffering consciousness struggling to fit into an image in order to speak to the small dwarf before him.

Golden flames flickered where his heart was. Violet shadows twitched where the wound gaped.

Borin approached.

He expected a voice, a thunderclap, a power that would crush him.

But the voice that reached him was quiet.

*"You found him."*

The shadow in Borin answered, not aloud, but as a vibration in his heart:

*"I never left you."*

The Titan trembled.

Gold and violet flickered together.

Borin understood: The Titan was crying.

Not in tears. But in light.

He knelt down, held his hand on his chest, and said:

"I will bring you back. Not separated. Not broken. But whole."

The enormous silhouette bent down, cautiously, uncertainly — like someone being touched for the first time in eons.

*"Help us... Borin Stonewalker."*

Borin slowly stood up.

The chamber trembled.

The next step would change everything.

## The Heirs of the Runesteel League

The Hall of Thoughtfire faded slowly as Borin took his first step back into the Titan's real world. The transition wasn't a rift, a vision, or an abrupt awakening. It was a glide—as if carried by the hand of a being gently lifting him from its depths back into existence. The golden and violet patterns that had previously shimmered around him retreated into his runes, pulsing there in a calm, new rhythm. A rhythm that was not only Borin's heart, not only the Titan—but both at once.

When the ground beneath his boots turned to solid stone, Borin immediately recognized where he stood.

The Halls of the Heirs.

A place every dwarf knew of, but which hardly any had ever entered. For centuries, the runemasters of the Runesteel Covenant had maintained their silence here, shielded from the noise of the forges and the footsteps of warriors. No blades were sharpened here, no helmets hammered. Here, runes were born—runes that shaped power, memory, and the future.

The room wasn't large, but it felt immense. Tall, closely spaced stone pillars supported a ceiling filled with a soft white glow—not bright, but clear like the first snow over a mountain pass. The walls were covered with ancient engravings, so finely crafted that they seemed as if millennia had guarded them. Set between them were runic tables of solid starstone, covered with thin lines that pulsed in a rhythm Borin now instinctively understood.

But the most impressive thing was: the room was not empty.

Nine figures stood there.

The heirs of the Runesteel League.

The oldest rune masters of the realm, preserved from the changing times not by magic, but by discipline, knowledge, and the trust of the Titan himself. Their beards sometimes reached the ground, woven in patterns understood only by those who had spent decades studying the primal symbols. Their eyes glowed—not with fire, but with clarity.

They had been expecting him.

The first of the nine, a tall figure with a deep gray beard that looked like cold smoke, stepped forward. His name was Duravon Ironword—the guardian of the third rune and bearer of the Last Gaze. His voice was old, but firm as tempered steel.

“Borin Stonewalker,” he said. “The Titan has called us.”

Borin felt a tug in his runes. A soft murmur within—the shadow trying to understand. And the fire that gave him support.

“I come from the Chamber of Fire,” Borin replied. “And from the place where the Titan’s wound was born.”

A murmur went through the heirs. Not fearful. But reverent.

Duravon stepped closer, and his ancient eyes examined Borin's runes.

“You carry both forces,” he finally said. “Not as something foreign. Not as an illness. But as a part.”

Borin nodded. “The Titan can only be healed when fire and shadow become one again.”

A second master, Marud Tiefensinn, stepped forward. His body was slender, almost frail, yet there was a glimmer in his eyes that showed his power went inwards, not outwards.

“The Upper Halls are in flux,” he said. “We can feel the cracks in the stone. We heard the cries of the fire when you awakened it.”

A third: "And we heard the shadow."

A fourth person said: "But now... he is quiet."

All eyes turned to Borin.

He felt the shadow within him, like a quiet, hungry memory. But he wasn't aggressive. He was vulnerable.

"He is not your enemy," said Borin. "He is the part that the Titan severed from itself eons ago. Out of grief. And out of fear."

The heirs exchanged glances. Not surprised — but dismayed.

Duravon nodded slowly. "We always suspected it. The ancient signs don't lie. Wherever fire was broken, a shadow remained. And where a shadow remains, a fire is missing."

He raised his hand. The entire room fell silent. The runes above the tables pulsed in unison.

"Borin Stonewalker," said Duravon. "You are here because you have become the Way itself. You bear the Titan's runes and the burden of his loss. You are the bringer of return."

Borin straightened his shoulders. He knew what was coming. He had felt it when he stepped onto the gold-violet path.

"What do you want from me?"

Duravon's answer was calm. But it weighed as heavy as mountain steel.

"We will give you what you need to heal the Titan."

"Knowledge?" Borin asked.

Duravon slowly shook his head.

"More than knowledge."

He raised a hand, and the ground between the heirs opened. A glowing circle burned into the stone. Runes formed—more powerful than anything Borin had ever seen.

A weapon. A tool. A legacy.

Duravon's voice became quieter, but infinitely significant:

"We'll give you the original form." "The first rune." "That which even protected the stone giantess."

"We give you... the runeskin oath."

Borin felt the shadow within him freeze. Feel the fire within him flare up.

And he knew: This was the beginning of a path that would either make him a new form of the Titan — or its final victim.

The glowing circle of runes in the ground stretched like a burning wheel, burrowing deep into the rock. The lines were not like ordinary runes—not the geometric, austere patterns of dwarven smiths, but living paths that shifted as Borin gazed upon them. They grew, intertwining like roots, then stretching apart like tongues of flame. Each movement left an echo in the stone, a faint sound more feeling than sound.

The heirs stood in a semicircle around the open ground, and their expressions had changed. They were no longer scrutinizing or cautious. They were serious, reverent—and filled with fear. For what was happening here was not a ritual. Not a teaching. Not a forging.

It was a transition.

Duravon Eisenwort raised both hands, and the hall's pillars began to glow. The engravings on the walls reacted as if alive, shimmering in gold and silver-gray, while a deep humming sound emanated from the ceiling, at first barely audible, then louder, like the humming of a giant stone horn.

"We'll begin," Duravon said in a calm voice.

The remaining heirs closed their eyes and placed their hands on the rune tables. Instantly, the lines on the table surfaces flared up and flowed like liquid streams into the ground. The circle beneath Borin reacted, flickering, glowing, becoming a network of golden and silver lines that crept slowly, inexorably, towards him.

Borin felt a tug inside him. The shadow grew restless. The fire in his breastbone, however, pressed against it, calming him, like a hand placed on a trembling animal.

"Stay calm," Borin whispered to himself.

He sensed how the shadow reacted – cautiously, vulnerably.

Then the ritual began.

The heirs sang.

It was not a song Borin had ever heard before. Not a dwarven song, not a smith's melody, not a runic formula of the ancient kings.

It was older.

The voices of the heirs blended into a single, mighty sound. It was deep as thunder, but clear as freshly hewn ore. The words were not in Dwarven; they were in the language of the primal forms—those beings who had once shaped, taught, and guided the Titan.

The air became denser. The pillars trembled. The walls breathed.

The circle of runes closed around Borin and lifted him from the ground as if an invisible hand were raising him. The stone beneath his boots softened like lava, then hardened like diamond. His body tensed, yet he remained upright.

Golden lines wound their way across his body, encircling his arms, chest, and legs. For a moment, he seemed to be engulfed in flames—not fire, but glowing runes that enveloped him.

The heirs sang more loudly.

Duravon stepped forward and shouted:

"Borin Stonewalker! Recipient of the Titan's Pain! Bearer of Fire and Shadow! Guardian of the Heart of the Deep!"

The lines shot up, intertwining. Borin breathed heavily.

The shadow flickered.

The flame burned hotter.

Duravon raised a hand, and a single rune broke free from the circle.

She was old. Incredibly old. She looked like a circle within a circle, surrounded by three broken lines – the sign of the first union.

"This," said Duravon, "is the original form. The first rune. The one that protected the Stone Giantess. The one that bound the Titan. The one that has never been placed upon a mortal."

The rune floated, pulsated.

"Borin Stonewalker," said Duravon. "Are you ready to carry them?"

The shadow trembled in Borin's chest. The fire pressed against it. An inner storm.

Borin replied calmly:

"Yes."

Duravon's fingers sliced through the air.

The rune plunged into Borin's chest.

He didn't scream. He stood. He let her in.

Gold and violet exploded within him, tearing his perception apart. His mind plunged into a light that simultaneously burned and cooled, simultaneously ached and healed. The rune merged with the runic heart, wound around the shadow, and laid itself upon it like a helping hand.

And Borin understood:

He was not strengthened. He was not enchanted. He was not protected.

He was bound.

Not as a servant. Not as a victim. But as a mediator.

The mediator between fire and shadow. Between titan and pain. Between past and healing.

The rune enveloped his heart like a new beat. A third pulse.

Fire. Shadow. And now: Original form.

The heirs fell silent. The air trembled.

Duravon lowered his hand.

"Borin... you are now more than a rune bearer."

Borin opened his eyes. They glowed gold and violet at the same time.

"You are the shield-bearer of the Titan."

The hall shook. Not from danger. But from appreciation.

The rune-skin oath was completed.

Borin stood at the center of the rune circle, the stone beneath his feet still warm from the echo of the oath. The air vibrated, not as a threat, but as recognition of a new state of affairs. The heirs of the Runesteel Covenant approached slowly, their steps even, heavy, solemn. They regarded Borin not as a hero, not as a chosen one—but as someone who had taken on a burden no one else could have borne.

Duravon Eisenwort was the first to stop. He studied Borin's body, whose runes now pulsed in a steady rhythm. Gold and violet no longer danced chaotically together. They were ordered. Connected. Part of a pattern that Borin didn't understand—but felt.

"The original form recognizes you," said Duravon. "It now lies within your heart, weaving your life force together with that of the Titan. What you are is no accident. The path has chosen you."

Borin breathed heavily. The rune in his chest felt like a second heart—not beating, but glowing. A center. A focal point that didn't move his blood, but his soul.

"Will this make me stronger?" Borin asked.

Duravon shook his head.

"You will become more complete. Strength is just a byproduct."

Another heir – Marud Tiefensinn – stepped forward. He was the quietest among them, but his words always struck like a precise chisel.

"The Runeskin Oath is not a gift, Borin. It is a burden. You now carry two hearts within you: that of the Titan and that of his shadow. The primal form binds them to your own. Your life is henceforth the nexus of a triad of will, pain, and fire."

Borin nodded. "I feel it. It's pulling... inwards."

"It must be," Marud replied. "For you will be the one who leads the Titan to unity. He cannot lift his pain alone—but you can carry the burden far enough for him to complete the rest."

A third heir, Halgrim Funkenbart, stepped forward. His voice was like the crackling of a forge fire just before it was lit.

"But know one thing, Borin Stonewalker. With this bond, you have placed yourself at the heart of the conflict. The Shadowspawn will react to you. They will recognize you as part of their essence—and as a traitor. The Titan's fire will see you as a hope—and as a threat."

Borin clenched his fists. "I didn't ask for this burden."

Duravon nodded. "No one worthy would ever ask for that."

A deep, resonant tone filled the room. The pillars vibrated like the low strings of an ancient instrument. The runic circle beneath Borin began to fade, the lines sinking back into the ground as if they had completed their work.

The heirs formed a circle around Borin.

Duravon raised his hand.

"There's something you need to know — before you leave the halls."

Borin looked up. "What?"

The old rune master spoke slowly, as if each of his words moved the very breath of the Stone Kingdom itself.

"You are not the first to have wanted to heal the Titan."

Borin froze.

The heirs lowered their gazes — not out of shame, but out of grief.

Marud continued: "Five hundred years ago, when the first dark runes appeared in the mountain, another dwarf sought the origin of the wound. His name was Thandur Ironhide. A powerful rune-bearer, gifted, pure-hearted, fearless."

Halgrim growled softly. "And he failed."

Duravon lowered his voice. "He tried to awaken the fire of the Titan—without the primal form. Without understanding the shadow. Without knowing the truth about the loss."

Marud added: "He touched the fire. And the fire didn't burn him—it repelled him."



Borin felt a chill, even though the room was warm.

"What happened to him?"

Duravon looked directly into his eyes.

"He no longer bears a name. He became part of the Shadowbrood, but not like the others. He became something new. A hybrid. A creature made of both fire and darkness—but not of unity, rather of fragmentation."

Borin understood. He knew immediately whom the heirs meant.

The terror that had assailed the Upper Halls. The presence that had crept through the stone. The curvature in Thargan's runes. The pain in the deep chambers.

"The Burnt One..." Borin whispered. "The one the guards described."

Duravon nodded. "Thandur is no longer a dwarf. No longer a rune-bearer. No longer part of the Titan. He is what is created when one tries to heal the Titan—without sacrificing oneself."

Borin felt the shadow inside him tremble. Not with fear. With pity.

And the fire inside him throbbed. Not angrily. Warningly.

Duravon closed his eyes and spoke the last, decisive sentence:

"You must heal the Titan. And to do that...you must find Thandur."

Borin felt the weight of this fate in his bones — and yet he stood upright.

"Then I will find him," he said. "No matter what he has become."

The heirs resigned.

The hall opened.

The path awaited.

Borin stood still as the Hall of Heirs gradually fell silent. The glowing lines faded, the stone cooled, and the vibrations of the ancient runes subsided like the tail end of a violent storm. But within Borin himself, there was no silence. Three hearts beat in his breast: his own, that of fire, and that of shadow. Each beat with a different color, yet they were now bound together by the primal form—not in harmony, but compelled to seek the same rhythm.

He felt the responsibility on his shoulders like an anvil of pure history.

Duravon Eisenwort stepped forward again, his gaze heavy yet hopeful. "The oath is complete," he said gently. "But the renewal is only just beginning. You must reach the Titan before his pain shatters the stone. The fissures Thargan opened are widening."

Halgrim Funkenbart snorted. "The upper halls are already trembling. The stone no longer bears its rage in silence."

Another heir, the elder elder Stormrunes, stepped closer and placed a hand on Borin's shoulder. Her fingers trembled slightly, but her voice was as firm as forged steel. "What comes now will tear you apart if you don't listen to yourself. Fire and shadow are within you—both fighting, both seeking purchase. You must guide them, or they will guide you."

Borin nodded, even though his heart was beating heavily. "Where is my path leading me?"

Duravon replied:

"Into the upper halls. Into the chaos that Thargan has sown. To where Thandur roams."

The name echoed in Borin's breast. Thandur. The Burnt One. The one who had once carried the same hope — and been broken by it.

"How do I find him?" Borin asked.

"He will find you," said Marud Tiefensinn. "Because you are what he wanted to be."

These words struck Borin harder than a blade. The shadow within him reacted instantly—a twitching impulse that felt like a spark bursting. Not fearful, but compassionate. As if he were hearing the name of a brother he had never known.

"And if I find him..." Borin's voice trembled only slightly.

Duravon closed his eyes. "Then you will have to decide whether Thandur can still be brought back—or whether he is too broken. The primal form shows the way, but it does not decide. You bear the fire and its loss. You must feel what is right."

Greisel stepped back and raised a hand.

The hall opened not through a door, but through the stone itself. The walls vibrated, receded, and a tall gateway formed as if from living ore. Beyond it lay a passage—wide, dark, restless. A passage that led upwards.

"This is the path to the Iron Crown," said Halgrim. "The highest of the Upper Halls. It is there that the clan leaders gather. It is there that the Stone first reacts to the Titan's weakness."

Borin felt the air of this corridor like a cold slap against his face. It smelled of fear. Of sweat. Of the beginning of war.

Duravon's voice became toneless, almost broken under the weight of his words.

"The dwarves believe the shadow comes from below. They believe the depths are the enemy. But the enemy now moves through their own halls."

Borin stepped forward, a step away from the open path. His runes flickered faintly, gold and violet at once. The shadow within him trembled as if called. The flame within him answered with heat—ready, yet hesitant.

"I will find Thandur," said Borin. "And I will heal the Titan. I swear it."

Duravon nodded. "Then go."

And with a final, reverent glance, the heirs bowed.

Not deeply. Not like before a king. But like before someone who carried a burden that no one else could bear.

Borin turned away and stepped into the path. The stone closed behind him. The Titan's call vibrated softly in his chest.

The Upper Halls were waiting. Thandur was waiting.

And with every step, Borin knew:

Now the real fight began.

### The grip of the deep brood

The path to the Iron Crown led Borin through a section of the mountain he hadn't set foot on since his youth. The Upper Halls had once been a place of vibrant life—a constant hammering reverberating through the stone walls, the clang of metal, the scraping of blacksmith's chisels. But now there was a different kind of silence. Not peace, but tension. A silence that lurked between the pillars like a predator watching to see if the intruder stood on familiar or hostile ground.

Borin immediately sensed that these halls had changed.

The air was thicker, heavy with fear. The rune fires, which usually burned brightly on the walls, flickered darkly; some were even completely extinguished. The stone itself seemed to be listening—not curiously, but cautiously.

"They sense us," Borin murmured. His runes flickered faintly in gold and violet. The shadow replied softly, "It is not the mountain you sense."

And Borin knew: It was something else crawling through these halls. Something that shouldn't have been up here.

A scratching sound came from behind the tall columns. Irregular. Hesitant. Like the sound of fingers gliding over stone.

Borin stopped. His hand instinctively went to the handle of his hammer, but he didn't pull it. He didn't want the first blow to hit something that might still be salvageable.

But the noises became clearer. Several. Quiet. Fast.

The deep brood.

But not those from the old stories — those wild, pale creatures that lurked in the shadows of the deepest chambers and were filled with instinctive hatred.

They sounded different. Faster. More determined. More organized.

The shadow in Borin trembled.

*"They are coming. They are looking for me."*

"No," Borin whispered. "They're looking for the part of you that was never whole."

Then they shot out.

Four figures—hunched, contorted, with arms that were too long and eyes that glowed in the flickering runic light. Their skin was not the pale gray of the usual brood. It was speckled with violet veins that pulsed across their bodies as if they were hot metal poured into living form.

This brood was new. Changed. Connected.

Borin stepped back, his heart pounding harder. A sound escaped his lips before he could stop it: "Thandur... what have you done?"

The creatures moved with a strange coordination, as if shaped by a common will. They didn't creep. They didn't rush. They approached in a hunched posture, as if searching for something—or recognizing someone.

One of them stopped, jerked upright, and raised his head. A sound escaped his throat, somewhere between a growl and a cry. A sound vibrating with a painful memory.

The shadow in Borin answered.

Not loud. Not deliberate. But clear.

The creatures recoiled — not out of fear, but out of recognition.

*"They feel me,"* whispered the voice of the shadow.

*"They feel what I was. They feel what I lost. They... want to come back."*

"To you?" Borin cautiously approached.

*"To him."*

To the Titan.

Borin understood. The Deepbrood up here wasn't an attack. It was a pull. A movement responding to the Titan's pain—to the rift tearing through his consciousness.

But then something happened.

A roar filled the hall. A heavy, dragging step.

Not a dwarf. Not an animal. Not a creature from ancient times.

The Overburned One.

Thandur.

Borin would have recognized his eyes anywhere: those glowing, once clear runic lines, now torn by violet energy that burned restlessly through his body. His form was barely dwarven anymore. His arms were longer, covered in ore-like plates. His back was bent, as if bearing a burden that had crushed him for centuries.

He saw Borin. And stopped.

"Borin..." The voice came like molten rock — heavy, burning, full of pain.

Borin replied calmly: "Thandur. I've been looking for you."

The Overburner laughed. It was a laugh made of pain, and his creatures recoiled as if the sound were hurting them.

"The Runeskin Oath..." Thandur raised his hand, half bone, half glowing substance. "I feel him. The Titan has bound you. He... sees you."

"He needs you too," said Borin.

Thandur snorted. "He once needed me — and rejected me."

Borin took a step forward. "You wanted to touch him without understanding. But now I understand what you were looking for. You didn't want power. You wanted healing."

Thandur's body trembled, the purple lines twitched uncontrollably.

"I wanted... for him to hear me."

"He can hear you now," said Borin. "But you must come with me."

Thandur screamed.

A scream of anger, loss, and hope. And the creatures screamed with it.

The halls shook.

The fight began.

But Borin knew: It was not a fight against Thandur.

It was a fight against the pain that had broken him.

The scream that Thandur let out tore through the air like a shattering runic sword. The vibration raced through the halls, making the stone tremble as if the mountain itself recoiled. Borin felt his runes rot—fire and shadow, both desperately trying to decipher the meaning of that sound. It was not a war cry. Not a cry of hatred. It was the scream of a being who had suffered alone for too long.

But the deep-brooding creatures around him reacted differently.

They flung their limbs apart, arched their backs, gasped for air as if the scream were a command piercing them like a hot dagger. Their purple-streaked muscles tensed as if they were marionettes hanging from the same string. They formed up around Thandur, not randomly, but like a protective barrier. A wall of contorted bodies that simultaneously growled and trembled.

Borin raised his hand. He wanted to speak — wanted to reach Thandur before it was too late.

But Thandur was faster.

With a movement that should have been impossible, he shot forward. He was no longer bound by the weight of the dwarven body. His limbs had become something else, something lighter, yet more dangerous. His legs bent with a crunching sound, as if made of flexible sheets of ore, and he leaped over his own creatures, straight toward Borin.

Borin raised his arm, his runic heart pulsing. A gold-violet shield blazed up—not of metal, but of pure essence. Fire and shadow merged into a shimmering wall that caught Thandur's blow.

The impact shook Borin's entire body.

Thandiger's arm crashed like a storm hammer. Golden sparks flew. Violet lines stretched across the shield, trembling like living veins.

Borin was thrown back several steps, his shield warped, but he held firm. For now.

Thandur landed catlike in front of him, his body swaying as if torn apart by an inner struggle. His voice was a burst pipe of pain and anger.

"Why... did YOU get what I was denied?!"

Borin straightened up. "Because I was prepared to bear both sides—not just the light!"

Thandur snarled like a wild animal, but his eyes trembled. For a moment, Borin saw clarity in them. For a heartbeat.

"I... didn't want to fall... Borin..." The words came out brittle, as if his throat were made of stone.

"Then get up again!" Borin shouted, loudly, powerfully. "The Titan didn't reject you—you chose this path alone, before you were ready!"

Thandur screamed again — this time not in anger, but in hurt. The creatures screamed with him.

And they stormed.

Borin turned, his hammer swinging through the air, glowing like a fragment of a star. He didn't want to kill—he wanted to hinder. He wanted to push them back until Thandur could reach him.

But this brood was different. Every blow Borin delivered wasn't simply cushioned—the opponent absorbed a portion of it. The purple lines in their bodies flared when Borin's hammer struck, and the creatures let out cries that were simultaneously pain and rapture.

They fed on the burden. On the resonance of the shadow.

*"They are parts of me,"* whispered the shadow in Borin's chest.  
*"Trapped... distorted... bound to Thandur's inner turmoil."*

"How many?" Borin gasped as he pushed back two creatures at once.

The shadow fragment within him answered hesitantly.

*"Everyone he touched."*

Borin looked at Thandur, who stood breathing heavily behind his own creatures, his hands clenched in the rock as if desperately grasping at something that was simultaneously destroying him.

"Thandur!" Borin shouted. "This isn't you! You can end this!"

"Can I?" Thandur slowly raised his head. His eyes burned like glowing coals. "Can I, Borin? The Titan cast me out! Because I loved! Because I believed! Because I wanted too much!"

Borin shook his head, his runes flickering. "He didn't reject you. He protected you. From the pain you couldn't bear."

Thandur laughed. A hollow, broken laugh.

"And you think you can carry it?! You?!"

"No," said Borin. His voice was calm. Clear. Unwavering.

"I am not carrying it alone."

The gold-violet shield flickered around him. Not stronger — but more stable.

*"I carry him with me."*

Thandur flinched as if the word had hit him like a hammer.

The creatures paused.

The halls fell silent.

And Borin took a step towards Thandur.

Not as an enemy. Not as a warrior. But as a mirror.

"Let me show you," said Borin calmly. "Let's go back together."

Thandur trembled. His flesh, his stone, his spirit — everything tore itself apart.

"I... can't..." he whispered.

"Yes," said Borin, raising his hand. "You don't have to be alone."

The shadow shimmered in Borin. Delicate. Gentle.

Thandur stared at him —and for the first time in centuries, Borin did not see hatred in his eyes.

But fear. And hope.

But just as Thandur was about to take a step forward, the earth began to shake.

A deep, ancient rumble filled the Upper Halls.

The Deepbrood screamed. Thandur screamed. And Borin felt it immediately:

Something greater had awakened.

Something that wanted to prevent reunification.

The tremor raced through the Upper Halls like a shockwave. It was not the quiver of a yielding rock, not the growl of a collapsing wall. It was a deep, pulsating sound—the sound of a being raising its gaze. The mountain itself seemed to be listening. The stone vibrated in a rhythm that overlaid Borin's heart, as if a strange, ancient pulse were trying to displace its own.

Thandur spun around, his purple lines flickering in short, panicky intervals. "No. Not now. Not NOW!"

Borin immediately understood that Thandur wasn't reacting to him, but to something awakening behind the stone.

The Deepbrood fell to their knees, their contorted bodies pressed against the ground. They did not whimper. They did not roar. They cowered as if under an inescapable weight that bent their spines to the point of breaking.

The shadow in Borin grew cold.

*"He... is moving."*

"Who?" gasped Borin.

The answer came from within him. Quietly. Awestruck. And deeply frightened.

*"The part of him that should never sleep."*

A second tremor followed. Harder. Closer.



Rune fragments fell from the ceilings above them. The pillars swayed. The flames in the niches flickered in the same rhythm as the throbbing that filled the stone.

Borin looked up. Where the passage led into the great columned hall, a violet-gold shimmer crept out. Not like light. Not like flame.

It was consciousness. A twisted, half-awakened, pain-distorted consciousness.

"The Titan...?" Borin whispered.

The shadow within him answered immediately:

*"No. Not him."*

*His pain.*

*His throw.*

*The part he buried deepest... and which is now waking up because you want to unite us."*

Thandur screamed and grabbed his head. "IT'S YOUR FAULT, BORIN! YOU'RE GETTING HIM TOO CLOSE!"

"Who?!" Borin shouted.

But the answer did not come from Thandur. Not from the shadow. Not from the mountain.

It came from the stone itself.

A sound that was both a word and a feeling.

*"The initial waste."*

Borin stepped back. He didn't know the term — but the shadow inside him flinched, like a wounded animal recognizing its tormentor.

*"No... no... he mustn't wake up..."*

"Tell me what he is!" Borin blurted out the words.

The shadow answered hesitantly, fragilely, as if it had to dig through epochs of silence:

*"The first pain."*

*The first loss.*

*The first form the Titan shed when the stone giantess died.*

The first waste. The very first brood. The root of all shadows.

Not a being. Not a creature. A primal impulse. An instinctual, untamed fragment that the Titan had once torn from himself to avoid succumbing to madness.

And it awoke.

The stone trembled again. This time several columns splintered. Stone slabs broke free from the walls and crashed to the ground.

"Borin!" Thandur screamed, his voice filled with panic. "When the First Fall awakens, it will devour EVERYTHING—the shadow, the fire, you, me, the entire mountain! HE IS UNCONSCIOUS. HE IS PURE PAIN!"

Borin thrust his hammer forward, even though he knew weapons would mean little here. Inside his chest, fire, shadows, and his primal form raged against each other, as if they knew what was coming.

The violet-gold shimmer in the corridor intensified. It began to take on forms—not as a body, but as a pulsating mass. A wave of emotion. A room-filling essence.

Thandu gasped. "We have to leave. We have to AWAY!"

But Borin stopped. "I... feel it calling me."

"IT CALLS ALL THAT SUFFERS!" Thandur roared. "And it WILL take you!"

The Deepbrood began to rise. Not like creatures—but like objects being pulled up by an invisible force. Their bodies jerked at rhythmic intervals, in the same pace as the First Fall approached.

"He binds them..." Borin whispered.

The shadow within him flickered desperately.

*"He binds everything."  
Because he should never have existed."*

The passage opened up. Stone crumbled like sand. A dazzling, golden-violet vortex of pulsating pain erupted and raced into the hall.

Thandur fell to the ground. The brood collapsed instantly. Borin was hit.

Not physical. Mental.

The first debris touched him—and Borin saw EVERYTHING.

He saw the Titan fall, the stone giantess shatter, the embers go out, the rage, the grief, the endless trembling.

He saw the first shadow born from that pain. Formless. Burning. Screaming.

And now this primal scream stretched out a hand — of light and darkness at once — and reached for Borin's heart.

It wanted him. It needed him. It had to devour him to become whole.

Borin gasped. "No... I am not your vessel..."

But the initial drop penetrated deeper.

*"You...  
are...  
Brother..."*

Borin roared—and the entire mountain trembled with him.

The initial fall penetrated deeper into Borin's consciousness, not like a voice, not like a thought, but like a primal sound that had screamed through the millennia and now sought an echo within him. An echo he should never have found. The golden-violet vortex of pain and memory tore Borin's perception apart and reshaped it, while the floor beneath his feet transformed from a real hall-like slab into a vibrating mist, pulsating to the rhythm of the titan's pain.

For a moment, he lost all sense of orientation. There was no up, no down—only the pull. The pull of a being that should never have been a being.

Then he landed in something that was neither a chamber nor a room. He stood at the heart of a gigantic vortex of light threads, memories, shattered thoughts, and seething darkness. It was as if he had stepped into the very wound of the Titan, the place where pain had been born and never treated.

The initial waste was not visible as a form. It was everywhere. A throbbing, vibrating, screaming something.

But suddenly something crystallized before Borin. A figure emerged from the whirlpool, as if the being wanted to understand him by imitating him. A dwarf? A dwarf's shadow. A distorted silhouette with gold and violet lines that didn't glow on the skin, but dragged through the air like burning runic threads.

The shadow dwarf stretched out a hand. His fingers were made of light—and pain. When Borin looked, he realized that this hand was cracked, like shattered glass, vibrating within itself.

"You are..." Borin wanted to say the word. But it wouldn't come out.

Because the initial fallout spoke.

Not loudly. Not in words. In a single, devastating emotion.

*"I am the first cry."*

Borin staggered backward. His runic heart glowed intensely, as if trying to stabilize him. The shadow within him twitched in panic, pressing itself against Borin's consciousness to gain distance, but the primal form held it firmly in place.

Borin struggled for words. "Why... are you looking for me?"

The figure drew closer. The golden veins within it pulsed in the same rhythm as Borin's heart.

*"Because you bear the wound."*

The Titan...The Shadow...The Original Form...Borin realized that he was now truly a focal point.

"I carry them," Borin said, breathing heavily. "But I am not your cure."

The figure twitched. Not threateningly — desperately.

*"You are the one who did not break."*

Borin understood. The first debris sought a vessel because the Titan had never fully released it. It was a part that never found a new home. A fragment that was never contained. A pain that never found a form—until now.

"I can't carry you," Borin whispered. "I'll perish if I try."

The figure contorted. It staggered. It stretched out both hands as if it wanted to embrace Borin.

*"You must... or I'll find... another one."*

The words struck Borin deep in the heart. It wasn't just about him—it was about the mountain, the heirs, the halls, Thandur, the Deepbrood. The Firstborn wouldn't be selective. They would seize anything sufficiently wounded. And every dwarf bore a wound. A different one, hidden, inherited, ancient.

"I won't allow that," Borin growled. "I won't allow you to devour what the Titan protected!"

The figure lowered its head as if hearing something. Then it flickered. Gold. Violet. Pure white.

Borin realized that the initial reluctance did not stem from malice.

But from isolation.

He was what remained when creation and loss collided—without guidance, without meaning, without purpose. An instinct that cried out for completeness.

The figure formed a final word — this time clearly.

"Help me."

Borin trembled. He wanted to help. But this thing was too big, too old, too pure in pain.

"I cannot take you inside me," said Borin. "You would tear me apart."

The figure replied:

"Then give me... a place."

And Borin understood. The First Waste didn't want to go into a heart. It wanted to return to Titan. To where it had once originated. To where it belonged.

But the Titan would die if it returned unbound and uncontrolled.

Borin had to find a way to tame this primal force. Not within himself. Not within the Titan. But through the original form.

He grasped his chest. The rune glowed.

The initial drop reacted instantly. It screamed—silently, but powerfully. And the entire hall, the entire vision, the entire vortex collapsed in on itself.

Borin fell.

He plunged through light, through shadows, through memories.

And landed gasping back in the real hall. Thandur was hunched over him. The Deepbrood lay trembling on the floor. And the First Waste—now visible as a golden-violet, pulsating mass—crawled through the halls, searching for a body, a spirit, a vessel.

"BORIIIIIN!" Thandur screamed. "HE'S LOOKING FOR ME! I CAN'T STAND HIM AGAIN!"

Borin got to his feet. The primal form in his chest glowed like a star made of stone.

"No, Thandur," said Borin. "He's looking for both of us."

Thandur froze.

And Borin knew: The next step would decide whether the Titan would be healed — or whether the mountain would die.

## The Ring of the Smith Fathers

The path to the Forge Fathers was no ordinary passage, no tunnel of hewn stone, nor one of the vast halls where dwarven hammers had made the air tremble for centuries. It was a circular route—ancient, secret, protected by runes so deeply embedded in the stone that no ordinary dwarf would ever have noticed them. Borin sensed it not with his eyes, but with his rune-heart. The primal form within his chest glowed a little brighter, as if recognizing an old friend. A friend who had never forgotten, but had waited in silence all along.

Thandur staggered beside him, beset by his own being, marked by the proximity of the First Fall, which crept through the Upper Halls like a living pain. His violet-glowing veins pulsed restlessly, and at times it seemed as if his limbs were rebelling against him from within. Borin had to grasp Thandur's arm to keep him upright.

"We have to move on," Borin growled.

Thandur laughed tonelessly, a hoarse sound that resembled a shattering stone more than a dwarven voice. "To the Ring of the Smithfathers? You... you really think they'd receive us? Me?"

"They called me," Borin replied.

"You," Thandur repeated bitterly. "Not me. Never me."

"Perhaps," said Borin calmly, "because they know you wouldn't come without me."

Thandur stared at him. A look torn between anger, fear, and the last vestige of a dwarf's heart.

They came to a point where the passage ended. To any normal eye, it appeared to be a smooth rock wall—no door, no opening. But when Borin reached out his hand, the wall began to glow. Not from his fire. Not from the shadow.

But through the original form.

Golden lines appeared on the surface, slowly, circling, like glowing marks of an anvil hammer that had never cooled. The stone began to rotate—an entire section of wall moved like the wheel of an ancient castle.

"They know you've come," Thandur murmured, and there was a shadow of respect in his voice.

The door — if you could call it that — opened in a circular arc.

And behind it lay the ring.

A vast hall, circular, so wide that Borin could barely see the opposite edge. The ceiling was a colossal dome, its inner pattern composed of intertwined runes—ancient runes, older than any clan, older than the first kings, perhaps even older than the Stone Giantess. The air vibrated with heat, but it wasn't a painful heat. It was the warmth of a smoldering furnace just before it was lit.

In the middle of the hall stood the ring of the blacksmith fathers.

Nine enormous anvils, each as large as a house, forged from a single stone that glowed brighter than any lava. Broad stone arches ran between them, their runes carved deep into the surface. And on each anvil stood a figure.

No dwarves of flesh. Nor statues. They were figures of runes. Luminous images, composed of light and memory, of the nine greatest smiths who had ever lived—the founders of the Runesteel Covenant. In death, they had not dissolved, but placed their essence within the stone to watch over it until the mountain found an heir worthy of them.

They both turned to Borin at the same time.

And the stone beneath his feet burned. Not hot. But intensely.

A voice filled the hall. Deep. Multi-layered. Like nine voices at once.

"Borin Stonewalker. Bearer of the primal form. Bound by fire and shadow. You have come."

Borin took a step forward. The ring vibrated. The runes ignited one after the other, like sparks of stars in a giant machine.

But Thandur buckled, and the purple glow in his veins twitched wildly, as if the ring were repelling him.

"They repel me..." he gasped. "They smell my... flaw."

A second anvil raised its voice. A little more sternly. A little harder.

"Not your flaw. But the hand that touched you."

Thandur froze.

"The First Fall has left its mark on you," said the third voice. "No one marked by it may enter the Ring unbound."

Borin pressed the hammer handle more firmly against the ground.

"Then tie him up," said Borin. "He is not my enemy."

The blacksmith fathers did not reply immediately.

The air in the hall became tense. The stone vibrated. And in the center of the ring, a golden fire blazed.

The first drop approached — creeping, like a shapeless mass of pain and light, filling the halls and trying to reach the ring.

"You must help us!" cried Borin. "He wants to go home—but if he does so without being bound, he will destroy the Titan!"

The blacksmith fathers looked at Borin. Then they looked at Thandur. Then at the growing mass of titanic pain.

The first voice spoke:

"Then we must now do something that hasn't been done for eons."

A second person said: "Something even the stone giantess didn't dare."

A third said: "We need to shape the initial waste."

Thandur gasped. "YOU WANT TO FORGE HIM?! A SHADOW OF PRIMAL PAIN?!"

The blacksmith fathers answered together:

"Yes."

Borin felt his runes flare up. The original form burned like a star.

"Borin Stonewalker," cried the ring. "You will be the hammer."

The anvils trembled. The runes on the floor glowed. Thandur screamed. The First Fallen shrieked. And Borin stepped into the center of the ring.

For now began the forging process that no dwarf had ever seen.

A forging of pain, embers, and creation.

A forge that would heal — or kill — the Titan.

The ground at the center of the ring vibrated beneath Borin's boots as the nine anvils simultaneously ignited. The golden fire that rose from its core was no ordinary flame. It was the very essence of the Titan, condensed into a light that did not burn, but shaped. Each spark leaping from the flame carried a memory, a thought, a pain, and a hope. Borin felt the primal form within his chest respond to the light—like a blacksmith's hammer striking the anvil for the first time.

Thandur looked as if the light were tearing him apart. His body arched backward, the violet lines twitching like flashing veins of broken glass. "I... can't... I can't stand it..." His voice was strained, an echo of what he once was. Borin reached out and grabbed his forearm.

"Stop!" Borin yelled. "Do you hear me? Stop!"

Thandur growled and screamed, yet he dug his feet into the ground as if Borin's grip would give him the only memory he still possessed.

An anvil spoke: "The first fall is approaching faster. We must begin."

The golden-violet vortex of pain that filled the halls had now almost reached the ring. It pulsed like a heart without a body, like a breath without lungs.

"Bin the room," commanded the first voice.

The blacksmith fathers struck the anvils simultaneously with their rune-shaped hammers. The blows were silent—and yet the entire ring trembled. Golden runes shot from the anvils, high into the vaulted ceiling, where they intertwined to form a gigantic, circular network. A cage of light and stone, closing around Borin, Thandur, and the First Waste.

"The ring is set," came the second voice. "There is no escape now."

Borin rumbled deeply. "I don't want to escape."

Thandur gritted his teeth. "The light... it burns like the past."

"You will have to feel them again," Borin said. "If you want healing."

Thandur stared at him, and for a moment Borin saw again the dwarf that Thandur had once been — brave, proud, unbroken, unwrought.



But then a scream broke through the air.

The initial drop reached the ring.

Not as a form. Not as a being. But as a flood of pure, raw essence. He plunged into the ring like a torrent of light hurled from the heart of a dying star. The ground beneath Borin pulsed, the stone itself trembled, and the primal form within his chest burned like a second sunrise.

Thandur fell to his knees, pressing his hands to his chest. "He... is looking for... me..."

"No," said Borin. "He's looking for both of us."

The blacksmith fathers spoke in unison:

"Borin Stonewalker. Hold the initial waste. Guide it into the shape. Become the hammer."

Then Borin saw something break away from the golden fire in the center of the ring.

A hammer. Not an ordinary blacksmith's hammer, but a symbol older than any written rune—a hammer of pure light, pure will, forged from the heart fire of the Titan. It hovered in the air, waiting.

Borin stretched out his hand—and the hammer flew into his fist.

It didn't feel heavy. But its significance made his bones clench.

The first drop screamed. The light flickered. The ring trembled.

"Borin!" Thandur roared, his arms folded in front of him. "He's coming—HE'S COMING!"

And then it happened.

The initial fallout crashed onto Borin.

Not as an attack. As a fusion. As desperate hope. As ancient pain that finally wanted to be contained.

The light body struck Borin with such force that it almost threw him out of the ring—but the ring wouldn't let him escape. The primal form within his chest tore open. Fire and shadows ripped through his body. His mind was flooded.

He heard no words. He only heard a roar that was thousands of years old.

*"HOLD ME!"*

Borin raised the hammer. Golden light flooded the hall. The first drop screamed. The ring creaked.

And the forging process began.

Here. Now. With Borin as the hammer —Thandur as the anvil —and the first waste as glowing, ancient steel.

The initial fall hit Borin like a storm of light and fractured pain. For a breath, the world was nothing but a single, burning vortex—a maelstrom of memories, loss, titanic tremors, and raw horror. Borin felt himself simultaneously forced to his knees and lifted into the air, fire and shadow flaring in his veins, colliding and intertwining.

The hammer in his hand burned. Not hot—but absolutely. It was more than a tool. It was will, condensed into form. It was the Titan's thought before it became fire.

Thandur screamed behind him as if his soul were being ripped from his body. His violet-glowing runes twitched uncontrollably, his distorted form writhing against the light that simultaneously attracted and repelled him. The First Fallen did not want Borin alone—he wanted Thandur, the broken dwarf who had once stood too close to the titanic fire.

"HOLD HIM!" roared one of the blacksmith fathers.

"I'M HOLDING!" Borin shouted back, but his voice was lost in the thunder of the ring.

The initial shock was everywhere. In his head. In his chest. In his breath. It wasn't a body. It was emotion that had outlived time. Pure pain. Pure longing. Pure fragmentation.

*"Touch... me..."*

The voice came from Borin's instantly shaken core.

"No," Borin gasped. "Not inside me."

He felt the primal form in his chest. It glowed brighter than ever before. A third pulse. A third will.

"You don't get inside me," Borin repeated. "You get into the form."

The hammer jerked his arm forward as if it had a mind of its own. Borin was leading it—or being led. He no longer knew. He didn't strike.

He led the operation.

The first blow fell like the beginning of any work: directly on the heart of the unformed.

The initial drop shrieked. No anger. No hatred. Just — finally — form.

The ring trembled. Golden light shot into the dome. Violet sparks flew in all directions. The anvils blazed.

"ONWARDS!" thundered the blacksmith fathers.

Borin drew back his arm again. The hammer sang. A sound that split the air and banished the shadows.

Second blow. The first debris shuddered like glowing metal trembling beneath the chisel. Its formless threads contracted, thickened, twisted. Borin felt the resistance—the resistance of a scream that for millennia had known no bounds.

The shadow within Borin wanted to flee. The fire wanted to fight. The primal form forced both into a calm, unwavering pulse.

"Once more!" cried the first anvil.

The third blow fell.

This time he didn't just hit the First Fallen — he also hit Thandur. The broken dwarf was gripped like a living anvil beneath Borin's blow, and the purple embers of his wounds flared as they collided with the First Fallen's titanic pain.

Thandur screamed. The First Waste screamed. Borin screamed.

And the ring of the blacksmith fathers echoed back — a single, colossal echo.

The initial debris contracted, forming a core. A spherical, glowing mass of gold and violet—not chaos. Not rage. Pure pain, finally contained.

The blacksmith fathers called out together:

"FORM!"

Borin took a deep breath. Stop. Heart. Hammer.

He struck a fourth time.

The ring exploded in light. The dome burned like a star. The anvils sang. Thandur tipped backward. And Borin felt the initial fall finally give way—not destroyed, but guided.

A fifth blow fell—not from Borin, but from the hammer itself.

The titanic essence burst—and reformed itself.

As the light subsided, the initial fall was no longer a whirlpool—but a glowing, clear core. A heart. A heart of light and shadow. A heart that breathed.

The blacksmith fathers spoke with deep reverence:

"This is the form. The initial waste is now bound."

Borin gasped. The hammer glowed in his hand. His body trembled.

And Thandur lay motionless on the ground. A spark of life—barely visible.

The core now hovered above the center of the ring, waiting. Breathless. Bursting with meaning.

Borin knew: Now came the final step.

That's what he had to do—before the mountain died.

The Ring of the Forge Fathers was filled with a stillness heavier than any thunder. The anvil lights burned dimly, the golden runic lines slowly retreated into the depths of the stone, as if fulfilling their purpose. The hall's dome glowed like a burnt-out star, its heat no longer destructive, but cautionary. In the center of the ring hovered the bound first waste—no longer chaos, no longer a furious, formless tremor, but a clear core of powerful calm, pulsating in golden and violet intervals.

Borin stood before him, breathing heavily. The hammer of titanic light hung wearily in his fist, the tool and the will with which he had forged something no one before him had dared to attempt. His runes twitched weakly, as if each were an extinguished ember, burning only by a final spark. His body trembled—not from weakness, but from exhaustion.

Behind him lay Thandur. Motionless. Yet alive.

A thin, violet-gold shimmer pulsed in his chest, like a tentative echo of what he had once attempted—and failed at. The forging had not destroyed him. It had shared his brokenness with the bound First Waste, as if there were now a narrow path back, a path only he and Borin could share.

“Borin Stonewalker,” spoke the first of the blacksmith fathers’ voices, softly but urgently. “The work is done.”

“Not yet,” Borin murmured. His voice was rough, his chest throbbing in the three-beat rhythm of the new heart within him. “The core must be brought home.”

The anvil figures gazed at each other. A glow passed over their rune-shaped bodies — a mixture of awe and concern.

"The way down is open," said the second voice. "But it is unstable."

“The Titan senses what you have done,” added a third. “His consciousness is in flux. The mountain is vibrating.”

No sooner had the words been spoken than a deep tremor tore through the hall. Dust trickled from the dome. Stone lines creaked. One of the anvils growled hoarsely—not from pain, but in reaction to the shaking.

Thandur opened his eyes.

A weak, hoarse breathing sound. A scratching sound like dry stone.

“Borin...” His voice was barely more than a whisper. “I... I felt him...”

Borin knelt beside him. "You have not fallen, Thandur. You are still standing."

Thandur laughed bitterly. "Stand...? I'm broken."

“Then we both stand broken,” said Borin, “and yet we stand.”

The gaze of the once-fallen man slid to the floating essence of the bound first waste. Thandu's pupils trembled. In them lay a mixture of fear, recognition, and a spark of dwarfism.

"What... is he now?"

Borin slowly lowered himself to his knees, supporting the titanic hammer. "It is the first pain," he said. "But it is bound. Shaped. It is no longer a burden—it is a part."

Thandur sighed. "And where... are you taking him?"

Borin looked towards the passage that led into the depths. A passage no dwarf had entered for eons — the path to the Titan's slumbering consciousness.

Borin knew there would be no return without this step. And no healing of the mountain.

"I'm taking him home."

The core reacted to the words. It floated closer to Borin, as if recognizing him, as if its pulse were adjusting to him. The primal form in Borin's chest responded with a calm, clear beat.

One of the blacksmith fathers said: "We can pave the way for you. Nothing more."

Another said: "The decision now rests with you — and with the Titan."

The third Rune Father lowered his voice. "And by the one you carry with you."

Borin knew what that meant. The Titan would not only take back the First Fall. He would also sense Thandur. And judge him—or forgive him.

Borin stood up. Heavily. But resolutely.

He reached out his hand to Thandur. "Come. You belong on this path."

Thandur hesitated. Then he reached out — and Borin raised him.

Together they stepped to the edge of the ring.

The bound primary waste floated between them, pulsating, listening.

The blacksmith fathers spoke their last sentence:

"Go. The mountain is waiting."

Borin took the first step into the depths. Thandur followed, trembling.

And the core of the titanic pain slid ahead of them like a second sun.

The road back to becoming a titan had begun.

And nothing that was still alive in the mountain would remain untouched.

## The Canyon of the Walking Shadows

The descent began where the Ring of the Forge Fathers ended: at a narrow ramp of starlit stone, its edges glowing faintly like the traces of bygone forge fires. Borin sensed at once that this path was older than the anvils, older than the runic lines of the Halls, and possibly older than the first Guardians themselves. Here, the stone was not worked—it was shaped. By the Titan, in a time before dwarves or Halls or kingdoms existed.

The bound waste material floated before them like a slowly pulsating star. The golden-violet core didn't flow in a straight line, but in movements reminiscent of breaths: forward, back, silently curved inwards, then wide and bright again. It guided the way as if it could still sense the memory of the Titan's paths. Borin knew this was true.

Thandur leaned heavily on Borin's shoulder. His steps were labored, as if invisible chains bound his limbs. The purple lines on his skin glowed faintly, no longer wild, no longer distorted—but not calm either. He was like an anvil, bearing cracks yet to be smoothed.

"The air... is different," murmured Thandur. He was right.

The passage that opened onto the gorge was filled with a strange silence. Not the heavy stillness of the deepest chambers. Not the tense silence of the upper halls. It was a breathing, watchful silence. As if something awoke with every step.

Borin nodded. "We are entering a place that even the blacksmith fathers feared."

The shadow within him answered softly, hesitantly.

*"This was the place where I once... sculpted."*

Borin stopped. "You... have you shaped something here?"

*"Not desired," whispered the inner voice.*

*"Never wanted."*

They stepped out of the corridor.

Before them lay the Gorge of the Walking Shadows.

A vast, gaping crevice, so deep that even Borin's sharpest vision sank into the darkness below. The rock wasn't smooth. It was riddled with cracks, folds, and lines that crisscrossed the stone like enormous scars. As if someone had tried to tear the mountain itself apart—and had almost succeeded.

But the most impressive thing was not the depth of the gorge.

It was the shadows within it.

They wandered.

They moved. Glided. Swam through the rock like smoke in a closed room.

They had no form. Some resembled hands. Others faces. Some old memories or lost hopes. But they were never quite what they looked like.

They were the pain that had not been bound. The remnants of the early titanic split.

Thandur almost collapsed when he saw her. "By all the gods... I... hear her."

Borin heard them too.

Not with the ears. With the soul.

*"Come..."*

*"Come back..."*

*"Who we were..."*

*"Who we are no longer allowed to be..."*

The bound primary waste reacted sharply. It pulsed like a heart encountering an old stimulus. Gold glowed. Violet writhed like pain.

The shadow in Borin grew restless. Almost fearful.

*"They are parts of me... little splinters... lost thoughts..."*

"What do they want?" Borin asked.

The answer came immediately, clearer than before.

*"They want to go back."*

*They want wholeness.*

*They want... you.*

Borin felt the blow in his chest. The triad. Primal form. Fire. Shadow.

"They won't get me," Borin said slowly.

But Thandur wavered. "They... are calling my name."

Borin grabbed him. "They are not calling you, Thandur. They are calling every wound that has ever remained open. And you have many."

Thandur gritted his teeth. "Then... we must continue."

"Yes," said Borin. "But we don't do it blindly. The gorge demands a price."

He stepped to the edge. The stone beneath him vibrated slightly, as if sensing Borin's bond. The bound first-fall descended slowly, as if to show them the way.

The blacksmith fathers had been right:

The Titan could now sense her.

And this ravine was the breath of his oldest pain.

Borin clenched his fists. "Hold on to me. We're going down."

"On foot?" Thandur asked incredulously.

"No," said Borin. "Through the shadow."

The wandering silhouettes stirred – as if they had been waiting for just that.

And the decline began.

The descent didn't begin with a step, but with a letting go. Borin felt the wandering shadows react to him even before he set foot over the edge. They contracted, stretched out, as if wanting to touch him. Some scurried back like frightened animals, others approached cautiously, as if recognizing a long-lost part of themselves. The gorge was not a place to simply enter. The rock itself demanded attention, respect—and sometimes an offering of memory.

The bound first waste floated before them, slowly sinking into the depths. Its golden-violet light was the only clear guide. The shadows in the gorge reacted to it like flies to flickering fire—some attracted, some recoiling. Thandur clung to Borin, his legs trembling with every step. His runes flickered faintly, but at least they burned. A sign that he wasn't completely lost.

"I can hear them more clearly," he whispered. "They... are speaking to me."

Borin stared into the blackness below. The shadows moved like currents of an invisible river. Some changed shape, becoming back-bending creatures, undulating bodies, faces full of longing or terror—but never completely. Only hints. Fragments.

"Don't speak back," Borin warned. His voice was quiet but firm. "They are not beings. They are feelings seeking a voice."

Thandur nodded, his lips pressed tightly together, but his gaze betrayed fear. He had known these voices for centuries—they had broken him. Now he heard them again, but their sound was different. Less wild. Less angry.

More pleadingly.

*"Thandur..."*

*"Stay..."*

*"We know you..."*

*"Come home..."*

The shadows crept closer, gliding along the rock faces, some detaching themselves like dark smoke and approaching them directly. Borin raised the hammer, not to strike—but as a



warning. The hammer of titanic light burned softly in his hand, and the shadows immediately retreated, as if sensing an old pain.

The primal form in Borin's chest beat slightly faster. The shadow within him became restless.

*"They... can smell us,"* whispered the inner voice.

"What do they smell?" Borin whispered back.

*"Completion. They realize that we carry the core. They believe that we could bring it back."*

"Back to where?"

A long silence. Then:

*"Back inside him."*

Borin stopped. Thandur almost tripped over him.

"If they all return..." Thandur paused. "What will happen then?"

Borin looked into the depths of the gorge. He understood now.

The wandering shadows were not like the initial debris. Not born of the same, pure pain. They were smaller cracks. Small splinters. Each a remnant of the titanic despair that had seeped from consciousness centuries ago.

If all these fragments were brought back into the Titan — without form, without bonding —

"He would die from it," Borin said. "He couldn't bear her pain. Nobody could."

Thandur clung to the rock. "Then they must never touch us."

"Yes," Borin said quietly. "But in an orderly way. Bound. Like the core."

The first debris, which was floating further ahead, reacted to these words. Its light briefly contracted—as if it knew what Borin was planning.

Borin took another step. Then another. The descent was steep, but not impossible. A narrow path spiraled downwards, and the wandering shadows moved like waves along its sides.

But eventually the path ended. It led into an open ledge that jutted directly into the blackness of the gorge. Below them was a moving mass of shadows, flowing like liquid smoke between the rock walls.

And down there, in the middle of the gorge, Borin saw something.

Something large. Something still. Something that looked like a heart made of black stone.

It beat. Slowly. Heavily. Each beat was a cry. A pull. A helpless command.

"This is..." Thandur gasped. "The heart... of the gorge...?"

The shadow in Borin responded immediately:

*"No.*

*That is the crack through which we fell.*

Borin shivered. "The Titan's Rift."

The core hovered above the heart of the gorge, shining brighter than before.

The shadows reacted. They turned towards him. Hundreds. Thousands. A sea of yearning voices, recognizing a lost part.

"Borin..." Thandur grabbed his shoulder. "What do you want to do?"

Borin looked into the depths.

He knew it.

"We're going into the crack."

Thandur looked at him, horrified. "This is madness!"

"No," said Borin calmly. "This is the way."

The hammer was glowing.

The core was burning.

And the shadows waited.

The ledge hung like a tongue of stone over the endless darkness of the canyon. Borin felt the rock stretch beneath his boots as if it were alive, as if it were a muscle of the titan, no longer knowing whether to contract or relax. The bound first scree sloped only a few steps away, a point of light in the seething sea of shadows below. Thandur seemed as if he might lose his footing at any moment, not only outwardly but also inwardly—as if the canyon were tugging at his soul with every breath.

"We have to go down," Borin said quietly. But the words sounded louder in the gorge, as if they carried weight.

Thandur swallowed hard. "What? There's no way out now."

Borin turned the hammer, and the titanic light illuminated the blackness surging before them. The shadows moved like streams, layered one upon the other—some leisurely, some furiously fast. They avoided the core, but they did not fear it. They knew it.

The shadow in Borin whispered:

*"We will not fall."  
We are gliding.*

"Glide?" Thandur snorted. "On what?"

"On them," said Borin.

The precipice below them was no mere rock. Shadows woven themselves there like intertwined threads, a river of titanic fragments, remnants of feelings that would never find words again. They were heavy—heavy like memories that cannot be shaken off. And yet they could bear weight. Powerful enough to stop a dwarf. Fluid enough to swallow him whole.

Borin grabbed Thandur's arm. "Hold on to me. No matter what happens."

Thandur's voice trembled. "I... feel that they want me."

"Then don't shake their hand," said Borin. "Instead, give them your fear—only the fear. Nothing of yourself."

Thandur trembled. "I gave it my all back then."

"Not anymore."

Borin stepped forward. The stone ended. The shadows began.

The surface beneath Borin's boots felt like thick fog, suddenly solidifying—then yielding again before taut once more. It was like walking on grief unsure whether to be solid or fluid. The bound primary scree continued to descend, and the shadows yielded to its light, opening onto a path that was never truly a path, but a temporary compromise.

Thandur cried out briefly as his foot touched the shadow. "He's... pulling on me!"

Borin pressed his fist into Thandur's upper arm. "Focus on my step! Not yours!"

He led. Thandur followed.

The descent wasn't like taking a step on a path—more like sliding along a current. The shadows carried her, but at the same time, they wanted to grasp her, to wrap her in memories that weren't hers. Whispering, enticing, demanding.

*"We knew you..."  
"You called us brother..."  
"You loved the pain..."*

Thandur tensed up. "You... are lying. Aren't you?"

Borin felt the primal form beating. "They are not lying. But they are remembering incorrectly."

The shadows suddenly formed a face—large, distorted, with eyes like open wounds. It looked at Thandur. And smiled.

Thandur screamed.

Borin immediately stood between him and the shadow. The hammer glowed, and the face shattered like smoke in the wind.

“They carry only splinters, not the truth,” said Borin, holding Thandur by the shoulder. “And splinters... can be knocked away.”

The gorge narrowed.

The fissure—the black heart of the canyon—was drawing near. It throbbed, a vibrating opening in the stone, as large as the gate of a royal fortress. Each pulsation sent shockwaves through the shadows, which then lost and regained their shape. They were neither foe nor friend—they simply were.

And they waited.

As Borin stepped onto the last shadow path, he looked into the depths of the rift.

Gold and violet glowed within him. An echo of the Titan. An echo of what was missing.

The bound initial debris floated in front of the crack. His pulse was restless—expectant. Returning home.

Thandur gasped: “This... is the way to the heart?”

“Yes,” said Borin. “And we’re going in.”

The shadows withdrew like parted curtains. The walls trembled. The Titan knew they were coming.

Borin felt it. Thandur felt it. The core felt it.

And the gorge closed behind them like a long-missed breath.

The entry into the crack began.

The fissure wasn't a gateway in the conventional sense. It was a pulse, a breath, a space that opened not outward, but inward. As Borin crossed the threshold, he felt no resistance—only a gentle, almost curious tug, like a child's hand pulling at a sleeve. The bound first slope slid ahead, its golden-violet glow growing stronger, denser, more concentrated within the fissure. Thandur followed closely behind Borin, his steps wavering but not hesitant. He knew there was no turning back. Not for him. Not for the mountain.

The air in the fissure was heavy, but not suffocating. It didn't smell of dust or metal, but of something Borin could barely grasp: the scent of memory. Of something that had once been and had not yet returned. A feeling that crept deep beneath the skin and was strangely familiar at the same time. The fissure was alive—but not like the mountain. It was a space between will and wound.

The deeper they penetrated, the less the boundary between light and darkness existed. The shadows of the canyon turned into threads of gold, the threads of gold into streaks of violet, and everything contracted in spirals that dissolved again moments later, as if following an inherent rhythm. Borin felt the primal form within his chest beating in the same pulse as his surroundings.

The Titan sensed her.

Thandur groaned softly as his hand slid along a wall that wasn't one—a surface of vibrating light that felt like liquid stone beneath his touch. "He... he sees us," Thandur murmured. "I can feel it in my bones."

"He sees the core," Borin said calmly. "And he sees the pain we carry."

The bound initial debris sank deeper into the crack. And then — abruptly — the space opened up.

It was as if the rift itself were merely a corridor leading into a vast, immeasurable chamber. A chamber not built by dwarven hands, nor formed by natural stone. This chamber existed because the Titan once conceived it. A space that lay within a slumbering consciousness.

Borin stepped inside — and held his breath.

The room didn't look like a hall. It looked like a heart.

Not a pulsating muscle. But a place that carried the sensation of a heart: heavy, warm, full of subdued power. The floor was soft as glowing basalt, yet firm enough to bear weight. Walls didn't exist as solid boundaries, but as mighty, breathing surfaces of light and shadow, constantly shifting. Some lines resembled runes. Others faces. Still others the colossal contours of a titan, hovering somewhere between form and dream.

And there — in the middle — lay a gigantic crack. A fissure as large as a lake, within which pure titanic light pulsed.

That was the wound. The first. The oldest.

The first drop vibrated intensely as it approached. Its light became restless, hungry, anxious, and hopeful all at once.

"He wants to go home," said Borin, and his voice echoed in the room like a thought bigger than himself.

Thandur staggered. "And the Titan...? Does he want him back?"

Borin placed his hand on his chest. The primal form responded with a heavy blow.

"He wants to be healed," said Borin. "But... he is afraid of it."

Because healing meant feeling the wound again.

Borin stepped closer to the edge of the titanic rift. A wave of intense heat hit him. Golden threads grasped at the first debris. Violet lines stretched towards Borin. Shadows contracted.

And a voice — not loud, not quiet, but simply there — filled the room.

*"Are you amazing?"*

Borin froze.

The Titan spoke.

Not as a form. Not as a sound. But as a question. As a test. As recognition.

Borin lifted the blacksmith father's hammer. It glowed brightly like a star in its final stages.

"I'm awesome," said Borin.

The voice answered:

*"And who is the anvil?"*

Borin lowered his gaze towards Thandur.

The broken dwarf stared back — stunned, as if he now understood what was being asked of him.

"I...?" whispered Thandur. "No. I'm too weak. I'm—"

"No," Borin said quietly. "You're the only one."

Thandur trembled. The titanic wound throbbed. The core vibrated with anticipation.

And the voice of the Titan asked for the third and final time:

*"Who binds the pain?"*

Borin replied:

"We — together."

He raised the hammer. The initial slope descended. Thandur stepped to Borin's side.

And the Titan's rift began to open.

## When the mountain held its breath

The moment the Titan received Borin's reply was not a transition—it was a rupture in reality. The titanic wound widened, not like an opened gate, but like a breath taken again after eons. Space tensed. The stone above their heads grew heavier, then lighter, then perfectly still, as if the mountain were actually holding its breath.

Borin felt the primal form begin to vibrate within his chest. Not chaotically. Not desperately. But in harmony with the titanic pulse beneath them. The bound First Debris floated closer to the rift, its golden-violet currents suddenly harmonizing, as if the proximity to the Titan had soothed its inner fractures. Its light was no longer flickering—it was clear, resolute, waiting.

Thandur stood beside Borin, head bowed. His body still trembled, but something in his gaze had changed. Fear was there, yes—but not alone. Determination had joined it. The kind of determination only a dwarf possesses who has reached the lowest point of his life and decides not to die there. The purple runes on his skin glowed at regular intervals, as if they had finally found a rhythm no longer born of madness.

Borin raised the blacksmith father's hammer. The titanic light in the hammerhead reacted instantly—pulsing in the same pattern as the crack. Gold, then violet. Gold, then violet. A heartbeat. A will.

This hall—this living, breathing space—was the Titan's innermost being. The place where his pain was born. But also the only place where he could be healed.

A sound filled the room. It wasn't loud like thunder, not sharp like a crash—it was soft, deep, ancient. A voice that didn't speak, but felt.

*"Hammer.  
Anvil.  
Form."*

Borin took a breath. Thandur raised his head. The initial waste was burning.

And the titanic wound opened completely.

Light emanated from within it, not blinding, but warm. It was a light that carried the Titan's immense power, yet simultaneously revealed a shattering vulnerability. Borin looked through the crack—and recognized something he had only sensed in visions:

A shadow of golden flesh. A titan, collapsed in on itself. A form of existence that was not asleep, but exhausted. Exhausted by millennia of bearing and losing.

The Titan was not dead. But not alive either. He was trapped in a state of pure exhaustion—in a stasis between pain and powerlessness.

No dwarf should have had to bear this sight. But Borin did.

“He... is broken,” whispered Thandur. “No,” said Borin. “He is injured. And we... we are the tip of the needle that can stitch him back together.”

The core reacted. It hovered between Borin and the Titan, pulsating back and forth—as if it recognized the Titan's wound and yet hesitated to touch it. It wanted to go home. But it feared the return.

Borin lowered the hammer. "I'm not bringing you back," he said softly to the first set of discarded pieces. "You're leaving of your own free will. We're merely maintaining the form."

The voice in the hall flickered. Not angry. Not afraid. But surprised.

*"You're not forcing me?"*

"No."

Borin took a deep breath. "Forging without coercion is not forging. It is destruction."

A throbbing tremor ran through the chamber. The Titan responded—not with words, but with a feeling that resembled recognition.

Thandur stepped forward. Not confidently. But determinedly.

"If I am the anvil," he said quietly, "then I will hold. Whatever comes."

Borin nodded. "Then stand next to him."

Thandur went to the rift, and the titanic light reached for him—not brutally, but gently probing. His runes glowed in gold and violet, as if they had always waited to finally find a rhythm greater than their burning pain.

The initial drop in elevation began. Borin raised the hammer. The Titan opened his heart.

And the mountain held its breath.

For now came the blow that decided everyone's fate.

The hammer in Borin's hand was heavy as a fragment of a star fallen from the firmament, yet at the same time it felt as if it had belonged in that hand since the beginning of time. The titanic wound pulsed to the rhythm of a heart that had forgotten how to beat. The bound First Debris hung suspended above the chasm, its light flickering between hope and fear—like a creature that knew that returning home could be both salvation and death.

Thandur stood at the edge of the fissure, his legs trembling, yet he did not retreat. The violet-gold lines of his wounded body reacted to the Titan's proximity like ancient scars responding to changes in the weather. He was the anvil—because he was the one who had been broken. And because no unbroken heart would ever be strong enough to withstand this forging.

"Are you ready?" Borin asked.

Thandur laughed harshly, without humor. "No. But I'm standing."

Borin nodded. "Nobody asks for more."



The titanic voice returned. Not a sound. Not words. But a feeling that vibrated through the chamber—heavy as the pressure of the depths, warm as a forgotten sunrise, old as the first stone.

*"Hammer...  
Anvil...  
Begins."*

The bound primary waste descended. It hovered like a small star above Thandur's chest, its light pulsating faster, brighter, more restlessly.

Borin held the hammer up. And for a moment, a single moment, he saw everything:

The halls of his people. The runes of the forge fathers. The broken Thandur. The sleeping titan. The wandering shadows. And himself — as a spark in an ancient fire.

Then he raised the hammer. And struck.

The first blow fell like thunder, striking not in the ear, but deep in the heart. The light core of the initial fallout was struck—not destroyed, but guided. Its light spread, flowing like liquid gold over Thandur's chest, while violet threads were drawn into the depths of the titanic wound.

Thandur cried out—but it was not a cry of anguish. It was a cry of remembrance. A cry that said: Here I am. And here I was. And here I want to be again.

The Titan reacted.

The walls of the chamber trembled as the pain he had concealed for eons finally took shape. The crack widened, not threateningly, but expectantly—like a heart deciding to allow its first beat to return.

Borin felt the primal form glowing with fire. His breath came in gasps. The hammer vibrated.

"Second strike!" yelled Thandur. "STRICK!"

Borin hit.

The second blow made the chamber tremble like an earthquake. The core became clearer, the violet essence calmed down and flowed orderly into the crack, not chaotically, but as if it were finally finding the path it had been searching for for millennia.

Thandur's body glowed in rhythm with the titanic wound. Gold and violet flowed down his arms, his neck, his chest—like two rivers meeting at the center of his heart. Borin saw something he never expected:

Thandur smiled. Not distorted. Not broken. Pure.

"Go on..." he whispered. "Take him home."

The Titan reacted again. A warm burst of light emanated from the crack—not an attack, but a breath. A thank you. A request. An acknowledgment.

Borin raised the hammer a third time. The original form burned like a star in his chest.

"Third hit," Borin murmured. "The hit of the binding."

He led him.

The hammer struck the core. The core struck Thandur. Thandur struck the wound. And the wound answered.

All light became one. The entire room was illuminated until neither gold nor violet nor shadow could be distinguished. Only a radiant, pure white remained—the white of a soul breathing again after endless darkness.

The Titan breathed.

For the first time in eons.

The mountain above them trembled slightly. Not destructively. Not threateningly. But like a being slowly awakening.

Thandur fell backwards — not dead, not broken. Borin caught him.

The core was gone. The crack was smaller. The titanic chamber was calmer.

And the Titan's voice whispered, like a thank you, caressing the stone:

*"The first breath... has been taken."*

But Borin knew: This was only the beginning.

The titanic light slowly faded, like the last embers of a colossal forge fire that hadn't gone out but instead retreated evenly into the stone. The chamber still vibrated with a faint resonance, as if carrying with the titan's every breath, and Borin knew that something deep within this ancient being had shifted. Not fully awakened, not healed—but awake enough to feel.

Thandur lay heavy in his arms. His chest rose and fell again, regularly, calmly. The violet-gold lines that crisscrossed his body no longer burned wildly. They had now settled into a clear, almost solemn rhythm. Borin felt the heat of the titanic light still resonate beneath Thandur's skin, but without the destructive force that had once broken him.

He opened his eyes. Slowly. Carefully. With an expression that showed both pain and peace.

"I... am alive?" he asked hoarsely.

"You are alive," said Borin.

"And am I... myself?" His voice trembled — not with fear, but with a hope he hardly dared to admit to himself.

Borin nodded. "As much as you haven't been for centuries."

The titanic chamber reacted. A warm glow rose from the walls, spread across the breathing surfaces of the room, and gathered above the crack, which had now become a long, narrow slit. It wasn't closed—but it no longer bled. The light that streamed from it was gentle, soothing, muted.

The Titan's voice returned. Stronger than before. More conscious.

*"Hammer... anvil... you have closed the first breach."*

Borin straightened up. He could still feel the primal form pulsing in his chest, but the beat had become gentler, more stable. It was no longer the tearing, ripping fire that had threatened him, but an ordered rhythm that filled him.

The Titan was not awake. Not yet. But he was no longer on the verge of oblivion.

*"The pain... is shaped,"* spoke the titanic voice.  
*"But the mountain is not free."*

Borin knew these words were coming. The healing of the initial fall—the retrieval of the core pain—had been only the first step. The wandering shadows in the chasm, the fragments of lost consciousness, were still there. And above it all lurked the Deepbrood, which had already begun to gather. Somewhere above them—above the titanic chambers—the Brood was in motion.

The Titan sensed them. And Borin felt the Titan's breath beneath his feet.

A slow, cautious inhalation. A hesitation. An attempt to find strength.

But the stone responded with cracks.

The chamber trembled. A new sound emerged from the depths—a sound that did not come from the Titan, but from something that crawled in the roots of the mountain.

Something that did not want to welcome the awakening one. Something that was afraid of the light.

Thandur turned around. "What... what is THAT?"

The shadow in Borin rose in his chest and became rock-hard, cold, and clear.

*"The Deep Beast,"* spoke the inner voice.  
*"The greatest of the fallen. The bulwark of darkness. She has been waiting... for this very moment."*

The titanic voice sighed — a sound that made the stone tremble.

*"I am not strong enough... to hold her."*

The first droplet twitched, as if it had understood the words. Its light intensified for a moment, as if it wanted to help again—but Borin knew that the core was now part of the wound, no longer a free tool.

“Titan,” said Borin, standing upright with his hand around the hammer, “you took the first breath. We will take the second.”

Thandur rose, unsteady but determined. “I stand by your side, Borin. It is time we gave something back to the mountain.”

The Titan spoke more softly than before — like a breath of wind in the glowing stone.

*"The shadows are coming."  
The offspring follow.  
And the beast has awakened.*

The ground shook violently.

Borin raised the hammer.

“Then,” he said, “we’ll start with the Titan.”

The chamber responded—not with words, but with light.

And the mountain, for a single, tremendous heartbeat, breathed a second time.

## The March of the Iron Legion

The titan's first breath had shaken the mountain, but the second had awakened it. Not completely—but enough for the stone itself to begin responding to Borin's footsteps. The chamber vibrated to a new, deeper rhythm, as if an ancient heart had finally found its own beat. The rift in the titan's consciousness glowed like a thin line of gold and violet, sending out delicate waves that probed through the mountain's inner layers. Each of these waves awakened something that had lain dormant for eons.

Borin felt it first in his feet: a dull, metallic rumble, high above, still faint, but growing stronger. Thandur heard it too; his ears twitched, and his hand instinctively slid to the hilt of his cracked, but still mighty, hammer. The Titan had warned them—the Deep Beast had awakened, the brood was on the move, and the wandering shadows demanded completion. But there was another power slumbering within the mountain.

The Iron Legion.

Not an army of flesh and blood, but the oldest guardians the Titan had ever created—even before the dwarves, even before the Forge Fathers, in a time when the mountain itself was still young. Creatures of living metal, forge spirits, bound to the Titan's will and to the balance of fire and stone. The Iron Legion had been created to protect the deepest chambers, and after

the Titanic Wound was inflicted, they had fallen into a slumber that could only be broken by a renewed breath from the Titan.

Now this breath had taken place.

And the mountain reacted.

“Borin,” whispered Thandur, looking up as if he could see through the living stone. “Do you hear that? Those aren’t shadows. Not beasts. That is... order.”

Borin nodded slowly. "The Legion Halls awaken."

The vibration intensified. It rippled through the titanic chamber, climbed the walls, and vanished into remote shafts scarcely mentioned even in dwarven legends. The titan did not respond with words, yet Borin felt its assent, its will, its guiding force. The hammer in Borin's hand glowed softly, as if responding to an ancient command.

Then the light came.

A golden spark shot through the wall above them, followed by another, and another. They moved like fireflies through the stone—but they were not sparks. They were runes. Ancient runes, not forged, but born. They formed triangular patterns that connected to form lines, finally spiraling loops that traversed the entire upper half of the chamber.

Thandur stepped closer. “By the depths... this is titanic command writing.”

Borin recognized them too. Not because he understood them – but because they understood him.

The runes flared up.

And then they heard it.

The roar of thousands of footsteps. Not chaotic like the brood. Not whispering like the wandering shadows. Not alive like dwarves.

It was the roar of iron striking iron. Of mechanical hearts beating in unison. Of an army that never rests, never doubts, never forgets.

The Iron Legion had awakened.

Part of the chamber's dome shifted, opening like a colossal stone flower, and from the shafts above the Titan's heart they emerged: colossal warrior figures of cast metal, with shoulders as broad as the portals of the Upper Halls, eye stripes of gleaming gold that sparkled like slits of an ancient consciousness. Their bodies were crisscrossed with runes that appeared rigid from afar, yet coiled serpentine up close—living patterns that pulsed to the rhythm of the Titan's heartbeat.

Borin felt no terror. Only awe.

Thandur, however, took a step back. "I... I always thought it was just a legend."

“It was one,” said Borin. “Until now.”

The first three warriors knelt down. Their metal trembled as if pierced by an inner core of fire.

The titanic voice rang out again – stronger, clearer:

*"Hammer.*

*Anvil.*

*You have closed the first breach.*

*Now the Legion awakens."*

The metal warriors rose – slowly, majestically – and bowed before Borin, not deeply, but unmistakably. A gesture no dwarf could ever claim for himself.

“Borin...” Thandur whispered in horror. “They... recognize you as a commander.”

Borin felt the beat of the primal form. The Titan's voice was not commanding, but pleading.

*"Lead them."*

*"Because the beast is coming."*

The metal warriors stamped their feet in unison. A wave of sound rolled through the chamber. And the march began.

The March of the Iron Legion.

The first steps of the Iron Legion echoed like hammer blows through the titanic heart. Each metal foot striking the living stone sent a wave of resonance into the ground, burrowing through the mountain's chambers and passages as if the Titan himself were reawakening his limbs. It was the march of an ancient will, forged not by blood, not by flesh, but by pure form and purpose.

Borin stood at the head of the front line, the titanic hammer in his hand, now glowing with a calm, golden light. The hammer didn't lead—it answered. It answered something deep within the stone, older than Titan and dwarf, older than any forge. The primal form in Borin's chest beat in the same rhythm as the Legion. And suddenly, Borin understood why the Titan had chosen him.

Not because he was strong. Not because he was worthy. But because his heart could bear two things at once that had always been contradictory: form and pain.

Thandur followed close behind. He seemed smaller among the colossal metal warriors, yet his runes glowed brighter than ever. With every step the Iron Legion took, his breathing stabilized, becoming more even. The titanic blow in the chamber hadn't healed his wounds—but it had set them right. And a dwarf with set wounds was stronger than an unwounded dwarf without direction.

The path the Legion took was an unfamiliar one. The walls of the titanic core shifted, opening ancient shafts sealed for eons. Runes glowed, forming arches that cleared the way for the metal warriors and opening the connection to the deepest halls—those even the Builders had forgotten.

As the legion entered the first of these shafts, the sound changed. The titanic chamber behind them gradually fell silent, and a new sound emerged—one that was deep and distant, yet ominously familiar.

A rumble. A scratch. A shuffle.

Thandur grabbed Borin's arm. "This is the beast."

Borin nodded. He had heard it too.

The Deep Beast was not part of the Iron Legion, not part of the Forge Fathers, not part of the titanic form. It sprang from another flaw—from a scream the Titan had uttered immeasurably long ago, before the primal form had bound the shadow. The beast was not a creature; it was the embodiment of an instinctual defense against pain itself. And that defense came now, because the Titan had begun to heal.

The Iron Legion reacted without command.

Three of the foremost warriors raised their arms simultaneously. Metal segments detached from their forearms and shifted into shields that glowed with a light of ancient runes. The rear ranks closed ranks, forming two parallel lines. A formation not forged by dwarven warmasters—but from the very memory of the titans.

Borin felt the echo of this movement in his chest. A feeling that whispered to him:

*"You are not leading them."  
They lead the way.  
You release him.*

And so Borin raised the hammer not to command, but to confirm. The golden light in the hammerhead ignited brightly – and the legion set off, faster now, but never chaotically. A disciplined storm of metal and glowing embers.

The shaft widened. Light became scarcer. The air grew heavier. A smell emerged – earthy, cool, old. The smell of growth without life.

The beast was near.

Thandur snorted. "I... remember that breathing. I heard it back then, before I... fell."

"Then you know their speed," Borin said calmly. "And their greed."

"I know how she kills," Thandur murmured. "But this time... we are not alone."

The Iron Legion continued to stampede. The rumbling in front of them grew louder. The shaft vibrated.

Something great moved in the darkness. Something that should not have been created by doors, runes, or anvils.

Then Borin saw it.

Two glowing lines. Not eyes – but cracks. Cracks in a shape of living rock and living pain.

The Deep Beast.

She smelled the awakening one. She smelled the core. She smelled the order that she had to destroy.

Borin raised his hammer. The Iron Legion stopped. Thandur drew in his breath.

The mountain held its breath again.

The Deep Beast emerged from the darkness like a nightmare that had simmered too long in silent stone. Its body was composed of layers of rock, ore, and something not a natural part of the mountain—a pulsating mass of scar tissue made of shimmering violet substance that dripped down its flanks like congealed pain. It was large enough to demolish a dwarf stronghold, yet its movement was surprisingly fluid: a single, flowing glide, as if it were not a body but a will forcing its way through form.

The beast emitted a sound that made the shaft tremble. Not a roar. Not a growl. It was a long, deep whimper, full of ancient aggression—the reaction of an instinctive defense mechanism: The titan awakens. Preserve. Destroy what threatens order.

Thandur clutched his hammer. "That's... how it sounded back then," he murmured hoarsely. "Before I lost who I was."

Borin stepped in front of him. "We're not losing anything today."

The Iron Legion reacted to the beast's appearance without a single command. Three ranks advanced. The front warriors sank into a broad stance. Metal plates shifted, fusing together to form shields. The rear ranks lowered their arms, transforming their forearms into elongated, wedge-shaped striking prongs—formations reminiscent of the points of titanic blacksmith's tools.

The Titan himself had once created this pattern. And the Legion remembered.

A deep, metallic hum filled the air as the runes on their bodies reacted. The hum became a harmonious, undulating roar—like the song of a blacksmith forging a warhammer.

"They... sing," whispered Thandur reverently.

"No," said Borin, raising the hammer. "They are warning."

The deep beast tensed. Its four massive limbs dug into the stone as if preparing to pounce. The purple fissures along its body opened, and steam poured out of them—hot enough that the stone beneath it began to sweat.

Then she rushed forward.

She moved faster than anything made of stone should be able to move. The shaft seemed to buckle under her weight. Her roar—that heart-rending, piercing whimper—made the world itself tremble.



But the Iron Legion held.

They thrust their shields forward. A wall of living metal. A wall of titanic power, forged ages ago.

The beast crashed against the shields – and the entire shaft shook. A sharp, screeching sound ripped through the air as violet-glowing cracks streaked across the shield wall and receded. The legion didn't budge an inch.

Then came the counterattack.

At the same moment, the rear ranks moved forward. Steel wedges shot out, striking the beast's flanks. Sparks flew. Violet chunks broke loose. The beast shrieked – this time in pain.

Thandur grabbed Borin's arm. "They're holding her! Borin, the Legion is holding her!"

But Borin felt something else. A vibration. An inner trembling.

The Titan spoke to him. Not in words. In meaning.

*"I am still weak."*

*You must make the first move.*

Borin raised the hammer.

Gold. Violet. The breath of the Titan in his chest.

"Thandur!" he shouted. "With me!"

Thandur stepped to his side. The beast fought against the legion, striking with its claws, trying to shatter the shield wall, but the titanic will prevented it from advancing.

Borin felt the energy of awakening burning in his arm. The primal form vibrated. Fire and shadow merged.

"Now!" he shouted.

They rushed forward.

The hammer struck. Thandu's blow followed.

The force exploded.

Violet scales burst away. Slabs of rock splintered. A horrific scream echoed through the shaft – loud enough that dust trickled from the walls.

The beast staggered.

Withdrew.

For the first time.

“Borin...” Thandur gasped. “We can defeat them!”

But Borin sensed what the Titan was sending him:

*"She does not fall by force."  
But through form."*

And Borin understood:

The fight against the beast was not a fight of violence. It was a fight of order against chaos, of craftsmanship against instinctive pain, of form against rift.

He raised the hammer again. The legion advanced. Thandur roared.

And now the battle truly began.

## The Battle of the Grey Gate

The Grey Gate lay deep within the mountain's belly, yet it was also a gateway to all that lurked beneath the world. Here ended the halls of the dwarves—and beyond began the nameless realm of the depths, a place no dwarven chronicler had ever fully described. The gate itself was a massive semicircle of grey, dully shimmering stone, crisscrossed with runes older than the first royal houses. It was the bulwark the titan had once fashioned from his own body to hold back the Beast and all that grew in its darkness.

Now she trembled.

And the earthquake came from both sides.

Borin led the Iron Legion up the final ascent that led into the immense hall before the Grey Gate. The metal warriors moved as one, their footsteps echoing in unison, a sound that both soothed and fueled the stone. Behind them, the titanic shaft had closed—not completely, but enough to hold the Titan's breath. Borin knew the Titan was still weak, that every blow against this gate would affect its condition.

Thandur stumbled beside him, not from weakness, but from haste. His runes still glowed gold and violet, as if he himself were a walking relic of the forge. His breath was heavy, but not exhausted—rather, charged with the fire of a dwarf who had rediscovered his place in the fabric of the world.

When they reached the hall, they saw the scale of it.

The Grey Gate was not simply a gate. It was a wall of dense titan stone, at the center of which rested a colossal circular eye—an ancient, dormant seal entwined with runes that had once been alive. Now they flickered. Some were dark. Others flashed, as if struggling for consciousness.

The Deep Beast stood before the gate.

But she was not alone.

From the cracks in the floor, the fissures in the walls, and the shadowy corners of the hall crawled the brood—not in dozens, but in hundreds. Creatures of twisted flesh and rock, with limbs that bent like broken tools and eyes that burned with greed. Some had the violet veins of Thandur, others were pure shadow, still others seemed like failed attempts at a form that should never have existed.

And right in the middle of them stood the beast, larger than ever, as if the battle in the shaft had only torn it open wider. The purple cracks along its flanks burned like open wounds, and from them billowed a dark vapor that fueled the brood—as if it were the heart of an entire realm of pain.

“Borin...” Thandur snorted. “That’s too many.”

“For the two of us, yes.” Borin raised the hammer. “But not for the Legion.”

Behind him, the Iron Legion formed up. Three ranks. Two spearhead formations. A shield wall stretching across the entire width of the hall.

Then the mountain trembled again.

The Grey Gate replied.

Her runes flared – not brightly, but with a definite glow, as if she knew the titan was breathing again. And in that movement, in that glimmer of hope, the beast recognized the danger. She tensed, opened her jaws, and let out a shriek of pain and hatred.

The brood responded.

A surge of gaping mouths, distorted bodies, and creeping shadows raced towards the Iron Legion, a storm of darkness that threatened to engulf the stone itself.

Borin raised the hammer. The titanic light flared up like a star being born.

"Legion!" he shouted. His voice wasn't loud—it was determined. "Hold the line! Not a stone will fall today!"

The roar that followed was not a war cry. It was the response of the Iron Legion. A sound like blacksmiths striking the heart of a mountain.

The brood collided with the metal front.

The fight began.

But Borin knew: This was not just any battle. This was the battle that would decide whether the Titan would ever leave again.

Or whether the mountain would die.

The first wave of the brood crashed against the Iron Legion's shield wall like a storm of living rock. Claws, teeth, and twisted limbs smashed against the titanic metal, yet the Legion did not yield an inch. Each of its warriors was a monolith, guided by an ancient order more deeply rooted in the mountain than any clan. Their shields vibrated in unison, the runes upon them burning in steely gold and captivating violet, every impulse within them echoing the titan's first breath.

Borin charged forward. The hammer in his hand was no longer a tool—it was will. Pure will, imbued with titanic power. Each step he took generated sparks of gold and shadow, marking the ground beneath him like ancient paths of fire. The brood smelled this power. Some recoiled, hissing and shrieking, as if the memory of their origins was stronger than their hatred.

Others rushed at him.

A creature with six arms and three mouths leaped at Borin. It was barely recognizable as a creature; its form was a pain-distorted misunderstanding of flesh and stone. Borin did not back down. The hammer came down and struck the creature's skull with a blow that did not shatter it—but dissolved it. The violet light that had coursed through its veins was drawn into the hammer in a single spiral, then neutralized and transformed into titanic gold.

"Back into shape," Borin murmured. The hammer responded with a subdued glow.

Thandur charged at Borin's side. His own hammer glowed dimly but resolutely, and the runes on his chest pulsed to the rhythm of the titanic wound they had bound together. He swung at a creature resembling an elongated, bony spider, his blow unaimed but full of determination. The creature crumpled as if its joints were made of rotten wood.

"Borin!" Thandur shouted between blows. "The beast is moving! It's looking for a weak spot in the gate!"

Borin saw it at the same moment. The Deepbeast hadn't directed its attack straight at the Legion. It was moving along the flank of the shield wall, its torso close to the ground, its massive body sliding toward the Grey Gate with shattering force. Its fissures pulsed unnaturally fast, as if it were gathering all its pain to deliver a single, fatal thrust.

"NO!" Borin roared. "SHE KNOWS THAT THE TITAN IS STILL WEAK!"

The beast reared up. The runes on the gate flickered desperately. Borin ran.

The Iron Legion reacted instantly. Two ranks broke formation, twisting like the gears of a gigantic mechanism, and rammed their shield edges into the ground to protect the gate. The legionaries' metal bodies almost fused together, as if they themselves wanted to become the wall.

But the beast was enormous. It jerked its head back. The purple mass in its cracks began to glow. It gathered its pain.

Thandu shouted: "Borin, she is releasing her core!"

The ground vibrated. The titan beneath them reacted – a weak, warning tremor.

*"Hammer..."*

The titanic voice was barely more than a whisper.

*"The third blow... is yours."*

Borin jumped. The hammer glowed.

The beast lunged forward – directly towards the gate.

Borin smashed the hammer down.

The blow filled the hall with pure light. The air grew still. The brood fell silent. The stone held its breath.

But the beast did not fall. It roared, wounded but not defeated.

Borin gasped. "One more time..."

Behind him, the Iron Legion regrouped. Their runes burned. Their shields lowered. Their sound was like a blacksmith's song, burrowing deeper into the mountain than any beast.

The beast growled. It rose a second time.

The second onslaught began.

The beast's second onslaught came not like a storm, but like the collapse of an entire mountain range. Her limbs pressed against the ground, the purple fissures along her body flared like burning veins, and a howling sound escaped her maw—a sound born not of rage, but of desperate protective instinct. She was not a being with reason. She was the instinctive will of the wound itself, the defense system of a wounded titan now blindly fighting against its own attempt at healing.

The Grey Gate trembled. Runes bled light. Dust trickled from the ceiling.

Borin stood alone between her and the beast, his titanic hammer raised, the primal form glowing in his chest like a blazing star about to explode. His breath came in short gasps, but it wasn't fear that filled him—it was a will older than any mountain.

Thandur fell beside him.

"Borin!" he cried, gasping, bleeding, but unyielding. "She's gathering all her strength! She wants to break the gate in one fell swoop!"

Borin nodded. "Then we'll break the attack."

The Iron Legion advanced. Their metallic bodies vibrated in unison, the runes on their breastplates shining so brightly they banished the darkness. They formed two semicircles around Borin and Thandur, then a complete ring – a titanic forging form, like a living anvil.

The beast tensed.

Her cracks became dazzlingly bright. Her muscles tensed. The entire hall vibrated.

The brood behind her huddled together, not in attack, but as if to amplify the thrust. She was not independent. She existed only as a shadow of the beast—and the beast existed only as a shadow of titanic pain.

Borin sensed that it was time.

“Thandur,” he said softly, “this blow is yours. I lead. But you... bind.”

Thandur stared at him. His runes pulsed. Then he nodded.

"I bind."

The beast charged.

It was as if the entire mountain was being moved. A murderous tremor raged through the hall. The floor cracked open in places. The walls swayed. And the gate itself, that ancient titanic shield, let out a thunderous groan.

Thandur raised his hammer. Borin raised his.

Their footsteps merged. Their breaths became one. The primal form burned. The titanic chamber far below them answered. The runes in the gateway stabilized. The Iron Legion locked down.

And then –

– where will and pain collided.

The beast struck with a force that could bring down even titans. A shock like the impact of a star ripped through the hall. The Legion's shield wall buckled, metal screeched, runes flickered.

Thandur screamed – not from fear, but from sheer exertion. His blow landed first. He bound the essence. Captured it. Guided it.

Borin struck at the same moment.

The blacksmith father's hammer struck the beast's essence. A titanic arc of light tore through the darkness. The brood crumbled to dust. The hall turned white, so dazzling that even shadows fled.

The beast's cry was not the cry of an animal – it was the cry of a wound closing for the first time in eons.

As the lights went out, Borin staggered backward. Thandur sank to his knees. The beast lay motionless on the floor of the hall.

Her purple cracks dimmed. Piece by piece. Her body crumbled. Not like stone, but like old pain finally released.

Then – with a final, long breath –

– it completely disintegrated into dust.

The hall fell silent.

The brood had vanished. The shadows had retreated. The Grey Gate stood. Unbroken. Stronger than before.

And in the still pulse of the mountain, Borin and Thandur heard the titanic voice, clearer than ever before:

*"The pain is ordered."*

*The path is open.*

*But the mountain's root still calls."*

Borin rose. Thandur stood beside him. The Iron Legion waited.

The Battle of the Grey Gate was won.

But the war – the real war – only began now.

## The fall into the lowest depths

The Hall of the Grey Gate lay behind them like an extinguished forge, the scent of the last blast of fire still lingering. The Iron Legion stood silent in formation, motionless like an assembly of forgotten statues, yet a new, calmer light glowed within their runes. They had survived the battle, and the Titan had spoken through their metallic bodies. But now, with the Brood destroyed and the Beast fallen, all eyes turned to Borin—the Hammer-Bearer, the Will of the Awakening.

A vibration ran through the ground, light, barely perceptible, yet full of meaning. It was not an earthquake. It was a call. A call that didn't penetrate the ears, but the bones. Borin felt it deep in his primal form, in that second heart that had long since become a part of him.

*"The depth..."* whispered the inner voice of the shadow within him, calmer than before, clearer.

*"We are not at the end. We are standing on the precipice, at the root of the pain."*

Thandur felt it too. He shuddered, but his trembling was not that of madness, but that of a dwarf who knows he must step onto a path no other leg wants to tread.

"That's the call," he murmured. "The call of the deepest depths. Borin... there's something down there. I sense... I sense that it awaits us."

"Not us," Borin said quietly. "Me."

There were paths in the mountain, mentioned in every legend but never described. Paths known even to the elder smiths only through fragments of dreams. Paths not built by hands, but by a will so ancient that even stone could no longer bear its weight.

The Iron Legion parted before Borin – a silent corridor of living metal clearing his way. At the end of this chasm, a new opening in the rock began. Not through mechanics. Not through runes. But through consciousness. The Titan himself had created this gateway for him.

Beyond it lay blackness. Not darkness. Blackness that breathed.

Thandur sank briefly to his knees, as if the mere sight of that opening had doubled the weight of his heart. "That's not a chamber. That's a fall." He swallowed hard. "It doesn't go down there... it falls."

Borin stepped closer. The closer he came, the more intensely the primal form vibrated in his chest. A deep beat, then a second – and then the third, which sounded almost like a warning.

*"Don't go carelessly,"* whispered the voice inside.  
*"For below lies the root of all suffering."*

Borin stood at the edge of the opening. The air flowed out from the depths in long, slow puffs – warm like breath trapped in the stone for millennia. It smelled of metal, of fire, of things forgotten.

And after danger.

"Borin," said Thandur, his voice hard as a blacksmith's hammer that has found its shape, "I will go with you."

Borin looked at him – and no longer saw the broken warrior from the shadow halls, but a brother who, despite all his scars, stood like an anvil in the flame.

"You will leave," Borin said calmly. "But not first."

Thandur knew what he meant. Because the path that awaited him down there was not one on which two feet could walk at the same time.

The Titan spoke.

Not loud. Not whispering. But like an earthquake that only reached Borin's heart.

*"Hammer carrier."*  
*Pain-shaping.*  
*"You must fall."*

Thandur gasped. "Borin... he means that literally."

Borin nodded. "Yes."

He stood at the threshold. He felt the abyss beneath him, a vast, black maw that didn't want to devour, but to test. The depths didn't call like an enemy—they called like a judgment.

The Iron Legion formed up behind him. Their runes began to glow in unison. A deep tone filled the room – a sound reminiscent of the clang of a gigantic blacksmith's hammer.



Borin raised his hammer. He took a step forward.

The primal form pulsed. The titanic consciousness tensed. Thandur gasped for air.

"BORIN!"

But Borin only turned around once, and in his gaze there was no farewell and no fear – only certainty.

"I am falling," he said, "so that we can stand."

And then – without hesitation, without a cry, without resistance –

Borin let go of the ground beneath him.

The depths swallowed him.

A free fall. A silent scream of the rock. A black light. A titanic heartbeat.

And Borin plunged down – into the lowest depths, to the origin of pain, where no dwarf had ever been before.

The fall wasn't a fall through space—it was a fall through meaning. Borin didn't feel the wind on his face, felt no speed in his limbs, no pull in his muscles or tendons. Instead, he fell through layers of darkness that had no color but carried every sensation. He fell through memories that weren't his, through wounds so old that even time knew them only as dull scars.

The depths had no bottom. They only had a "further." And Borin fell further.

The primal form within his chest pulsed in rhythm with his fall, first chaotically, then slowing down, then accelerating again, as if it had to recalibrate to keep pace with the movement. It was the only fixed point in this infinite abyss. A light within him that never went out.

But then, all of a sudden, something happened.

It wasn't a floor. It wasn't a wall. It was the titanic will itself that caught him. Not hard. Not gentle. But like a net of thought, preventing him from falling further than he should have. Borin's feet felt stone—but the stone wasn't solid. It was warm. Breathing. As if he were standing on a great, dormant hand, so old it had forgotten how to awaken.

Borin opened his eyes.

Above him, the abyss stretched like a swallowing sky, endless and shimmering, with streaks of gold and violet that glided along the walls like flowing runes. There was no up. No down. The depths themselves shaped the space around him.

A path lay before him. A narrow ridge of black stone jutting into nothingness, without railings, without support, as if it were merely an idea of form.

And at the end of this path, something was glowing.

A light. Weak. Foreign. Wounded.

Borin knew without a doubt: This was the source. This was the origin of the titanic pain. The first rift.

He took the first step on the path.

The stone vibrated—not threateningly, but questioningly. The titan tested him. The depths tested him. Each step grew heavier the further he went, not because the path was steep, but because the trail demanded he shed some of his own pain to continue.

Borin noticed that the shadow within him was becoming restless.

*"This is not our place,"* said the inner voice. It sounded quiet. Not defiant like before. More... small. Uncertain.

*"This is his deepest pain... we shouldn't..."*

Borin simply replied: "We're leaving."

The voice was silent.

He took the second step.

The path changed. The stone became transparent, then semi-liquid, then solid again. Images appeared beneath his feet – not memories of the Titan, but images of the world as it was before the dwarves were born.

He saw the first mountains rise. He saw fire that burned without flames. He saw titans – not as figures, but as concepts of light and rock – striding through the still young world.

And he saw one of them fall.

The path trembled. Borin had to stop.

A titanic figure – gigantic, unimaginable, built from arched light and shadow – plunged into an invisible chasm. Not brought down by external adversaries. Brought down by an inner turmoil he could not comprehend.

That was the Titan. Her Titan. The one in whose heart Borin was now traveling.

*"Why did he fall?"* Borin asked aloud.

The path didn't respond. But the light at the end pulsed stronger. A breath. A pleading throb.

Borin took the third step.

This time he didn't see an image, but felt something. An emotion more powerful than any earthquake, a mixture of shame, responsibility, and horrifying realization.

The Titan had not only suffered pain. He had felt guilt.

And it was this guilt that brought forth the beast. It was this guilt that gave birth to the First Fall. It was this guilt that even created the wandering shadows.

Borin stopped.

He understood.

The first crack was not an accident. It was a fracture that came from the very core of the Titan – a flaw in his own will.

*"The light at the end,"* Borin whispered, "This is not just his wound. This is his admission."

The path vibrated in agreement.

The hammer in his hand glowed hot. The primal form in his chest reacted violently. The depths whispered.

Borin continued. The fourth step. Then the fifth.

The path grew shorter. The light at the end grew brighter. He heard a humming – deep, vibrating, ancient. A call. A name that wasn't one.

As Borin crossed the last stretch, he finally saw it:

A sphere of pure titanic light, torn by fine, dark lines – small as a heart, heavy as a mountain.

The origin of the wound. The origin of the pain. That which the Titan hid from the world above all else.

Borin raised his hand. The hammer answered. The original mold burned.

And the light spoke to him – not as a voice, but as a plea.

*"Heal me."*

Borin inhaled.

The Titan was waiting.

Before Borin, the spherical wound of light pulsed like a beaten but not broken heart. The titanic essence within was restless, like a being feverishly struggling between sleep and awakening. The dark lines that crisscrossed the light did not appear as simple cracks—they looked like the scars of a will that could not forgive itself. Each pulse of the light core resonated deep within Borin's chest, as if the primal form and this origin were connected by some kind of inner echo, bringing forth ancient, forgotten truths.

The path behind Borin vibrated as if it had served its purpose and was slowly dissolving. There was no turning back. The abyss demanded no retreat. It demanded a decision. And Borin knew: if he failed now, the wound would close—not heal, but harden. And a hardened, titanic pain would obliterate everything above the abyss, until only a dead mountain remained.

Borin stepped closer. The hammer glowed in his hand. The primal form became hot, almost painfully so, as if it wanted to burst from his chest.

But the origin spoke again – this time not as a request, but as a question.

*"Who is touching me?"*

Borin raised the hammer, but the voice cut through him like a soft but relentless current.

*"Not great."*

*It is form.*

*Not the original form.*

*It is bonding."*

Borin understood. The Titan wanted to be touched. Not his tools. Not his legacy. Himself.

He, the son of the mountains. He, the smith of order. He who led the first defection. He who bore the pain. He who fell.

So Borin extended his free hand.

The heat became so intense that his skin tingled. Then it burned. Then it hurt. But Borin refused to be pulled back.

It happened when his fingertips touched the light.

The world exploded in gold and purple.

A storm raged through Borin's mind. He saw images so powerful they took his breath away:

A titan who strode upright through the birthing chambers of mountains. Fire that flowed from his hands, forming rivers of molten ore. A step that shaped the world. A breath that filled lakes. A thought that created halls.

And then – the mistake.

A contradictory thought. A will turned against itself. A break in his consciousness. A feeling he had never known before.

Fault.

A pain so deep that it could not be understood, but only repressed. And in this repression, its core—the origin that Borin now touched—tore, and all that came later—shadows, beasts, first waste—were merely the splinters of this one titanic error.

Borin cried out – not aloud, but inwardly, for the pain was not physical. It was the weight of a guilt greater than any mountain.

But just as he was about to break, something appeared.

First it was just a spark. Then a line. Then a network of runes. Runes that did not originate from the Titan.

Runes forged by Borin himself. Runes of his choosing. Of his deeds. Of his determination.

He was not the Titan. He was Borin. And Borin did not break.

He pushed his hand deeper into the light. And said – not aloud, but through sheer will:

"I am not here to take blame. I am here to sort it out."

The light changed. It glowed brighter, became calmer. The dark lines began to tremble. Some burst. Others dissolved.

The wound... ceased to be a wound.

Instead, she became a core. A heart. A spark.

The Titan spoke – not as a question, not as a request, but as recognition:

*"Hammer carrier."  
You touched me.*

The abyss trembled.

The path shattered. Borin was caught in the titanic light, lifted, carried – not downwards, not into the depths, but upwards.

He was swept upwards. Out of the darkness. Out of the origin. Out back to the stone.

The depths disappeared beneath him. A stream of golden sparks accompanied him. His heart beat in a titanic rhythm.

And the Titan uttered the sentence that would change the mountain:

*"I am waking up."*

Then Borin broke through the darkness – back into the world of the dwarves.

## The Return of the Stone Seers

Borin burst forth from the light like a forged wedge pulled from fire. Not gently, not slowly, but with the force of a long-overdue awakening. The transition from the blackness of the deepest abyss back into the world was like a curtain being torn open: a moment of stark clarity, followed by a tremor in the stone that gripped the entire mountain. Borin didn't feel the impact—the titan absorbed it. He hovered for a breath, carried by a golden-violet radiance, before the mountain set him down on solid ground.

He was standing in a hall that he didn't immediately recognize.

Runes floated in the light. The walls were crisscrossed with veins of living stone. And over everything lay the breath of an ancient consciousness.

He was back. But not where he had fallen. Not at Thandur. Not with the Iron Legion.

But in a place that no dwarf had entered for ages.

The Hall of the Stone Seers.

It was enormous—larger than the smiths' chambers, larger than the halls of kings. The ceiling was a vault of shimmering rock, moving to the rhythm of a colossal heartbeat. Above the floor floated fragments of stone, as if held by an unseen will. Some were as large as wagons, others as small as splinters, yet all circled in silent orbits, as if listening to something Borin could not yet hear.

Then he heard it.

*"Borin... son of the stone... you have touched it."*

The voice was not an echo of the Titan. It was not deep. Not loud. It was soft, ancient, like a murmuring stream beneath granite.

Borin turned around – and saw her.

The Stone Seers.

They were not beings of flesh. They were not dwarves. They were form—pure form, born of stone, preserved by titanic power. Their bodies were layered rock that moved like skin. Their faces were mask-like, without eyes, yet they saw. Their voices were murmurs in the stone. And in their hearts glowed violet sparks—fragments of titanic consciousness that had slumbered in this hall for eons.

Three hovered before him. Others moved in the depths of the hall, slowly, deliberately.

The middle seer lowered his head.

*"You have returned from the depths. You have seen what must not be seen."*

Borin felt the primal form respond in his chest.

"I saw what needed to be seen."

The seer on the left stepped closer. His body moved fluidly across the ground like soft stone.

*"And you have touched the origin. No dwarf has ever..."*

The seer on the right raised his hand – a rocky arm that looked like living lava.

*"No. He is more than that. He is the hammer of the new order."*

Borin felt a pressure in his chest—not pain, but awareness. The Stone Seers didn't look at him like a dwarf. Not like a warrior. But like a tool of the Titan.

The middle seer stretched out his hand. A thin crack in the stone opened in the ground.

And a light emerged from it.

Gold and violet at the same time. There was no core. No crack. No splinter.

It was a memory.

*"When we fell eons ago,"* "We were the voice of the mountains," said the middle seer. "The first recipients of the Titan's will. Through us he spoke to the forge fathers. Through us halls were formed, paths created, runes given."

The seer lowered his hand.

*"But when the wound appeared... we fell silent."*

Borin nodded. "The Titan was sealed. The world fell into disarray."

The seer on the left touched the ground with two fingertips made of stone. The hall reacted, sending a tremor through the air.

*"You have healed the origin, Borin. Not completely – but enough for us to awaken."*

The original form beat violently. The light in the seer flowed into Borin – a spark that disappeared within him without burning.

He suddenly understood where he was.

The Hall of the Stone Seers was not a place. It was a tool.

A tool that waited. For a signal. For the Titan's healing. For the hammer.

The middle seer approached and spoke:

*"The Titan awakens. But the mountain is not one."*

The right-hand seer added:

*"The root is still broken."*

Then they both spoke at the same time.

*"And down there is something that the Titan cannot bind."*

Borin raised the hammer. "The Deep Beast has fallen."

The middle seer shook his head.

*"The beast was merely a guard. The real breach lies deeper."*

Borin frowned. "I was at the lowest depths."

The left-hand seer moved forward, and his heart fragment glowed darkly.

*"No. You were at the origin. But not at the root."*

Borin understood. There was something beneath the surface. Something that even the Titan could not touch.

The middle seer raised both arms. The hall vibrated. The stone opened.

A new path appeared. No fall. No light.

A corridor of absolute darkness, silent and cold as death itself.

*"The root of the mountain,"* whispered the stone seers.

*"That's where you need to go."*

The original mold was burning. The hammer was glowing.

And Borin stepped forward.

The path the Stone-seers had opened before Borin was no ordinary passage. It was not forged, not hewn, not shaped. It was remembered. As if the mountain itself had forgotten that this path existed, and only now—through Borin's touch of origin—had it reclaimed it. The darkness emanating from the passage was absolute. Not a glimmer, not a flicker, not a titanic gold or violet. A silence of such depth that even Borin's breath seemed to disturb it.

The stone seers stood silently behind him, their eyeless faces unmoved, their stony bodies like statues from a bygone age. Yet their voices echoed in the air, not spoken, but vibrating within the rock.

*"This path leads to the root of the mountain."*

*"No dwarf has ever gone there."*

*"No Titan has ever entered it."*



Borin turned halfway towards them. "How can there be a place that even he doesn't know?"

The middle seer raised his stone arm.

*"The root is not part of his body."  
It is what his body rests on."*

The left-hand seer added:

*"A place that is older than Wille."  
Older than the form.  
Older than the first thought.*

Borin felt the primal form in his chest contract, like a heart resisting an insight. "What lies down there?"

The right-hand seer gave the answer:

*"That which even a titan fears."*

Borin nodded slowly. Not out of courage, but out of understanding.

Everything he had seen, touched, and healed so far had been part of the Titan—part of a being vulnerable despite its unfathomable size, power, and Old World existence. But this new path... this was different. Something that didn't fit into the Titan order. Something the Titan hadn't created—but something that had influenced him.

Borin pulled the hammer closer to him. The hammer responded. A dim glow emanated from it, but the darkness before him instantly swallowed it.

Thandur appeared behind him, breathless, as if he had traversed the entire mountain. "Borin! By all the Forge Fathers, what is this? I could barely follow you when you vanished! The Legion... she said nothing. But I sensed your fall." He saw the path and fell silent. "This... is no path. This is—"

"An origin without a name," said Borin.

Thandur stepped closer, his runes glowing as if lighting a warning fire. "And we're supposed to go in there?"

A wave of vibrating silence rolled through the corridor. A breath of darkness.

The middle seer spoke:

*"Only Borin is allowed to enter the grounds."*

Thandur grabbed Borin's arm. "I won't let you descend into something like this alone! I am your anvil, Borin! Companions never abandon each other!"

The seers answered simultaneously:

*"The root tolerates no second one."*

The rock trembled briefly beneath Thandur's feet — a warning, unmistakable tremor.

Thandur stepped back, begrudgingly but obediently — for even in his stubbornness he understood that this place knew different laws.

Borin placed a hand on his shoulder. "You were with me in the Rift. In the Origin. In the Titan's Forge. But this..." He saw the absolute blackness that did not yield, did not answer, but only waited. "This I must go through alone."

Thandur swallowed hard. "Then come back. Whatever is down there... it takes nothing from you. Do you hear? Nothing at all." He pointed at Borin's chest. "Not the original form. Not your runes. And above all, not yourself."

Borin nodded.

Then he stepped into the darkness.

The hammer fell silent. The runes were silent. The primal form struck—once, heavily, reluctantly.

And then everything went black.

But Borin heard something.

A sound so ancient that even Titan had forgotten it.

A heart. But not a titanic one. One that beat deeper, darker, older.

One that didn't want anyone to find it.

The darkness beyond the Stone Seers' Gate was so profound that it swallowed even memory. Borin continued, step by step, without seeing, without hearing, guided only by the throbbing echo of the primal form within his chest. Each breath was a tentative attempt to grasp the nature of this place—but the darkness offered no answers. It was not merely the absence of light. It was a presence. Ancient. Awakened. Expectant.

The ground beneath Borin's feet changed. First it was smooth. Then brittle. Then, as if he were walking on living rock – warm, pulsating.

Borin paused for a moment. "Show yourself," he said softly. His voice was swallowed, as if by a greedy, hungry depth that did not want words to exist.

The original form struck a second time. Stronger. Then a third time. And with the fourth strike, Borin saw something.

Not light. Not form. But movement.

A glimmer. A black glow. Something that was barely distinguishable from the darkness, yet different – denser, more conscious.

Borin realized: That was an eye.

Not a living eye. A gaze. A consciousness looking at him. A will that was not a titan.

And then something spoke.

Not with words, but with feeling. A urging. A pushing. An attempt to push him back.

*"You don't belong here."*

Borin was adamant. "I'm going anyway."

The darkness thickened. A rumble vibrated through the ground. The rock beneath him twisted as if a being of gigantic size were stirring.

And then Borin saw it.

The path ahead opened into a vast depression. A pit so deep that even the darkness below seemed heavier. In its center lay something that was neither stone nor shadow—something that looked like a massive root. But not a plant. A titanic vein. Thick as a tower, dark as pitch, pulsating like a sleeping monster.

The root of the mountain.

And Borin understood immediately: This was not part of the Titan. This was what the Titan had been built upon. A foundation that was more awake and older than any titanic consciousness.

The voice came again. This time clearer. Deeper. Ancient.

*"Why are you disturbing my sleep?"*

Borin raised the hammer. "Because the mountain is awakening."

The root contracted briefly, as if stung. A wavering shadow grew out of it – formless, viscous, fluid. The air grew heavier.

*"The Titan must not awaken."*

"He must awaken," said Borin. "The mountain will die without him."

The root trembled. A black pulse swept through the hollow. Borin narrowed his eyes, holding the original form.

*"The Titan is to blame."  
And guilt must not live on."*

Now Borin understood. The Root was the guardian of the deepest order. It was the institution meant to prevent a Titan who had once failed from ever regaining power.

The Titan had fallen. And the Root wanted to let him fall too.

"If he falls," Borin said slowly, "we all fall."

A silence. A heavy, oppressive moment in which even the darkness seemed to listen.

Then the root spoke:

*"Prove to me that his awakening brings order – and not chaos."*

Borin raised the blacksmith father's hammer. He let the primal form speak. A single golden-violet spark leaped from his chest, fell into the pit, and illuminated it for a brief moment.

And the root saw what lay there: ordered pain, tamed guilt, healing power.

A scream echoed through the depths – a scream that was not pain, but an ancient, immense realization.

*"The Titan... has learned."*

The root trembled. It changed. The darkness became lighter. Not bright, but more permeable – as if it were now letting the borin through.

*"Then move along, hammer-bearer."  
I will no longer stand in the way.*

Borin straightened his back. The path opened further into the unknown.

And the root of the mountain – which had been the greatest resistance – bent down before him.

### **The sleep of the ancient guardians breaks.**

The path behind the mountain's base was unlike anything Borin had ever encountered. The darkness that had enveloped him before gave way to a deep, shimmering twilight that was neither light nor shadow. It was as if the mountain itself had decided to momentarily revert the world to the state it had been in before stone became form and time began. The air vibrated like a string plucked by an unseen hand. Each step Borin took caused the ground beneath him to respond—not with sound, but with memory.

A vast space opened before him. The ceiling was so high that it disappeared into the semidarkness. The walls consisted of layers of rock that had not formed naturally, but had been deliberately laid – like pages of a gigantic book whose contents had not been read by any being for eons.

And they stood in the middle of the room.

The original guardians.

Borin held his breath.

There were six figures – taller than dwarves, shorter than titans, formed from a rock that lived in twilight. Their bodies appeared to be the work of a smith who forged not from metal, but from pure earth energy. Each figure had sunk into a posture of sleep: bowed heads, resting hands, closed eyes of bright crystal.

They stood around a circle whose center resembled still, dark water, although it contained not a drop. A basin of obsidian rock, its depth impossible to discern.

Borin knew immediately what he saw. Not from knowledge. From instinct. From connection.

These were the Titan's first guardians, created not to fight, but to observe. To hear the mountain breathe. To see Stone dream. To watch over the form the Titan had given the world.

But they had been asleep – for eons.

And now one of the original guardians began to stir.

A soft, subtle crackling sound rippled through the chamber, as if millennia-old pressure were being released. Crystalline eyelids moved. An arm of living stone trembled, as if searching for the first spark of thought. Then the figure slowly raised its head.

Her eyes opened.

Bright. Pure. As deep as the interior of a mountain.

And she saw Borin.

Not with surprise. Not with fear. But with recognition.

“Hammer-bearer... you have come.” The voice of the primal guardian was like a rolling boulder sinking into a deep mountain lake. Not loud, not harsh, but heavy and infinitely old.

Borin bowed slightly. "I am Borin. And I fell into the depths to touch the origin."

The original guardian stepped out of his position. His steps made the room vibrate, not from weight, but from significance.

The other guardians also began to stir – their eyes flickered weakly, as if consciousness were only slowly returning.

"The Titan awakens," said the Primal Guardian. "We feel his first breath. And his pain, which has become ordered."

Borin raised the hammer. "His pain could destroy him. But I have bound him."

The Primordial Guardian paused. His gaze fell upon the hammer, then upon Borin's chest, where the primal form shimmered like a bound star.

"You wear what no dwarf should wear. And you haven't been broken by it."

Then the titanic guardian figure bowed its head. "We recognize you. Borin, son of the stone. You are the messenger of awakening."

At that moment, the other guardians fully awoke.

A chorus of deep breaths filled the chamber. They straightened up. The runes on their stone forearms began to glow. Their eyes sparkled like cut diamonds.

A second guardian spoke:

"The mountain has called. The shadows have retreated. The beast has fallen. But order is not complete."

Borin nodded. "The Titan awakens—but he is not whole. His will is still scattered. His root was broken. I have awakened his sleep, but the mountain... needs you."

The first guardian stepped back into the circle. "That is why we were awakened."

The six formed a perfect circle around the dark pool in the center of the room. Runes on their bodies blazed. The air became heavy, vibrating, filled with power.

Borin felt the chamber itself hold its breath.

Then the original guardian spoke:

"The sleep of the guardians is broken. We are returning to the surface. The Titan will be guided. And the mountain will rise."

Borin tried to ask, "Where are you leading me?" But the Primordial Guardian only raised his hand.

The world shifted. The ground began to move. Not to tremble – to rise. As if the entire room were being carried upwards in a single, slow breath.

The ancient guardians marched. For the first step in eons.

Borin knew: This was the beginning of a new era.

The hall where Borin and the Primal Keepers now stood was no longer a silent place of waiting. It vibrated. Softly at first, barely perceptible, like the twitch of a muscle awakening from a long sleep. But within a few heartbeats, the tremor intensified, and the rock began to breathe like a living being, trapped for millennia and now gasping for air. The Primal Keepers stood in a circle, and with each further pulse of the mountain, their runes grew brighter until they glowed with a light that pierced the chamber's twilight.

Borin felt the primal form react within his chest. Not defiantly. Not warningly. But like a heart beating in unison with another—the titanic one, pulsing deep beneath them in the darkness. The mountain's breath brought Borin to a state of tension and awe, and he sensed that the Titan's awakening was not merely physical. It was an awakening of order.

The first guardian raised his hands. Stone separated from stone, as if invisible threads were reweaving the chamber. The ceiling above them opened, and above it lay not another layer of rock – but a vast, golden-glowing sphere of titanic light, pulsating like the core of a star.

"The Titan is preparing," said the Primal Guardian. "His mind is gathering. His will is reforming."

Borin raised the hammer. The brilliance of the titanic light reflected off its surface, making the metal appear alive. The runes along the handle flickered like sparks in a smithy.

"Why now?" Borin asked. "Why was I the one who had to touch him?"

The middle guardian – the oldest and deepest of the six – fixed his crystalline eyes upon him.

"Because a Titan cannot heal alone. Because its guilt must be bound not by power, but by craftsmanship." He took a step closer. "You are a blacksmith, Borin. You mend what is broken. You restore form where chaos reigns." Then the Primal Guardian laid his heavy, stone hand on Borin's shoulder. "As no Titan can."

Borin started to reply, but a deep thud reverberated through the room—a throbbing, primal sound that made the mountain tremble. The titanic core above them grew brighter, larger, almost dazzling, and the air itself began to sing. The Primal Guardians aligned their bodies like ancient soldiers receiving an order they had waited eons for.

"He's coming," whispered Thandur, who had approached Borin's side. His voice was hoarse with amazement. "Borin... the Titan is coming."

The floor swelled like a heartbeat, rising and falling. The entire chamber was now a living lung, breathing in and out titanic energy.

The guardians spoke in unison, and their voices sounded like the sound of stone reforming itself:

"Sleep ends. Will is found. The Titan rises."

The golden sphere in the chamber's sky began to open. Not like a door, but like an eye. A titanic consciousness poured out, heavy, powerful, so profound that even the room itself began to sway. Borin narrowed his eyes, not in fear, but from the overwhelming force of something ancient, dangerous, and yet sacred.

*"Hammer carrier..."*

The voice shook the chamber like an earthquake, yet it was heard only within Borin's chest. The words were unmistakable. This was the Titan.

*"You touched me."*

Borin stepped forward, gripping the hammer firmly.

"I have ordered your pain. But the mountain is not healed. It calls for you." He raised the tool. "And I am ready to go on."

A luminous glimmer burst forth from the sphere, drawing a path of light through the chamber – directly to Borin. It was warm, not burning. Heavy, but not oppressive. The primal form reacted instantly, pulsing intensely and merging with this beam.

Borin gasped, a shock of energy coursing through him. An image formed before his eyes — a place deep in the core of the mountain that no being, not even he, had ever seen before.

The origin. The heart of the world. The place where the Titan would finally awaken.

The Titan spoke again:

*"Come on, Borin."*

*It is time.*

And at that moment, a second door opened at the edge of the hall, unlike any before. Not a path. Not a tunnel. A rift of pure titanic light.

He was waiting. Only for him.

The guardians knelt.

Thandur took a step back.

And Borin knew: The next step would not only change his fate — but that of the whole world.

As the titanic rift of light opened, the Hall of the Primordial Keepers changed palpably. The air vibrated as if a colossal blacksmith's hammer were striking an invisible anvil. The golden sphere in the chamber's "sky" pulsed faster, shone brighter, and each beat was like the heartbeat of a being straining back to life from the infinite depths. The Primordial Keepers remained in a circle, kneeling like statues of living stone, yet they were more alert than ever before. Their crystalline eyes burned like beacons in the darkness.

Borin stood at the edge of the titanic rift of light. The hammer in his hand was heavy as a world. The primal form within his chest was a burning, living fragment of a star. Everything within him surged forward—and yet, at the same time, there was a spark of fear. Not of pain. Not of death. But of the knowledge that stepping through this light could lead him into a state from which there was no return.

Behind him, Thandur was breathing heavily. "Borin... whatever is in there... it's no longer dwarfish." His voice trembled. Not with fear—with greatness. "You are going where no living being has ever been."

Borin did not take his eyes off the light. "Then one of the living must be the first."

Thandur laughed softly, bitterly. "You talk like a king, even though you are not one."

Borin replied calmly: "Because I know what a king would do — and I know there isn't one here to do it."

The primal guardians rose unexpectedly. Not entirely, not completely—their bodies only straightened slightly, like ancient runes activated for the first time in ages. The light in their inner chambers glowed more brightly.



The first Primal Guardian spoke: "Hammer-bearer—hear us for the last time." His gaze bored into Borin like a truth. "Behind this light lies not the Titan. There lies the heart of his awakening."

The second guardian added, his voice like layers of stone sliding over one another: "There it will take shape. And when it takes shape... it will recognize you or reject you."

The third guardian stepped forward a hand's breadth. "Understand, Borin: A Titan does not see as a dwarf sees. His judgment is not about life or death. It is about order or chaos."

Borin felt the weight of these words. They were not a threat. They were a law.

The fourth guardian raised both arms in an ancient gesture. "You have touched his pain." The air flickered. "Now you will touch his consciousness."

The fifth added: "But bear this in mind: What you show him will become truth for the Titan. All future order depends on your will."

The sixth one let his gaze wander over Borin's hammer and original form. "That's why he chose you."

Borin lowered his head — not out of humility, but out of acceptance.

Then he lifted the blacksmith father's hammer. The runes along its handle flared up like newly kindled fires. Gold flooded the chamber. Violet answered. And the primal form within his chest began to beat in the same rhythm as the titanic heart above them.

Thandur took one last step closer and placed a hand on Borin's back. "Come back, brother." It wasn't a command. Not a request. It was an oath.

Borin turned halfway towards him. "I will return when order allows me to return."

Then he stepped into the titanic light.

It wasn't a step into a tunnel. Not a passage through a door. It was a passage through consciousness.

His body did not dissolve, but it had no substance left. His spirit did not dissolve, but it had no form left. Everything became a single, vibrant, titanic moment.

One blow. A second. A third.

The primal form reacted. The hammer vibrated in his hand. And a gigantic pressure seized him, as if the mountain itself recognized him... tested him... measured him.

Then Borin heard the Titan's voice, clearer than ever before:

*"Hammer carrier... finally you're here."*

The world turned golden. And Borin was swept away—into the heart of awakening.

## The War at the Root of the Mountain

Borin did not fall. He did not slide. He was not carried. The titanic light that enveloped him was not a space—it was a state. A state that swallowed form and time alike, until nothing remained but the pure will of a being that had arranged the first stone eons ago. Borin had no body, and yet he felt his limbs. He had no breath, and yet something sang in his chest. He existed in the consciousness of the Titan—and the Titan allowed him to see.

It didn't start with pictures. It started with pressure.

A tremendous, all-encompassing pressure, like the breath of a divine smith traversing an entire mountain range. A sensation that should have shattered the mind, yet the primal form within Borin's chest stood like a shield, a calm pulse that helped him comprehend the titanic will.

Then the pressure broke apart in two directions.

One side was gold. Order. Clarity. The shaped world as it should be.

The other side was blackish-purple. Chaos. Wounds. The initial fall. The darkness that Borin had touched in the depths – but bigger, older, deeper than that beast they had seen.

Between these two forces pulsed a heart of flickering light, torn but not broken. The Titan itself.

*“Hammer carriers... look.”*

The titanic voice didn't echo through the air, but through Borin's thoughts. And suddenly the light shattered, and Borin stood—or rather, was catapulted—into a vast expanse that wasn't made of stone, but of concepts that had taken on a form.

Before him lay the foundation of the mountain.

Not the rock that dwarven smiths had hewn away. Not the halls that generations had built. But the original, primeval root—a plain of floating veins of rock that snaked like mighty torrents through an endless space. Some of them glowed with pure titanic gold, others pulsed with violet pain, and still others were black, twisted, as if something alien had invaded them.

*“This is war.”*

The Titan spoke in images, not words.

*“The war that rages beneath everything.”*

Borin understood. This was not a war between peoples. Not a war between steel and shadow. It was a war between concepts. Between forces. Between that which held the world together – and that which wanted to tear it apart.

And right in the middle of it all, Borin saw her.

Creatures that were not bodies, but thought-forms of titanic pain. Shadowy figures with brittle lines that rippled through space like cracks. They had no eyes, and yet they saw him. They

had no mouths, and yet they screamed. They swarmed along the black and purple veins, gnawing at the golden currents like parasites at the roots of a tree.

They were more numerous than anything Borin had ever seen.

“That...” Borin’s voice was shaky, even here where words didn’t exist. “Those aren’t beasts. Those are... mistakes.”

*"Fault."*

The Titan confirmed.

*"Every wrong decision. Every broken order. Every failure I repressed... became them."*

The titanic guilt was alive. And it burrowed into the very foundation of all order.

Borin stood firmer. He raised the hammer. The titanic space reacted. Light condensed around him. The primal form beat like a second heart.

*"Why are you showing me this?"*

The Titan did not respond with words, but with a shock that ran through the room.

One of the golden streams broke. Not slowly. Not gradually. Suddenly – like a rope snapping after millennia of tension.

Shadows immediately plunged into the crack. They grew. They multiplied. They swallowed light. And the titanic space trembled.

Borin was pushed forward. He fell onto the plane of light. The rift drew closer.

And he heard the Titan say:

*"Because you are the only one who can give form – where I only know pain."*

Borin raised the hammer. The shadows rushed towards him. The plain trembled. The Titan screamed within him. And Borin felt:

This was no longer just an awakening. This was a battle. A battle in the heart of a god. A battle that would save the mountain—or destroy it.

The war beneath the mountain's root had begun.

The titanic rift before Borin widened like a gaping breath, and from it poured shadows that were not simply dark, but formed the darkness itself. They moved not like creatures, but like thoughts that shift too rapidly to be comprehended. Titanic space vibrated beneath their movements; each wave they created made the golden veins quiver, and each twitch brought a new tear into the fabric of order.

Borin raised the hammer. And the shadows paused.

Not out of fear. But out of understanding.

For this hammer was not a metal tool. It was a thought of the Titan, shaped in a dwarf's hand. It was order – the kind of order that the Titan himself could no longer touch.

The primal force within Borin's chest pounded hard, so powerfully that he nearly collapsed to his knees. Yet he stood firm. A single golden spark emerged from his chest and merged with the hammerhead. The space around him reacted instantly: lines of titanic light spiraled around the hammer, as if the Titan himself were drawing his power back to him.

Then it happened.

The shadows grew. A screaming, swirling mass that swept across the plain like a black storm. They moved not across the ground, but through it, as if the titanic space were merely a thin veil over an ancient abyss. Some of the shadows took on vaguely humanoid forms—distorted reflections of the Titan itself, born of miscalculation and guilt.

And amidst the chaos, Borin realized what he was fighting against:

These were the mistakes of a god.

No picture could have made this clear. No text. No song.

Only here, in the titanic consciousness, could Borin see how every misjudgment of the Titan – every hesitation, every false trust, every failed order – gave birth to a fragment of pain that now existed like a creature.

"You are... his doubts," Borin whispered. "And his anger."

A single shadow shot forward. It looked like a torn reflection of Borin. Wider. Taller. The hammer in his hand was a distorted echo, curved and black.

The Titan spoke in Borin's thoughts:

*"Destroy him. It's my oldest mistake."*

Borin yanked the hammer around. The shadow jumped. Their tools collided.

Gold versus black. Order versus pain.

The impact shook the plain, and a shock ran through Borin's arm. But not pain—realization. The shadow dissolved, becoming a mass of violet mist, and split into three new shadows, slimmer, faster.

Borin understood immediately:

He could not destroy them by smashing them. They were not made of matter. They were concepts.

He had to bind them. Like the titanic pain before.

He raised the hammer. The original mold was burning. Light burst forth from it, flooding the plain, forming lines, circles, rings that consisted of pure order.

The shadows shrieked silently, plunged into the patterns – and remained trapped. The lines closed around them like chains. And for the first time in eons, Borin heard titanic guilt cease to fester.

The Titan spoke:

*"This is how a dwarf forges. This is how a hammer-bearer creates order."*

But the battle was not won. The rift widened further. New shadows pushed forth, countless, denser, stronger.

The golden streams that crisscrossed the plain began to flicker. Some turned black. Others splintered.

The titanic voice became more urgent:

*"Borin. The Root has tested you. But this is my test."*

Borin concentrated. He struck the hammer on the ground.

The blow unleashed a golden roar of thunder that swept through the titanic space. The shadows receded for a heartbeat, their forms fluttering like smoke in a storm. But immediately the mass surged forward again.

It was too much.

No hammer, no dwarf, no titan could have withstood this flood.

Unless —one forged a new order.

The original form pulsed hotly. Borin closed his eyes and saw...

... his father's forge... the first fire he had lit himself... the sound of metal on metal that had shaped him as a child... the promise he had made to himself:

*"I will repair what breaks."*

Borin opened his eyes. The titanic room trembled.

"Titan," he said firmly, "your fault is not that you fell. Your fault is that you never reshaped your wound." He raised the hammer. The golden plain shone. "But a dwarf can shape what even a god dares not."

The titanic voice was silent. Not out of rejection. Out of anticipation.

Borin struck the hammer a second time. The titanic space ripped open. Not chaotic. Orderly.

A forge was formed. The largest forge in the world.

And Borin was at the center.

The shadows screamed. The fissure trembled. The mountain's root shook.

The war at the base of the mountain had taken a new turn.

Because Borin was no longer just a fighter.

He was a blacksmith in the heart of a god.

The titanic forge that formed around Borin was not a place as anyone knew it. It was not made of metal, fire, and stone; it was made of concepts. Of ideas. Of pure will seeking form. The air vibrated like glowing steel being laid on the anvil, and sparks of titanic energy spiraled through the space. But the anvil itself was not forged from iron—it had been created from the very essence of order that Borin had summoned in that godlike consciousness.

The roar of shadows grew louder. Black mass flowed from the rift like an unstoppable torrent of forgotten misjudgments. Creatures without bodies, composed of fissures in the titanic will, proliferated upon one another. Some took shape: distorted versions of the Primal Guardians, grotesque reflections of the Dwarves, even titanic forms—but all were shattered representations of what the Titan could have been.

“They are coming,” Borin murmured, and his voice echoed across the plain like a blacksmith’s blow.

The primal form within his chest burned, its light pulsing in rhythm with the titanic awakening. The hammer vibrated in his hand; sparks danced on its surface as if it might explode at any moment.

Then the Titan spoke.

*"Borin. In this forge I once shaped the world."  
But I shaped them alone.  
And my solitude brought about mistakes.*

The titanic voice vibrated through the golden firmament of the forge.

*"Shape with me."  
"Form what I destroyed."*

Borin stared into the chaos. Shadows as far as the eye could see. Each one a splinter of guilt, rage, fear. Each one a thought that had broken the Titan.

“I can’t beat them all,” said Borin.

*"No," replied the Titan.  
"You shall not hit her."  
You shall transform them."*

Borin raised the hammer. Then he struck.

The blow didn't hit an enemy. It hit the titanic space itself.

A sound like the clash of two worlds broke through the forge. A ring of pure order spread, golden lines forming circles, then spirals, then chains. They reached for the shadows, spinning webs of light, and Borin led—like a blacksmith creating perfection.

But the shadows fought back.

They pressed against the light, distorting it, causing cracks to appear. The golden lines began to break, warping. Violet shards shot out and struck Borin with such force that he staggered backward.

He fell — but the Titan caught him.

Not with one hand. With one thought.

*"Get up again, hammer-bearer."*

*The war is not yet decided.*

Borin rose. He saw the shadow wave.

It had grown larger, denser, heavier, like a flood threatening to engulf the entire titanic space.

"They grow... out of me," Borin whispered, startled. "Whenever I hesitate, more of them appear."

The Titan was silent for a moment. Then:

*"Yes."*

Borin stared. "These are... my mistakes?"

*"You now carry my pain,"* said the Titan.

*"And with it, its seed."*

A golden spark broke away from the titanic sphere and joined with Borin's chest.

*"But you are not me."*

*You can correct what I could only suppress.*

The realization hit Borin like a blacksmith's hammer.

The shadows were not merely titanic guilt. They reacted to him. They intensified through his doubts — and weakened through his determination.

Borin gripped the hammer more tightly. The original form pulsed.

"Then we'll shape it."

And he struck again.

This time the tone was different. Not like chaos versus order. But like two hammers striking in unison.

Golden lines spread out, but this time not as rigid chains. They moved like living threads, traversing the shadows, not enclosing them, but transforming them. Some of the shadows shrank, others lost their shape, still others turned into pale light.

Then something new happened.

A shadow, especially large, especially distorted, especially old—one that looked like a primal titan made of nightmare fabric—screamed when the golden lines touched it. Not in pain.

From recognition.

The Titan spoke:

*"This was my first doubt."*

A dull ache filled the forge.

*"Order him."*

Borin stepped forward, raised the hammer, and the golden power flowed through him.

"I'm classifying you," said Borin. "Not as a Titan—but as a dwarf."

He hit.

The shadow burst open — not into darkness, but into light.

And the titanic plane reacted.

The golden currents grew stronger. The purple lines healed. The rift began to close.

Borin gasped. Sweat—real, dwarven sweat—ran down his forehead, even though he had no body.

*"Once again,"*The Titan roared.

*"Forge on."*

*We're not quite there yet.*

Borin raised the hammer again.

He was no longer just a dwarf.

He was the blacksmith of a god.



## The elevation of the runic heart

The titanic space, reshaped anew, was still filled with the glowing echo of the last blow of the forge. Light and shadow traced cloud-like paths across the plain, like wisps of smoke from a colossal fire that did not die down but reignited itself. Borin stood on ground that was not stone, yet possessed the solidity of stone; a foundation that was also the titan's will. The golden lines he had forged earlier wandered like living runes through the surroundings, reweaving the chaos—not with violence, but with structure.

But something arose in the midst of this order.

First a pulse. Then a second, deeper one. Then a third that made the entire titanic space tremble.

Borin knew immediately: The Runeheart awoke.

It was invisible, yet its presence pushed back the titanic shadows like an unseen hand. The golden currents intensified, thickening into veins of pure titanic light. The violet shards in the room began to vibrate; some withdrew, others shattered. Even the titanic will breathed heavily, as if this awakening were an act that demanded effort even from a god.

A light appeared in the distance—not a sphere, not a spark. It was a geometric pattern that rotated, changed, grew. A circle that became a triangle, then a star symbol, then an unfathomable form that could not be described in dwarven words.

And Borin understood: This was the core of consciousness. Not of the Titan. But of the world.

The Rune Heart.

The Titan spoke, and his words resonated deeper than ever before:

*"Borin... you have ordered my pain."  
But order alone is not enough."*

The titanic core of light approached. The plain rose. Shadows receded.

*"The rune heart is the first form."  
The first decision.  
The first order from which I was born.*

Borin took a step forward. The hammer in his hand became as hot as molten steel; the primal form in his chest burned like a star about to explode.

"Why was it hidden?" he asked quietly.

The Titan replied:

*"Because I had lost it."  
In the case."*

Borin remembered the origin, the wound, the guilt—and how deeply all of it was buried within the Titan itself. But this was different. The Runeheart was not a site of wounds.

It was the place before. The place where the world was decided. Before mistakes were possible.

The titanic plain continued to tremble. The shadows grew nervous. Some grew, others shrank, as if sensing that something was coming that they could not bear.

The Titan spoke again:

*"Touch it."*

Borin hesitated. No dwarf had ever touched such power. No Titan would have entrusted it to a dwarf.

"Why me?" he asked.

The answer was so clear that the titanic space itself became a sounding board.

*"Because you know mistakes."  
And yet you create order."*

Borin raised his hand. The hammer glowed. The original form struck faster.

He stepped closer to the rotating, pulsating, ever-changing rune heart, and the air around him became so heavy he could hardly breathe. But he continued, step by step, like a blacksmith walking through fire without being consumed by it.

When his fingertips reached his heart, the world exploded.

Gold. Violet. Black. Flames of concepts. Circles of meaning. Lines rewritten. Mountains redefined. Shadows dissolving. New shadows born—but in order, not in chaos.

Borin didn't scream. He stood his ground.

The Titan screamed. But it was a scream of liberation.

The runeheart rose in Borin's chest. Not as possession. Not as power. But as a tool.

Borin sensed it. He knew it.

He had raised the runic heart.

And nothing in the mountain would ever be the same again.

The titanic light that had flooded Borin subsided only slowly. It had not been an explosion, but a transformation. The plane beneath his feet had ceased to be the titanic ground of consciousness he had entered and had become something else: a space of forms and lines of force that related to one another with unprecedented harmony. Where chaos and injury had

previously reigned, a network of golden and violet structures had now emerged—like the veins of a newborn god.

But the change was most noticeable in Borin itself.

The hammer in his hand was warm, yet steady—as if his inner self had realigned. The primal force within his chest was no longer a turmoil, no burning that turned into pain, but a steady, soothing beat. And beneath all these layers, he sensed the presence of the rune heart: not as an alien power, but as ancient knowledge, silently waiting to be used.

The Titan's voice no longer came as a thunderous command, but as pure resonance.

*"Hammer carrier... I feel it."*

Borin was breathing heavily, but remaining steadfast. "You were torn apart."

*"I was blind."*

The titanic plain—newly created, reordered—vibrated in unison with every word. Light pulsed through the currents, making the dark remnants of old guilt tremble at the edges of the world. The shadows hadn't vanished, but they had lost their terrible mass. They moved like smoke that finds no wind to rise from.

"What will happen to them?" Borin asked.

*"What you allow."*

Borin sensed the meaning behind these words. The runeheart wasn't inside him like a weapon. It was a tool. A tool that could both create and destroy order – depending on his will.

He looked around. The rift from which the shadows had emerged was no longer open. It was no longer a terrible abyss full of horrors.

He was a transition.

A transition to something the Titan was not allowed to enter alone.

Borin raised the hammer. The runes on the handle glowed, one after the other, like links of a chain being newly forged. As he swung the hammer, he left lines of light in the air. Shapes emerged from nothingness—geometric patterns that made sense, even though they could not be named. Each swing carved a new runic path into the plain, until a circle was complete.

The titanic world responded. Gold and violet sparkled. Shadows receded. And in the center of the circle, a new core of light emerged.

"What... is that?" whispered Borin.

*"Your order."*

The Titan approached – not as a physical form, but as a feeling of immeasurable grandeur that no dwarf's body could ever have comprehended.

*"You have touched the rune heart."  
It follows your will.  
"Now I am not forging alone."*

Borin felt dizzy. Not from weakness. From understanding.

The Titan continued:

*"I was the origin."  
Something of me became the world.  
Something of me became the wound.  
"Something in me became guilty."*

Light flickered across the plain. The shadows screamed – softly, as an echo.

*"But there was never anything within me that could recreate order."  
The voice deepened.  
"Until you fell."*

Borin raised his head. "And what if I shape it incorrectly? What if I make mistakes myself?"

*"Then you will heal them."*

A simple answer. An endless burden.

The Titan led:

*"The rune heart does not follow my will."  
It follows yours.  
What you do... becomes the world.*

Borin stared at the newly created rune circle. It was perfect – and yet unfinished. A form that still needed a blacksmith.

"What should I mold?" he finally asked.

This time, the answer was not the voice of the Titan. It was the plain itself that answered.

The golden streams flowed into a circle. The violet threads arranged themselves. The shadows shrank inwards, as if waiting for a blow that would transform them.

And suddenly Borin saw something in the middle of the ring.

A figure. Blurred. Then clearer. A body of stone. A heart of runes. Not a titan. Not a dwarf.

Something in between. Something new.

The runic heart had shown him the shape.

Borin took a deep breath.

He knew what he had to do.

He lifted the hammer of the blacksmith father. He felt the power of the Titan. He felt the expectations of the primal guardians. He felt the weight of the world.

Then he hit him.

The sound echoed across the plain like a new law.

The shape made of light began to take shape.

The raising of the Rune Heart had begun.

The blow Borin struck against the titanic plane was more than a movement of his arm. It was a law taking shape. A command to reality itself. The sound was not loud, but deep—so deep that Borin heard it not with his ears, but with his bones, with his primal form, with his own will. The titanic world trembled. The runic circle began to burn in radiant gold and violet, and the light formed itself like molten steel poured into an invisible mold.

The figure at the center of the circle became clearer. At first, Borin saw arms that weren't quite arms—lines that coalesced into limbs composed of pure order. Then a torso that formed like layered stone, yet was simultaneously traversed by veins of titanic energy. The runes he had forged laid themselves over this form like living patterns, weaving themselves into it and connecting each segment.

The creature was neither a titan nor a dwarf, but it possessed characteristics of both.

It didn't stand still, it grew. It didn't grow from matter—it grew from meaning.

The Titan spoke, and this time his voice was more cautious, almost reverential:

*"You are shaping... an heir."*

Borin did not lower the hammer. He swung it in a circle above his head again and struck a second time.

The new blow didn't shake the world. It brought order to it.

The shadows at the edges of the plain diminished. The black cracks closed. The purple lines smoothed out. Golden threads bound together the remaining fragments of titanic guilt—not to bind them, but to transform them.

Something in the titanic voice broke—not pain, not a scream. Something like relief.

*"I was always afraid of this part."  
The part that I couldn't organize on my own.*

Borin raised the hammer for the third time. The primal form in his chest burned so hot that he felt his body could not endure — yet he stood firm.

"I'm not organizing for you," said Borin. "I'm organizing with you."

The Titan remained silent. But it was a silence that could only consist of consent.

Borin struck a third time.

Gold. Violet. Light. Movement. Form.

The figure rose from the circle of runes. Complete.

She had a body of layered rock, but this rock was not natural: it was pure conceptual structure. Each layer was a decision, each vein a conscious choice. A heart of runes pulsed in her chest—neither warm nor cold, but filled with a power that lay beyond the old order. Her face was simple: not a dwarf, not a titan, but a mask of glowing lines, its eyes shining with bright triangular runes.

And yet, in everything about her there was something deeply... familial.

The figure opened its eyes. Golden light streamed from them.

The Titan whispered:

*"This is the rune heart... in form."*

Borin slowly stepped back. Not out of fear. Out of reverence.

The figure turned its head. It saw Borin. It saw the hammer. She saw the original form. And she slowly raised her hand — a hand made of lines, not stone.

“What’s your name?” asked Borin, even though he knew that names worked differently in this room.

The being's voice was like the sound of a blacksmith's fire being gently kindled:

“I am what you formed.” A second sound followed. “I am what the world needs.” A third. “I am order that was born.”

Then the being lowered its hand and spoke a single name:

"I am Runeheart."

The titanic plain trembled. Not out of fear. Out of recognition.

The Titan spoke:

*"The mountain will no longer stand alone."*

*"I am no longer a single will."*

*"You have given us an heir."*

The golden veins in the ground began to flow, like streams finally remembering where they must go. The shadows fell back, shrunk, became smaller and smaller, until they were nothing more than dull patches in the titanic light.

Borin breathed heavily. He looked at the Runeheart—the being that was neither titan nor dwarf. A new will. A new order.

The world had changed. The mountain had found new life. And the future was no longer defined by guilt.

It had been forged.

“Come,” said the runeheart. “It is time to return.”

Borin nodded.

The titanic plain opened a new way — a path of light that led neither down nor up, but out.

The Titan whispered:

*"Borin. Hammerträger."  
You are not at the end.*

Borin stepped forward. Runeheart followed.

The survey was complete.

### **A stone shattered, a stone awakened**

The path of titanic light that opened before Borin was no ordinary path. It was a line of pure meaning, suspended in titanic space, composed of the very structure Borin had just created. The path's golden and violet edges pulsed in sync with the primal form within his chest and with the inner beat of the newly awakened runic heart that stood beside him. This being was both familiar and incomprehensible: a creature of order and will, a link between titanic creation and the dwarven world.

Borin stepped onto the path of light. He expected hardship, but felt none. It was as if he were walking on flowing knowledge—each step shifting the path's meaning without losing its direction. The Runeheart followed him in absolute silence, but the silence was not empty. It was filled with a power that needed no words. Each of its steps caused runes to flicker beneath them, only to fade away again instantly.

Then the Titan spoke. His voice no longer came from the walls, nor from the plain, nor from the room — it came from all directions at once, as if the entire Titan consciousness had begun to reorganize itself.

*"Hammer carrier. The order is in motion. I am in motion."*

Borin nodded slightly — he knew that the Titan felt him, not saw him.

“You are awakening,” said Borin. “And the mountain with you.”

A gentle tremor ran through the titanic space, as if the Titan were confirming every word.

But beyond the path of light, Borin saw something new.

The titanic shadows, which had previously swept across the plain like a flood, had changed. They had become smaller, some as thin as threads, others barely more than patches flickering in the light. But their movement no longer contained wild jerking, no chaos. They twisted, sought form—as if they too longed to be ordered.

The Titan spoke again:

*"They were my pain."  
Now they are my memory."*

One sentence. One change. One law.

Borin understood that the shadows would not disappear—and should not. For even a Titan could not lose his history.

"I'll rearrange them further if you want," said Borin.

*"No," replied the Titan.  
"You have done enough organizing."*

A golden crack opened at the end of the path of light, and Borin immediately recognized the structure: It was a passageway. A transition back to the physical world.

His heart beat in his chest. Not out of fear. Out of anticipation.

"What awaits us?" Borin asked.

But before the Titan could answer, the Runeheart spoke again for the first time since its elevation:

"A stone shatters..." The voice sounded like the sound of two anvils touching — not a sound, but an event. "...another awakens."

Borin turned around. "What do you mean?"

The rune heart raised its hand. The runes along its arm lines flickered like star trails.

"The order we created here is not only at work in the Titan," it said. "It is at work in the mountain. In the world. In all stone."

Suddenly, a tremendous sound tore through the titanic plain.

A roar like a thousandfold rockfall, a sound that echoed not through air, but through reality itself. The ground—which had only just been leveled—vibrated harshly. Runes flickered. Shadows cried out briefly and vanished into themselves.

Borin turned around. "What was that?!"



The Titan answered.

*"An awakening."*

*No mistake.*

*One episode."*

The Runeheart placed its hand on Borin's back.

"A stone was shattered," it repeated. "Up there in the mountain. An ancient curse. An ancient presence. An ancient guardian."

Borin froze. "Who?"

The Runeheart gazed into the distance with its flaming rune eyes, into an area that Borin could not see.

"The stone seers are not the only ones awakening." He lowered his hand again. "Something else is stirring. Something that was not forgotten—but bound."

Borin swallowed hard. "Friend... or foe?"

The runic heart gazed at him for a long time.

"That depends on you."

The titanic space split open. The way back opened. The world waited.

"Come," said the rune heart. "The mountain is moving. The world is being reborn."

Borin raised the hammer. The primal form struck. The Titan breathed.

And together they stepped through the crack—back into the world where one stone had been destroyed and another had awakened.

The transition from the titanic realm of consciousness back into the world was not a step, but a condensation. The golden light that had surrounded Borin and the Runeheart contracted like a forge's glow, shrinking to the size of a flame with a single breath—and then extinguished in a moment of utter darkness. Yet this darkness was not empty. It was filled with sound. With pressure. With ancient, primordial stone, awakening like a colossal body stretching its limbs after millennia.

Borin opened his eyes, and the world was stone again.

But it's not the same stone anymore.

They stood in the vast main shaft of the Underworld, where silence had once reigned. The ceilings were as high as cathedrals, supported by natural pillars that seemed lost in the dim light. But now the hall vibrated, as if something beneath the floor were pulsing. Fine dust trickled from the ceiling. Veins of rock began to glow, as if light were rising within them.

And then Borin heard it again:

The sound of shattering.

Not like a rockfall. Not like an axe blow. It was something deeper. Slower. More significant.

Like breaking an age-old decision.

Thandur was the first to appear. Dust clung to his beard, his runes glowing restlessly. When he saw Borin, his gaze was first relief, then disbelief—and finally awestruck fear as he realized something was standing behind Borin.

“By all the blacksmith fathers,” he whispered. “What... in the world is that?”

The runeheart stepped forward. It had shrunk—no longer as large as a titan's gleam, but about the size of a dwarf, yet its body was composed of layers of stone and runes that danced within it like liquid fire. It was neither threatening nor comforting. It was... undeniable.

“I am order that rises,” said the Runeheart, and its voice echoed through the hall without the air even vibrating. “Fear me not, son of the anvil.”

Thandur swallowed, nodded slowly — and involuntarily took a step back.

Borin stepped beside the runic heart. "The Titan awakens," he said. "And with him, the mountain."

"We can feel it!" shouted a voice from afar. The Iron Brothers appeared, soot and panic on their faces, some with broken hammers in their hands.

"The mountain is trembling everywhere!" someone cried. "Passages that were buried are opening again!" "Runestones are shining, silent since King Harûn!" "And something... something great has awakened! In the deepest halls!"

Borin felt the words like hammer blows in his own chest.

That was it. That was the shattered stone. The stone that had been broken in the titanic plain — the effect was now physically evident.

"What exactly has awakened?" asked Borin, although he already sensed the answer.

The ground trembled again. This time more violently. The hall rocked like a ship in a storm. Stone slabs ripped apart. Light—real, golden light—burst from the cracks.

And then they heard it.

One breath.

Slow. Difficult. Like entire layers of earth being pulled in.

The Iron Brothers froze. Thandur grabbed Borin's arm.

"This is not a shadow. Not an evil. This is... this is too big."

The rune heart placed its hand on the ground. Runes spread out like circles on water.

"Not too big," it said quietly. "Just very old."

The light from the cracks intensified. Dust swirled up like smoke. The breath was repeated—this time faster, heavier.

And Borin understood.

"A guard," he whispered.

Thandur's eyes widened. "What kind of guard?"

But the answer did not come from Borin, nor from the Runeheart.

But from the ground itself.

A voice — deep, rough, silent for a long time — spoke:

"Who stirs me...from my sleep?"

Stone slabs broke. A massive hand of ancient, textured stone pushed upwards — five fingers, each as large as an anvil block.

A head rose. A face, stern and angular like the countenance of an ancient statue, one never crafted by mortal hands. Runes covered it. They glowed.

The creature was not a Titan. It was not a Dwarf. It was not a Runeheart.

It was an original guardian. One of the first.

He opened his eyes. Two vertical stripes of white-gold fire burned out.

"The mountain... is calling." The voice echoed like a rock speaking. "And I... must answer."

Borin breathed shallowly. Thandur knelt. The Iron Brothers retreated.

And the rune heart calmly said:

"One stone shattered, one stone awakened." It pointed to the primal guardian. "He was the prize. And the reward."

Borin swallowed. A new player had awakened. One older than kings, older than halls, older even than many titanic orders.

And the war that was to come had just found a new giant.

The primal guardian continued to rise, each movement an earthquake. Not destructive, but relentless. Dust billowed from the walls, loose boulders broke free and crashed to the ground. The gigantic body rose from the stony ground like an ancient tree from fertile soil. Its runes flared and died down again, as if searching for a rhythm it had forgotten.

Borin and the Iron Brothers stood frozen in place. The primal guardian ignored them. Not yet.

His gaze—two vertical fissures of blazing fire—traversed the hall as if gauging whether it was still the same world as before his long slumber. And each breath was like the slow influx of ancient mountain air, lying in the deepest layers of the mountain.

The Runeheart stepped beside Borin. Its voice was calm, but Borin heard a heaviness in it that he had not known before.

"A guardian of this age does not awaken without reason," it said. "He was not summoned. He was set free."

Borin glanced at the creature. "Freed... from what?"

The runic heart pointed to the ground — to the cracks from which the primal guardian had emerged.

"There was a spell that held him. A spell that did not originate from the Titan."

Borin frowned. "Who could...?"

But the answer came from the original guardian himself.

He leaned forward slowly. His face, ancient as the world itself, seemed to narrow, as if trying to recognize the dwarves. Then he raised his voice—a thunderous roar that rolled through the halls, stirring up dust like an approaching storm.

"You carry the scent of the mountain," he said. "You are its children."

Thandur stammered: "U... Primordial guardian... venerable lord... we serve the mountain – and order!"

The giant lowered his head a little, so low that his stone chin almost touched the ground.

"Order," he murmured, as if he could taste the word. "A word I haven't heard in a long time."

Borin stepped forward. "I am Borin, son of the Stone People. I come with the hammer of the blacksmith fathers... and with the rune heart." He pointed to the being beside him.

The eyes of the primal guardian flickered. Not with anger. With realization.

"The Titan has sent you." It was not a question.

The Runeheart answered instead of Borin: "Yes. Because the world is changing. And your task has changed."

The primal guardian rose fully. Now his full size was visible: he reached almost to the height of the hall's dome. His shoulders, broad as fortress walls, were covered with layers of runes that now rearranged themselves, as if shedding old forms.

"I was bound," he said. "Bound by those who feared the depths. I was to be silent. I was to sleep. I was to forget."

Borin suspected something. "Who bound you? Dwarves?"

The ancient guardian laughed. It was a soundless tremor. "No, hammer-bearer. Not your kind. Your ancestors knew what I was. They respected my watch."

His gaze darkened. A deep shadow passed through the runes on his chest.

"I was bound by those who were afraid that one day I would wake up and see the truth."

"Which truth?" Borin asked.

The ancient guardian lowered his head. His face was like a mountain that had learned melancholy.

"That the Titan is not dead."

The Iron Brothers muttered. Tangur gasped. Borin felt the hammer grow heavier.

The Runeheart took a step forward. Its eyes now glowed brighter, calmer, as if it recognized in the primal guardian not chaos, but an ancient, forgotten order.

"The world believed the Titan was lost," said the Runeheart. "They were wrong. But some wanted the mistake to remain."

The ancient guardian nodded. "And they did everything to bury the truth deep inside me."

Borin felt the weight of this revelation like a boulder.

"And now?" he asked.

The primal guardian straightened up. His breath transformed dust into mist. His eyes flashed.

"Now," he said, "I will do what I should always do."

He stretched out his hand — and placed it towards Borin.

A gesture as if he wanted to bow without bending his body.

"I recognize you, Hammer-bearer. Not as a dwarf. Not as a mortal. But as the one who has healed the Titan's wound."

Borin stepped forward hesitantly and touched the stone palm. A spark of titanic power coursed through him, but this time there was no pain in it—only recognition.

"You have awakened me," said the primal guardian. "Now I will stand with you against what is to come."

"What's coming?" Thandur asked weakly.

The primordial guardian gazed upwards — deep into the halls, through the rocks, through the world. An expression of knowledge, absent for eons, returned to his stony features.

"The mountain is not just moving," he said.

"He is gathering himself."

Borin and the Runeheart exchanged a glance.

Something big began. Something inevitable. Something that not only accompanied the awakening of the Titan —

but challenged.

The original guardian spoke one last sentence:

"A war is coming. Bigger than any before."

## The Hall of Last Truth

The path the Ancient Guardian showed led deeper into the mountain than any dwarven map had ever recorded. Not even the oldest chronicles of the Stone-seers mentioned the paths that now opened before Borin, the Runeheart, and the Iron Brothers. The air changed with every step—heavier, denser, filled with a kind of stillness that was not the absence of sound, but the presence of something great, too ancient to make noise anymore.

The tunnels grew, widening, then narrowing again, as if following the course of an ancient breath. Runes glowed in the walls, not brightly, but like ancient mica, recalling long-forgotten times. Some were broken, others incomplete, still others rekindled by the change spreading through the mountain.

Borin sensed the rhythm of the titan in the distance. Every step. Every breath. Every flickering change in the rock.

But there was something else. Something he couldn't grasp. A thought that didn't belong to the Titan.

An echo.

The ancient guardian stopped.

"We are close," he said in a voice that sounded like rolling stones. "The hall lies beyond this threshold."

Borin looked ahead and saw an archway. An immense, monumentally high archway made of black stone, smooth as polished obsidian, yet crisscrossed by fine golden lines that glittered in the light like veins of metal. These lines formed no known runes. They were older. Raw. The first strokes of a being that had to learn concepts before it could find words.

The rune-heart inclined its head. "This is the handwriting of the Titan before he understood order."

Thandur examined the lines with wide eyes. "This... this is older than our language. Older than form itself."

Borin felt a shiver. "What lies behind it?"

The original guardian replied:

"The Hall of Last Truth. There the Titan wrote his first law – before he knew he was writing a law."

He placed his massive hand on the obsidian arch. A deep, vibrating sound spread, and the gate began to open. The mass of stone did not slide aside; it dissolved like mist, from form to formlessness, and then into a new form that cleared the way.

A light shone forth. Not a golden glow like in the titanic plains. Not a cold blue like in the deepest rock. This was a pure, whitish light, clear and immeasurably deep, as if it were the essence of truth itself.

Borin was the first to enter.

The Hall of Ultimate Truth was not a room. It was a glimpse into the emergence of order.

It was so tall that its end disappeared into the white light. Pillars of pure meaning rose like runes that had grown organically. The ground was smooth as polished stone, but when Borin looked closely, he recognized patterns in it that never repeated themselves, yet seemed to repeat themselves constantly.

And in the middle of the hall stood...a stone tablet.

Inconspicuous. Unbreakable. Unsecured.

Borin knew immediately: This was it. The original tablet. The first law.

The Runeheart stepped beside him. "This tablet contains the truth that even the Titan forgot."

Borin swallowed.

Thandur whispered: "And what... does it say?"

The ancient guardian answered slowly, with a voice like broken granite:

"That no will – not even that of a Titan – may exist without witnesses."

Borin didn't understand immediately.

Then he saw the rune-heart gaze at the stone tablet. Not with fear. Not with awe. But with understanding.

"This is the reason the Titan fell," said the Runeheart. "He walked the path alone."

Borin felt the air grow heavier. The truth in this hall wasn't knowledge. It was judgment.

And he knew: This was a place that not only revealed — but changed.

The table was waiting.

And whatever Borin learned now would decide the war that was about to begin.

Borin slowly approached the primal tablet. Each step echoed in the hall, not as sound, but as a gentle fluctuation of the white light that filled the space. It was as if the hall itself were breathing—as if it had been waiting. Not for just any bearer of a hammer or any guardian of fire, but for precisely this dwarf in this moment of the world.

Thandur whispered reverently, "Are you alright, Borin? You're turning... very pale."

But Borin barely heard him. His attention was bound, drawn, attracted like metal to the magnet of a primal force. The primal force within his chest beat faster, as if recognizing that the stone before him was not truly a stone—but a law so ancient that even the Titans could not comprehend it.

The Runeheart positioned itself to the right of Borin. Its eyes, filled with shimmering lines, observed the tablet with a stillness no dwarf had ever known.

"Remember," the rune heart said softly, "whatever you touch in this hall... touches you back."

The original guardian nodded. "And it changes you. There is no one who has left the hall unchanged."

Borin took a deep breath. He had known for a long time that retreat was not an option. He had gone too far. The Titan had led him too far. The world had led him too far.

He stretched out his hand. His fingertips trembled slightly.

And then he touched the original tablet.

The world didn't explode. It didn't perish. It changed.

First everything went dark.

But this darkness was not emptiness. It was the darkness before the world, before the first spark of order had been kindled. A darkness that was not evil, but undecided. Unformed. The darkness of possibility.

Then Borin heard a voice. A voice that was not the Titan. Not the Runeheart. Not an Ancient Guardian.

A voice so old that it had no sound.



*"Willpower alone is blind."*

The words struck Borin's mind like a blacksmith's hammer. He saw images – not one after the other, but all at once:

The Titan, as he created his first forms. How he raised mountains and guided rivers. How he created the first guardians – beings of rock and will.  
How he created the primal guardians who would later sleep. How he wrote the first runes, imperfectly, searching.

But nobody was standing next to him.

He walked the path alone.

And the first mistake arose from being alone. Not out of malice. Out of loneliness.

Borin suddenly felt an immense heaviness. Not physical. Mental.

He witnessed the Titan's fall. He saw wounds inflicted that could not heal. How guilt accumulated and formed entities. How the Titan tried to suppress instead of heal.

And he saw the future – not fixed, but possible.

A world where the Titan falls again because no one stands by him. A world where the dwarves eventually perish because they believed they had to act alone. A world where the mountain is silent because no one listens.

Then the light came back.

Borin was back in the hall. But something was different.

The original tablet glowed. Not brightly. Not gently. It glowed like a heart.

Thandur stared. "By all the rune hammers... Borin... your eyes...!"

Borin blinked. He felt something warm on his face. He rubbed his eyelids – and saw that fine golden light clung to his fingertips.

He had runes in his eyes. He saw the world differently now.

The runeheart approached. "The truth has touched you," it said. "You now know what the Titan never knew."

The primal guardian bowed – a gesture that his gigantic body hardly allowed.

"You are no longer just a dwarf, Borin. You are a witness."

Borin was breathing heavily, but clearly. "I saw... why the Titan fell."

The Runeheart replied:

"And now you know how he has to get up."

Borin closed his eyes. He saw the truth behind the truth.

The Titan could not fix the world alone. Not anymore. Never again.

He needed someone by his side.

Someone who sees what they don't see. Someone who isn't omnipotent—and precisely for that reason recognizes where order breaks down. Someone who knows that craftsmanship isn't just about shaping things...

... but also preserved something.

When Borin opened his eyes again, he spoke in a calm, firm voice:

"The Titan needs a witness. Someone to hold the world with him."

Thandur stared. "And who... by all the gods... could that be?"

Borin looked at the hammer. He looked at the runic heart. He looked at the original tablet.

Then he spoke the sentence that would change the fate of the mountain:

"I."

The hall responded with a sound that sounded like truth itself.

The words hung heavy in the room, heavier than any weapon, heavier than any rock Borin had ever lifted. "I," he had said. And the hall responded with a sound that belonged to no voice, no rock, no wind—it was a sound of meaning. A blaze in the very fabric of the world.

Thandur took a step back as if struck by something invisible. "Borin... you can't be serious... you? A witness of the Titan?"

But Borin knew: It wasn't a wish. It was a necessity.

The Runeheart stepped forward and faced Borin. Its eyes, two burning triangular shards, shimmered calmly.

"You witnessed it before you knew it," said the Runeheart. "When you ordered the Titan's pain. When you did not break where everyone else would have fallen. When you healed a wound older than your kind."

The ancient guardian nodded. "Witness is not a title. Not an office. Not a rule." His voice was a tremor, wanting to be gentle but barely able to be. "It is a burden. A burden that only someone who knows breaking can bear."

Borin took a deep breath, the hammer firmly in his hand. "And what does it mean? To be a witness?"

The rune heart raised its hands. The hall reacted. Light flooded in, gathered around Borin, and formed lines that twisted around him like living threads.

"A witness," said the Runeheart, "is never above the Titan. But he is also not below him."

The lines gathered in Borin's chest to form the original shape without touching it. A circle of light that acted like a new rune.

"A witness is one who sees when a titan errs." The voice of the rune-heart deepened. "One who admonishes him. One who holds him. One who shows him that no will can stand alone."

Borin was silent. His heart pounded, heavy as metal as it cooled.

Thandur murmured, "That means... you will be able to contradict the Titan?"

"If he's wrong," said Borin, "then I have to be."

The original guardian approached, each movement a thunderclap. "That's how it was always intended. The original tablet... was not just a law."  
She was a protection. So that the Titan would never stand alone again."

Borin looked at the original tablet. The runes glowed within it, not in rigid order, but like arteries. Life. Knowledge. Truth.

"Why was the truth hidden?" Borin asked quietly.

The Runeheart lowered its head. "Because those who were powerful feared the Titan's fall. And because those who were weak blindly worshipped his decisions." A bitter spark flickered in the lines of his face. "A Titan without witnesses becomes a law without test."

The primal guardian was now kneeling completely, for the first time since his awakening.  
"But now you are here."

Borin didn't know what to say. He only knew that his heart was heavy – not with fear, but with responsibility.

"What does the hall demand of me?" he finally asked.

The Runeheart replied:

"Only one thing: that from now on you do not act for yourself, but for order."

Silence filled the room. Long and deep. Then they heard it again –

A rumbling sound in the distance.

A rumbling sound that didn't originate from rock. Not from shadows. But from the Titan itself.

Thandur turned around. "What was that?!"

The ancient guardian rose. His eyes flickered.

"The Titan sensed that you had seen the truth."

Borin blinked. The golden runes in his eyes flickered.

"He... can feel me?"

"He recognizes you," said the rune heart.

The rumbling intensified. The hall vibrated. Runes on the walls lit up – old, new, broken, healed.

THEN a voice broke the silence.

Not loud. Not angry. But immense, deep, ancient. She did not speak to everyone.

Go to Borin.

*"Come."*

Borin shivered. The Titan called.

And he understood what had to happen next.

"It is time," said the rune heart. "Time to bear witness."

The primal guardian stood up. "The Titan awaits you. He awaits both of you."

Thandur grabbed Borin's arm. "Brother... where are you going?"

Borin looked towards the exit of the hall, in the direction of the vibrating rock.

"Towards ultimate truth," said Borin. "And perhaps... towards first order."

The Hall of Last Truth left no shadow. It left a decision.

Borin was no longer just a blacksmith. Not just a hammer-wielder. He was the witness.

And the mountain was waiting for him.

## The Chosen One of the Rocky Paths

The way out of the Hall of Last Truth was no ordinary tunnel, no passage of stone hewn by dwarven hands. It was a path of meaning, born only when Borin took the first step. The rocks shifted beneath his feet. Not through magic, not through force—but through recognition. The mountain recognized him now. Not as a son of the Stone Folk, not as a craftsman, not as one of the many who came and went. It recognized him as something that had not existed since the earliest times: a witness.

Thandur and the Iron Brothers followed Borin at a respectful distance. The Runeheart walked beside him, its footsteps barely audible, though each one made the ground glow. Behind them all strode the Primordial Guardian, so immense that his mere presence made the air vibrate. And yet he was silent—like a mountain that had learned to respect silence.

The path narrowed, became lower, until even the primal guardian had to bow his head. But the walls themselves yielded to him, as if bowing before an ancient power. Veins of rock glowed green and gold, some violet, and Borin sensed that these colors were not accidental. They were the breath of order that marked the way.

He felt every vibration of the mountain. It wasn't an earthquake. It was an awakening.

After a long passage, a new chamber opened up—a natural dome of massive pillars that grew out of the rock like gigantic ribs. In the center was a raised mound of layered rock, and Borin immediately sensed what this was.

"The Path of Rocks," whispered Thandur. "The elders spoke of it. A place no living dwarf has ever set foot in."

The ancient guardian nodded slowly. "A place where the mountain recognizes those who can bear its will."

Borin stepped closer. The air grew heavier. Not oppressive—venerable. Every breath tasted of dust older than any dynasty, any crevice in the stone, any law of the dwarves.

The Runeheart placed its hand on Borin's shoulder.

"You must walk this path alone."

"Why?" Thandur asked immediately. "We accompanied him all the way here — we can't..."

The Runeheart raised its hand, and Thandur fell silent. It was not a threat, not a command, but a truth spoken in silence.

"The rocky paths recognize no companion," it said. "Only a will. Only a step. Only a truth it can bear."

The primal guardian stepped forward. His voice filled the entire chamber.

"The Titans didn't build the rocky paths to test strength. Anyone can have strength." He looked deeply at Borin. "They were created to test whether a being carries its own will—or the will of another."

Borin understood. He was the witness. But only if the mountain recognized him as such.

The rune mound before him began to glow. Runes wrote themselves across the rock, first slowly, then faster. Borin recognized some—ancient runes, dwarven and titanic at once. Others were new—perhaps not even words, but feelings incarnate.

A line of light appeared on the ground.

It led up the hill.

Borin took a deep breath, lifted the hammer, and felt his heart fill with a weight that came not from fear, but from meaning.

Thandur shouted after him: "Borin... if you fall, the mountain falls!"

"No," said the runeheart. "If he falls, the old order falls. And a new one is born."

Borin heard both voices. And yet he heard something else. Something deeper.

The breath of the Titan. The sound of truth. The mountain's anticipation.

He placed his foot on the first step of the rocky path.

The rock trembled — not in rejection, but in a testing manner.

The second stage. A sound like the beating of a heart.

The third. Golden light discharged at the edge of the chamber.

And suddenly a narrow crack of titanic radiation opened in the ceiling.

Thandur gasped. "By all the runes... he will be chosen!"

Borin felt the mountain's power flowing towards him — not warm, not cold, but like an ancient memory that he had never possessed and yet never lost.

The Runeheart spoke:

"The rocky paths recognize you." His eyes flickered. "Go on. For the Titan awaits."

Borin climbed higher. And the mountain watched him.

He was no longer just a hammer-bearer. Not just a blacksmith. Not just a witness.

He was the one whom the mountain itself should recognize.

The Chosen One of the Rocky Paths.

The rocky path rose like an ancient ridge through the chamber, and the higher Borin climbed, the more the world around him changed. The air grew denser, more vibrant, as if the mountain itself were breathing through the cracks in the rock. The path was no ordinary route; it reshaped itself beneath Borin's feet with every step. Stones shifted, rearranged themselves, and then folded back together, as if testing whether the person treading them was worthy to proceed.

On the fourth step, the hill began to glow.

Golden lines shot through the stone, like glowing veins of metal searching for a form. The heat rose towards Borin—not burning, but testing, as if the mountain wanted to feel whether the hammer-bearer's heart was strong enough to withstand this light.

Behind him, Thandur and the Iron Brothers instinctively held their breath. Even the Runeheart remained silent. Even the Primal Guardian dared not move.

Borin continued to rise.

Fifth step.

A deep humming filled the chamber. The sound wasn't beautiful. Not ugly. It was... significant.

Sixth step.

The rock grew warm. Borin felt the warmth penetrate his boots and touch his bones.

Seventh step.

The primal form within his chest pulsed, stronger than ever before—as if it recognized the path. As if something in the rock were answering.

Step eight.

Borin stopped. A pattern appeared in the rock before him—a rune. Not a dwarven rune. Not a titan rune.

A rune he had never seen before.

It glowed in three colors: gold, violet, and white.

The rune heart whispered behind him – so quietly that it was barely audible:

"This is the Path Rune. The oldest. The one that even tested Titan."

Thandur swallowed audibly: "What... what is she doing?"

"She is showing him herself," replied the rune heart.

Borin felt the rune pulsate, and suddenly the ground beneath him became as solid as iron. The chamber faded. The voices disappeared.

He stood alone.

Alone in a room of shimmering white. No shadow. No floor. No sky.

Only him.

And the rune in front of him.

Then she spoke.

No voice. No sound.

It was a realization.

*"Who are you, hammer-bearer?"*

Borin didn't answer immediately. He knew this wasn't a question about his name, or his origin.

"I am Borin," he finally said. "Son of the Stone People. Blacksmith."

The world around him shimmered. The rune pulsed again.

*"That's what you were."  
Not what you are.*

Borin felt himself getting short of breath. He concentrated.

"I am the one who touched the pain of the Titan. And who did not break."

The rune shimmered brighter.

*"That's what you did."  
Not what you are.*

Borin clenched his fist around the hammer handle. The room vibrated.

"I am..." He paused. For the first time since he had entered the titanic room.

Then came the realization. Simple. Clear. Inevitable.

"I am the witness."

The rune flared up. The white space trembled. A wind—without origin—passed through it.

*"That's what you need to become."  
But not what you are."*

Borin gasped. "What does the path demand of me then?!"

And this time the rune answered with one word.



*"Truth."*

Borin felt a pulling sensation. Sharp. Deep. Not physical—mental.

Images flashed by:

He saw himself as a child, weak and insecure. He saw himself as a young blacksmith, proud and angry. He saw his mistakes. His decisions. The times he had lied to himself. The times he remained silent when he should have spoken. The times he showed courage. The times he lost courage.

All of this swirled through him until a sentence emerged:

*"A witness... must recognize himself."*

Borin fell to his knees. Not out of weakness—out of truth.

"I... I am not perfect," he whispered.

The rune replied:

*"Good."*

A pulse.

*"Because perfection cannot be a witness."*

Borin looked up. His heart was beating faster.

"Then who am I?"

The rune burned in pure gold.

*"The one who never lies — not even to himself."*

Borin stood. Slowly. Heavily. Determinedly.

The room shattered like glass. The path reappeared. The chamber. The runeheart. Thandur. The Iron Brothers. The Primal Guardian.

Everyone stared at him.

His eyes glowed in three colors.

And the mountain whispered — through stone, through veins, through order:

**"He is chosen."**

As Borin stepped back into the chamber from the trial, the air changed. Not abruptly, not like a gust of wind—but like an ancient, forgotten choir rediscovering its first notes. The rock walls began to vibrate softly. Runes that had previously been dark flickered and now glowed in a warm, subdued light that filled the entire hall.

Thandur stared at him as if he had seen a ghost. The Iron Brothers involuntarily took a step back. The Primal Guardian bowed.

And the runeheart stepped two steps in front of Borin, its lines sparkling like a dawning morning.

"You have passed the test of truth," it said. "You have recognized yourself. Now the mountain recognizes you too."

Borin wanted to answer, but his voice caught in his throat. He felt it: something inside him had changed. Not outwardly, not powerfully like titanic might—but deep within, in the place where life's decisions are born. It was a feeling of clarity, sharpened like a freshly honed chisel.

"What... have I done?" he finally asked.

The guardian replied: "You saw yourself. And you did not turn away."

Borin knew what that meant. No Titan could be a witness. No Primal Guardian. No Watcher.

Only one who was broken – and who was able to forge something good from it.

The runic heart pointed up to the chamber's highest point, where the rocky path ended. A massive monolith of layered rock rose there. It was so smooth, as if it hadn't been hewn, but had grown naturally. And in its center glowed a symbol—three-colored, like Borin's eyes.

"The final step," the rune heart said softly.

Borin went up. With each step, the room became quieter. Not because sounds disappeared – but because the mountain was listening.

Having reached the highest point, Borin stood before the monolith. He placed his hand on it.

A deep, harmonious rumble immediately reverberated through the entire mountain. The air grew heavy. The surrounding veins of rock began to pulsate in the same rhythm. The runes of the monolith spread out, stretching across Borin's arms, chest, and forehead like glowing tattoos of titanic light.

The chamber trembled.

Thandur fell to his knees. The Iron Brothers did the same.

The primal guardian lay flat on the ground, like a mountain showing humility.

And the rune heart said:

"The mountain has chosen you."

The monolith slid apart like two enormous doors.

There was no tunnel behind it. No hall. No passageway.

But a single beam of titanic light, coming from the depths and shooting upwards – through all the layers of the mountain, until Borin felt he was standing at the intersection of earth and sky.

A voice filled the room.

Not made of stone. Not made of air. Not from the titanic plain.

It was the voice of the Titan himself – clearer, more alert, closer than ever before.

*"Borin."*

The hammer in Borin's hand vibrated. The original form struck with a bright thud. His eyes burned in gold, violet, and white.

*"You have walked the paths."  
You have borne truth.  
You have recognized yourself.*

The beam grew brighter. The Titan spoke:

*"Now I recognize you."*

Borin knelt. Not out of compulsion. Out of recognition.

The Titan said:

*"Stand up, witness of order."*

Borin stood up.

And the Titan spoke the sentence that would shake the world:

*"The war begins."  
And you're not walking behind me.  
"You walk beside me."*

The light went out – not from weakness, but like a breath gathering.

Borin stood at the center of the path. The runes shimmered on his skin. The hammer had become heavier – and at the same time lighter.

The mountain was silent.

But it was not a silence of fear. It was the silence of a mountain that had found a new breath.

Borin stepped off the path. The world would never be the same again.

He was now truly:

**The Chosen One of the Rocky Paths.**

## The mountain raises its children

The mountain breathed. Not like an animal, not like a titan—but like an ancient king opening his eyes after a long sleep. Borin felt it instantly, barely after leaving the rocky path. The air vibrated, the walls seemed to stretch, and the halls were filled with a dull pulse that rolled through the depths at regular intervals. Each beat was reminiscent of the heartbeat of a being that had created the world itself.

Thandur was still kneeling, but when Borin approached, he stood up trembling. "Brother... I almost didn't recognize you."

Borin smiled almost imperceptibly. "I'm still the same."

"No," Thandur replied softly. "Now even the stone recognizes you before you touch it."

The Iron Brothers approached cautiously. Their faces were a mixture of fear, awe, and a kind of hope rarely seen among the Stone Folk. They had seen much in their lives—collapses, battles, darkness, miracles—but never anything like this.

The Runeheart stepped to Borin's side. His body glowed in gentle lines, as if reflecting the changes of the mountain within himself.

"The chosen one of the rocky paths," it said in a calm voice, "bears not only truth. He bears the call of the mountain."

The primal guardian approached, each step a deep rumble. "Something stirs in the upper halls. Not shadows... not pain... but power."

Borin looked up. The rock ceiling began to shimmer, fine golden cracks running like living veins along the stone. Dust trickled down, but not chaotically – in an orderly fashion, as if following a rhythm.

"The mountain... is calling its children," Borin said softly.

And then it happened.

A thunderous sound reverberated through the hall—so deep that even the primal guardian froze. The floor trembled beneath their feet, but not as if it were collapsing. It was not destruction, but an awakening. All along the walls, runes that had lain dormant for millennia began to unfurl. Glimmers of light flickered through ancient incisions, and age-old mechanisms sprang to new life.

Dwarfs streamed out of the side tunnels. Blacksmiths. Miners. Guards. Their faces marked by dust and exhaustion – and yet wide open in wonder.

"The halls... they are opening!" someone shouted.

"New tunnels are appearing where there was rock yesterday!" shouted another.

"The mountain... has called us!"

Borin felt his heart beat faster. The runes on his arms glowed faintly.

The dwarves stopped as soon as they saw him. A silence fell. First a whisper. Then a murmur. Then words that spread like a spark:

"There he is." "The Hammer Bearer." "He who touched Titan." "He wears the colors of the mountain." "The Witness." "He was chosen."

Borin raised his hand. The murmuring subsided.

"Children of the mountain," he said in a deep voice that was no louder than usual—and yet carried farther. "The mountain awakens. Not to war against you. Not to terror. But to truth."

A powerful tremor ran through the chamber. And suddenly they heard something – far above, through countless layers of stone:

Hammers.

Not guided by dwarven hands. Not by titanic hands.

But from a force in between – new, clear, ordering.

Runeheart placed his hand on Borin's arm. "The mountain raises up its children. And it raises up its son."

Borin looked up and understood:

Not only the dwarves, not only the ancient guardians, not only the watchmen,

but the MOUNTAIN itself awoke and raised up its people.

The runes blazed. The halls trembled. The depths sang.

And the world prepared for ALL the children of the rock to rise up.

No sooner had Borin's voice faded than a new pulse filled the halls. This time it was not deep and ponderous as before, but faster, more rhythmic, more determined. It was the sound of hurried footsteps—not just a few, but hundreds. Then thousands. An entire nation in motion.

The air vibrated as the first dwarves emerged from a side tunnel: warriors with ancient breastplates gleaming anew, smiths with runehammers that suddenly glowed brightly, and miners with lanterns that twinkled like tiny stars. None of them seemed surprised that they had all found the same path. They were following a calling they couldn't explain—and yet understood.

"What brings us here?" asked one with a sooty face. "I was in the North Shaft Forge... and suddenly a path of light appeared before me..." "Same here! A passage that wasn't there!" "I heard hammers—but not from dwarves..."

An old guard with a white beard stepped forward and knelt before Borin. "Hammer-bearer... I felt your call. Or the mountain's call through you."

Borin placed his hand on his shoulder. "I didn't call you. The mountain called you all."

Then the ground trembled again. And this time a sound followed that no dwarf had ever heard before.

It was like the scraping of enormous stone slabs. Like the clanging of metal ribs. Like the awakening of enormous, massive bodies that had slumbered for eons.

Thandur's eyes widened. "By all the ancestors... what is THIS?"

The ancient guardian raised a hand. "Rise," he said to the assembled dwarves. "For you shall become witnesses, just as he did."

And then a creature emerged from a side passage, silencing the dwarves.

A colossus of stone, but not one of the shadowborn. He was shaped like a warrior—gigantic, ancient, covered in runes. His chest was made of layered slabs of stone that shimmered like a forge's fire. His eyes glowed white-gold, like a guardian's light.

A second one followed. Then a third.

Soon a dozen of these stone colossi stood in the chamber – all as massive as the oldest hall columns.

One of the Iron Brothers whispered: "These... these are Stone Guardians. The first ones. They say they were created by the Original Guardians..."

The ancient guardian nodded.

"They were once my race," he said. "The children of order. Forged to support the world when it falters."

Borin swallowed. The stone guardians bowed before him.

A warrior beside Thandur murmured: "The mountain forms armies..." Another: "Not from blood. From rock." A third: "It raises us up — and itself."

Then a thunderous roar came from above. The ceiling vibrated. Dust drifted down in fine veils.

And an old dwarf, so old that his beard looked moss-green like lichen, stepped forward. His eyes were milky, yet full of knowledge.

"I feel it," he said. "The depths... they are singing. A song our ancestors knew." He placed his hand on the ground. "It's coming back."

The mountain responded to his words.

Cracks opened in the walls—not crumbling, but ordering. Runes sprouted from them like roots from young stone. The dwarves' lanterns brightened without fire. The halls expanded, as if to make room.

And then everyone heard it:

The voice of the mountain. Not the Titan. Not a being. But the mountain itself.

A single, profound sentence filled the room:

*"Arise, children of the rock."*

The dwarves did not fall to their knees. They stood upright. They raised their hammers. They called out their names. Their veins glowed in the light of new runes.

Borin stood at the center of the light. The hammer in his hand was heavy as truth and light as decision.

The mountain had raised its children.

And now they would go together with him.

The mountain's sound was everywhere now. Not just in the halls, not just in the rock—it seemed to resonate directly in the hearts of the dwarves. Borin felt the pulse of the world merge with his own, as if the mountain were channeling its breath through him. The stone guardians stood like living fortresses in a semicircle behind him, and the runic heart at his side was a blazing nexus of order.

The dwarves in the chamber—hundreds of them gathered there—no longer stood uncertain or confused. Something had changed within them. Their backs were straight, their hammers steady, their gazes clear. As if the mountain itself had lent them a piece of its will.

"Hammer bearers," shouted an older blacksmith in a voice that boomed through the hall, "tell us why we are standing here. The mountain is calling, the walls are trembling – but we do not know what we are preparing for!"

Borin raised the hammer. Not raised high, not as a command – but as a sign that spoke deep into the rock.

"The Titan is awakening," he said. "And with its awakening, forces are stirring that we cannot ignore. We are at the beginning of a war – not against the mountain, but for it."

An excited murmur went through the crowd.

Thandur stepped forward. His face was covered in sweat and dust, but his voice was stronger than ever.

"A war for the mountain," he repeated. "Not against shadows. Not against enemy kingdoms. But... for what we are."

"For what we must be," added the rune heart.

The Primordial Guardian stepped forward, and the hall trembled beneath his weight. "Hear me, children of the rock," he cried. "You were not created to die in forgotten halls. You were

not made to hide behind stones. You are the heirs of the order that the Titan once began—and that must now be completed."

The stone guardians behind him straightened up. Their bodies shimmered as if new strength were flowing through their veins.

A young dwarf, barely old enough to wield an anvil, stammered: "And... what are we supposed to do?"

Borin approached him and placed the hammer handle on his shoulder – a gesture of appreciation, not of burden.

"You do what every one of us does," said Borin. "You stand. You walk. You fight when necessary."

He looked around the room. "But you are not fighting alone."

The rock faces began to glow.

At first only faintly – like shimmering embers behind thin ash. Then stronger. Then brighter, until the entire chamber shone in golden lines that wound around each other like roots.

"Look!" cried a dwarf, "the runes... they're burning!"

"No," corrected the rune heart, "they are alive."

And at that moment, new paths opened between the stone guardians – gates not made of metal, but of pure order. They shimmered like boundaries between stone and light.

More figures emerged from these gates.

First shadowy, then complete:

**Stone Guardians**, dozens, then hundreds, all of different shapes – some as large as the original guardian, others somewhat smaller, almost dwarfish, yet formed from pure mountain rock.

"The army of the ancient guardians..." whispered Thandur reverently.

"No," said the primal guardian. "The mountain's army."

A dwarf woman with glowing blue runes on her arms stepped forward. "What should we do, Borin? Tell us where we should go."

For the first time, Borin felt that the hammer in his hand was not just a tool, but a guidepost. The mountain spoke through the veins in his chest, through the runes in his eyes, through the light in the rock.

He raised the hammer slowly, and the tip pointed upwards – towards the higher halls, to where the Titan was calling.



“We’re going up,” Borin said calmly. “To where the Titan needs us.”

The hall fell silent.

Then a thousand voices answered at once:

**"For the mountain!"**

The stone guardians stamped their feet. The rock trembled in agreement. The runic heart glowed brighter. And the primal guardian said:

"The mountain raises up its children." He looked at Borin. "And now you raise them up."

Borin turned to the newly opened paths.

This was not a march to death. It was a march to order. To the awakening of the world.

And the mountain itself seemed to whisper with every step:

**"Goes.**

**I stand with you.**

## **The Return of the Guardians**

The ascent through the ancient rock passages was like a march through history itself. Borin felt each step grow heavier, not from exhaustion, but because with every meter the mountain became denser, older, and more awake. The halls around him were unlike anything the dwarves had ever known: colossal arches whose floors bulged from living rock, ancient wall friezes shaped not by tools but by the mountain itself, and a light that emanated from the deepest runic rivers, needing neither torches nor fire.

Behind him marched the dwarves—not in chaotic frenzy, but in a steady, orderly formation. Their weapons clanged, their hammers rested heavily on their shoulders, and their armor glowed in rhythm with the runes that the mountain itself had rekindled. Beside them walked the Stone Guardians—colossal figures of primeval rock, whose footsteps made the ground tremble and whose eyes burned like torches in the darkness. They were neither servants nor masters, but equals within the Order.

The Runeheart kept pace with Borin. "The mountain is gathering us," it said calmly. "The Titan is near."

The ancient guardian strode behind them like a wandering mountain range. "It is time," he murmured, "for the world to see what should have been standing long ago."

And then the corridor opened.

Before them lay a hall so vast that an entire dwarven kingdom could have fit inside. The ceiling dissolved into shimmering mists of light and rock; colossal stone pillars rose like the

bones of an ancient world, and in the center of the hall pulsed a vast chasm of gold-violet veins.

This gap was not a crack.

It was a heartbeat.

A vibrant center.

A portal.

A place to return to.

Thandur stepped forward, trembling. "By all my ancestors... what is this?"

The Runeheart raised its hand. "This, Thandur son of the Anvil Line... is the place where the Primordial Guardians were once set into the world." It pointed to the chasm. "And the place where they fell."

Borin felt it. Not as sound. Not as light. But as a deep calling within his soul.

*Something* Something stirred there. Something older than the Titan. Something that directed its gaze at him across space and time.

The ancient guardian suddenly knelt down.

His voice trembled. "They are awakening... I can feel them."

The stone guardians froze. They aligned themselves as if renewing an ancient oath. Their breastplates parted slightly—not in injury, but in reception. Sparks of titanic significance floated from them, drawn toward the chasm, as if hastening their return.

The dwarves huddled closer together. Awe. Fear. Pride. Everything mingled together.

And then the rock began to sing.

It was a deep, otherworldly sound – melancholic yet triumphant. The walls responded, the ceiling vibrated, and the veins of rock burned in gold and violet, as if taut like sinews.

A voice rang out. Slowly. Clearly. Sublimely.

*"Witness..."*

Borin shivered. That voice was older than the world.

*"You saw us without knowing us."*

The Runeheart also knelt down. "The ancient guardians speak."

Thandur sank to his knees. The Iron Brothers followed him. The Stone Guardians knelt like mountains.

And Borin stood alone.

Not because he wanted to. Because the mountain demanded it.

Another sound filled the hall – and it was different: warmer, more determined.

*"Stand, witness."*

Borin raised his chin. He stood.

The crack in the middle of the hall now glowed so brightly that the world seemed bathed in white. A figure rose from the depths.

First only light. Then shadow. Then structure.

A body of pure rock, but different from the stone guardians – older, more polished, more marked. Runes crisscrossed him like memories. His face was stern and calm, his eyes glowed blue-white like the first order of the world.

The first guardian.

And behind him, the others rose up.

Twelve in number.

They were not warriors. They were not gods.

They were the first guardians of order.

When the first of them stepped onto the surface of the hall, the mountain trembled – not with fear, but with joy.

He spread his arms wide, his voice echoing like the very first words in the world:

*"We are returning,  
because you called us,  
Witness to order."*

Borin felt his hammer grow heavier. How his runes burned.

The first guardian pointed at him.

"Now begins what the Titan awakens to do."

The return had taken place.

Order was up in arms.

And Borin knew:

The last war had begun.

The twelve Primal Guardians now stood fully in the hall, each one a monument to bygone ages. Their bodies were not of ordinary rock, but of a stone that seemed both alive and ancient, crisscrossed by lines that flowed like runes, as if they had never truly come to rest. The air vibrated, as if struggling to bear the sheer significance of their presence.

The first ancient guardian stepped forward. His steps were silent, though his body must have weighed tons. The dwarves hardly dared to breathe. Even the stone guardians bowed their gigantic heads in awe.

“Witness to Order,” spoke the Primordial Guardian, and his voice sounded as if it were being reflected off all the walls at once, but never distorted. “You called upon us – and we have awakened.”

Borin swallowed. “I didn’t call you intentionally.” His voice echoed faintly in the vast hall.

“And yet you did it,” replied the Primal Guardian. “When you recognized the truth of the Titan, when you ascended the path of rocks, when you carried order within you... then you called to us.”

He raised his hand, and a fine line of blue-white light stretched through the air – a line that carried neither warmth nor cold, but clarity.

“Because we listen to truth, not words.”

The runic heart stepped forward. Its lines glowed brighter than before.

“Primordial Guardians,” it said reverently. “Your time had passed. Your halls were silent. Why can you return?”

The guardian answered without hesitation:

“Because the Titan seeks order again.” His gaze wandered over the dwarves, over the stone guardians, over the primal guardian himself. “And because the world has a witness again.”

Borin felt that the words were meant for him. He, a dwarf. A blacksmith. A man who had never sought power.

The other guardians of the primal realm also moved now. Not randomly—but as if in an ancient dance that had never been finished. Their runes glowed, and the hall responded with trembling light.

“We were created,” said a second guardian, whose voice sounded deeper, as if cast from metal, “to remind Titan that order is not created by might, but by measure.”

A third stepped forward. His body was slimmer, but his runes glowed brighter than all the others. “And we watched over his ways. Not his enemies.”

A fourth added: “We maintained a balance between will and world.”

A fifth, whose face looked like broken slate: “We shouted at him when he was wrong.”

A sixth, with runes like veins of fire: "We questioned him."

A seventh: "We contradicted him." His voice was like the blow of an anvil.

An eighth person said: "We taught him patience."

The ninth: "And also what pain is."

The tenth: "And what requires healing."

The eleventh: "We taught him humility."

The twelfth – the smallest among them, but with the strongest presence – finally stepped into the middle.

His face was perfectly calm. His eyes glowed white, like pure truth.

"But we were asleep," he said. "Because the Titan pushed us away. Not in anger. In error."

Borin felt a pang. The Titan – the great, powerful one – had made mistakes. And the world had bled for it.

The first guardian spoke again: "But now he seeks us. Not as servants. Not as judges. As companions."

The ancient guardian bowed his head. "It is time."

"Yes," said the first guardian. "For the Titan is awakening. And when he does, he cannot stand alone."

He raised his arm, and the runes on his body flared up.

"That is why we return – to walk with you, witness. And with the mountain people who have rediscovered their courage."

Borin took a step forward. He was no longer trembling. The runes on his arms burned in three colors: gold, violet, and white.

"And what... do you demand of me?" he asked.

The first guardian approached so closely that Borin could almost touch his stony face – a countenance older than time itself.

"Only this," he said.

"Speak the truth when the Titan errs. Stand by his side when he falters. Maintain order when the world breaks."

The hall vibrated. The dwarves held their breath. The stone guardians rose like walls.

And the original guardian spoke the last words:

"Because you are the witness. And we have returned because you exist."

The hall was filled with a silence that was not empty, but charged – with anticipation, with memory, with an order that was reforming. The twelve primal guardians stood around Borin like a circle of living monuments, and for a moment it seemed as if the entire mountain held its breath.

Then the first guardian raised his hand, and the runes on his arms began to move. Not like flickering light, but like words choosing to be written. The other guardians followed suit, and together they formed a network of lines that shimmered across their bodies like a woven tapestry of truth.

"Witness," spoke the first Primal Keeper, and his voice filled the hall like a deep peal of bells. "The time of sleep is over. The time of testing has come."

Borin felt the hammer vibrate in his hand. The Runeheart stepped beside him, its body bright as a core of living rock.

"What does that mean?" asked Borin.

The second guardian replied: "The Titan awakens. But he does not awaken in silence."

A third raised his voice, rough as hammered ore: "Something is stirring in the world that is not born of order."

The fourth: "A power that resembles old mistakes."

The fifth, whose runes glowed like flowing lava: "A will that does not want to be ordered."

The twelve now spoke as one, polyphonic choir, and the mountain seemed to answer their words.

"The Titan awakens," they said. "And another power awakens with him – one that was not created, but arose when he fell."

Borin tensed. "Shadow?"

"More than shadows," replied the sixth guardian. His gaze was stern, like a judgment. "Something born of guilt."

The primal guardian growled deeply. "The deep-brooding..."

The guardians nodded as one.

The seventh Primal Guardian spoke: "The Deepspawn is not merely an enemy. It is a flaw that the Titan never healed."

The eighth added: "It is will without order. Power without measure."

The ninth: "She awakens because he awakens."

The tenth: "She can feel him."

The eleventh: "She wants what he has."

The twelfth – whose voice was so calm that it took away the fear from the hall – spoke the sentence that changed the world:

"She wants to break the order before it is rewritten."

Borin took a step forward. The dwarves behind him involuntarily held their breath. The stone guardians now stood like a belt of rock around the scene.

"Say it clearly," demanded Borin. "What's coming?"

The first guardian stepped forward again. His face was chiseled, but in his eyes was something Borin had never seen before: worry.

"A war," he said. "The last war."

A rumble went through the hall, deep as the rumble of a mountain.

"The Titan needs you, Witness," the Primal Guardian continued. "Not to fight for him—but to keep him."

Another guardian of the ancient world added: "Because if he falls, the world falls."

Borin closed his fingers around the hammer handle. He felt the three colors of his runes pulsing in response.

"And what do you have to do?" he asked quietly.

The circle of ancient guardians raised their arms simultaneously – and a wall of light shot up to the hall's ceiling. Runes, as large as houses, appeared in the rock. The ceiling responded with a shudder. A white fire flooded the veins of the walls.

The tenth guardian said:

"We are strengthening the titan."

The eleventh:

"We are accompanying him."

The twelfth:

"We straighten him up when he wobbles."

And again the first one, with a voice that now sounded like the word of an entire world:

"But you, Borin, you keep him safe."

The hall trembled. Dust fell like golden rain. The dwarves gazed in awe at Borin.

Then the first guardian spoke the last words before the mountain's fate was decided:

"Lead us, Witness. For the original guardians stand again."

He took a step back.

"And now the path to becoming a titan begins."

The hall trembled in a way that was no longer merely the whisper of an ancient mountain. This was an awakening witnessed by the world itself. The runes on the walls burned brighter than ever before, so bright that their lines seared themselves into the dwarves' eyes like memories of light. Borin stood at the center of the twelve Primordial Guardians, and the mountain held no shadows: only truth, light, and anticipation.

The ground vibrated beneath his feet, but not in chaotic tremors—it was the ordered heartbeat of the world, pulsing through stone and time. The dwarves behind him stood firm and still, each one a warrior of rock, forged by centuries of labor, hardship, and will. The stone guardians acted like a second mountain range, a living wall of ancient strength.

The runic heart glowed with intense gold. "The path is open," it said. "The Titan is ready to receive you."

The first guardian extended his hand. A titanically large line of light glided through the air, opening like a rift between world and meaning. Not a portal. Not a gate. It was a line that said:

*This is where order begins.*

"Be a witness," he said, "lead your people."

Borin nodded slowly. He felt the hammer pulsate in his hand like a life form of its own. The primal force within him responded with a calm, deep blow that fell perfectly into the rhythm of the mountain. No doubt remained within him. Not a twitch. Not a shadow.

He turned to his people.

The dwarves didn't stand like soldiers. Not like workers.

They stood as a single essence:

*The Stone People.*

"Children of the Rock!" cried Borin, and his voice echoed to the highest peaks of the Twelve Hill. "We have seen the return of the ancient guardians! We have seen the mountain rise up! And we know what is to come."

A silence like tense blacksmith's flames followed his words.

"We are not marching towards death," said Borin. "We are marching towards order."



The dwarves struck their breastplates with hammers.

*Once.*

*A sound like a new rune being born.*

“We are not moving out of desperation,” Borin continued. “We are moving because the world needs us.”

*Twice.*

The hall floor shook.

“We are not going alone,” said Borin – and looked at the Ancient Guardians, who rose like living pillars of truth.

The stone guardians responded with a mighty blow of their fists against their breastplates. The echo rolled through the hall like thunder.

*Three times.*

The mountain itself responded with a deep, ordering tone.

Then Borin addressed the Original Guardians. "You have returned to strengthen order."

The first guardian nodded. "We walk alongside the Titan."

“And I,” said Borin, “by his side — and over his fall.”

The guardians smiled. A smile of stone, heavy, but honest.

"Then the circle is complete," said the twelfth guardian. "The Titan has its witness. The world has its guardians. And the mountain has its children."

The path of light to the Titan opened wider, becoming broader, clearer. No flash. No fire. It was simply... order.

Borin stepped forward. Every step was a promise.

Behind him rose a sea of dwarven armor, gleaming yet ancient. Beside them, the Stone Guardians marched like mountains. Before them, the Ancient Keepers pointed the way.

And the Titan waited.

Thandur shouted: "For the mountain! For order! For Borin!"

The dwarves answered with one will:

**"For the Titan!"**

**"For order!"**

**"For the witness!"**

The primal guardian was the last to step onto the path of light — every step a tremor, every breath a power.

Then the hall closed behind them. Not as a loss. Not as an end.

But as the beginning of a new story.

The return of the ancient guardians was complete. But their path—the path of all children of the rock—had only just begun.

Borin looked into the stream of light that led to the Titan. He raised the hammer. The primal form burned. And he spoke:

"I'm coming."

Then he went inside.

And the mountain went with him.

## imprint

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