

# THE SIEGE OF THE DEEP REALMS



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## The Voices Under the Mountain

The darkness beneath the mountain was ancient, older than any royal lineage that had ever ruled in the halls of the Underrealms. It lay heavy in the caverns, as if a living mass, breathing, waiting, and listening. The dwarves had long since grown accustomed to it, for their eyes were adept at reading the shadows, but on that night, something different hung in the air. Something that made even the torches on the walls flicker uncertainly, as if they longed to turn away and go out. It was a whisper, barely audible, barely tangible, and yet as sharp as a cold breath brushing against bare ore. Those who heard it were unsure whether they were truly words or merely the play of the wind in the mountain's veins. But it did not sound like wind. It sounded like voices.

Borin, a seasoned guardian of the halls, stopped as if seized by the collar. His thick red beard barely stirred as he inhaled sharply and stared up at the gallery's dark ceiling. He knew the mountain like few others; he had been born here, as had his father and his father before him. He knew that rock could stir, that stone could speak if one listened long enough. But this was something that defied the natural creaking and groaning. It wasn't a rock that spoke. There was something behind it.

The footsteps of the patrolling guard echoed hollowly on the ancient stone steps, and somewhere water dripped from a fissure in a slow, regular rhythm. But the whispering kept interrupting—irregular, hissing, sometimes just a single sound that seemed like a warning. Borin knew he wasn't the only one who heard it. The other guards, too, exchanged furtive glances, like men who sense something ominous but don't dare utter the first word about it. The darkness had changed. Something was stirring in the ancient veins of the mountains.

He narrowed his eyes and listened again. There it was again—a whisper, a scraping, as if hidden voices were brushing against bare stones. He couldn't make out the words, but he sensed the meaning: not friendly, not encouraging, but sharp, ancient, and full of resentment. A spark of uncertainty gnawed at his stubbornness, and Borin wasn't easily rattled. Nevertheless, a cold film settled on his hands, and involuntarily he reached for the handle of his axe.

"Did you hear that?" a voice murmured beside him. It was Darrim, a younger guard who had nevertheless roamed many a shadowy passage. His eyes were as large as polished coins, and he involuntarily moved closer to Borin. "Those are voices, aren't they? I'm not imagining it."

Borin didn't answer immediately. He wasn't one to speak lightly. He let his gaze wander over the tall, dwarf-built pillars that stretched at regular intervals into the infinity of the gallery. The flickering torchlight danced among the runes carved into the columns—ancient words of protection, steadfastness, strength. But on this evening, even the runes seemed paler, as if yearning to be renewed.

"I heard it," Borin said finally, his voice echoing softly between the pillars. "But we will not speculate. The mountain is speaking. Perhaps it is warning us. Perhaps it is calling for something we do not yet understand."

"Or someone calls," Darrim replied, looking nervously into the darkness. "Someone who shouldn't be here."

In the distance, something sounded like bones cracking under a heavy footstep. A sound not of the mountain's natural life. Borin and the other sentinels straightened simultaneously; hands slid to weapon hilts, secured helmets, and checked their stance. The air shifted. The shadows seemed to thicken—as if waiting for something.

A shuffling sound approached. Slowly. Cautiously. Borin tensed like a drawn bow. Then suddenly – silence.

A silence so complete that the blood rushed in his ears.

Borin took a step forward. His axe was raised, his senses sharp as freshly forged steel. He felt the darkness staring at him. Darrim behind him held his breath. No one spoke. And then they heard it—this time so clearly that no one could doubt it anymore.

A voice, strange, shrieking, as if forced through a narrow crack: "They're coming..."

Borin whirled around, searching for the source. The voice seemed to come from everywhere—from the rock, from the deepest darkness, from the ground itself. He stepped back, without consciously deciding to do so. The other guards also retreated as the sound suddenly intensified—first a crackling, then a scratching, then the ominous echo of several voices whispering the same thing, over and over again.

"They are coming... They are coming... They are coming..."

Darrim almost tripped over his own feet. Borin grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back before he could fall. Then, without warning, the voices stopped. Abruptly. As if they had never been there.

Dust drifted over from the back of the gallery. Borin realized it must have come from a tremor, because tiny pieces of stone were breaking away from a crack in the ceiling. Something had struck the mountain itself—not from the outside, but from within.

A dull thud echoed deep below, like the beating of a massive heart.

"By the ancestors..." Borin whispered. "That was... that wasn't the rock. That was something that got inside."

And as dust trickled down from the ceiling once more, Borin knew, even before he admitted it to himself: The mountain was warning her. He was warning her of something that was already stirring in his deepest veins.

The thud, which reverberated deep within the mountain's heart, still vibrated in Borin's bones as the torches on the walls flickered sideways. It wasn't the ordinary vibrations of a natural earthquake; any dwarf who had lived long enough in the depths knew that. It was a rhythm, unnaturally steady, as if something had struck the stone—a being, a tool, or a ritual. And whatever was stirring down there had awakened the voices the mountain had swallowed for decades, perhaps centuries.

Borin felt the air change, become denser, as if compressed by an invisible weight. Darrim moved close to him, and even the others, who generally preferred to keep their distance, moved closer together as one, instinctively, as if seeking mutual support. No one spoke a



word; all listened to the throbbing, which had now subsided but still vibrated through the veins of the mountains like a distant heartbeat.

"We should warn the superiors," Darrim whispered. His voice was thin, far removed from the usual defiant, challenging tone he used to use. Borin merely nodded silently, for he knew this was no longer an ordinary watch report. This was something the Stonefathers themselves needed to hear—the council elders, the keepers of the runes, and the guardians of the deepest secrets. When the mountain itself spoke, they listened. And when the mountain warned, they acted.

But before they could move, that ominous whisper crept across the bare stone floor once more. It was quieter than before, but clearer, almost as if the voices were drawing nearer. This time they didn't sound like an echo from the distant past, but like something deliberately moving into the shadows, step by step, sound by sound.

Borin raised his hand, and his men froze. Even the dripping of water seemed to stop. The torches no longer flickered—they trembled, as if an invisible gust of wind were pressing them downward. The flames grew small, thin, almost fearful. Borin had witnessed such a sight only once before, many years ago, when the orcs had overrun the Greystone and dark sorcery had been involved.

The whispers crept across the floor like mist, unpredictable. Borin held his breath. The voices seemed to gather, to concentrate, as if preparing for something. And then—a sound. A single one. It came from one of the side passages that led into complete blackness.

A long, low gasp. Not human. Not dwarven.

Borin stepped forward, the weight of his axe in his hand, his fingers tightly gripping the handle. He extended his other hand and briefly touched the cold surface of a rune carved into a stone pillar. It felt warm, almost alive—a sign that something was disturbing the ancient protective spell within the stone. Or challenging it.

Then something emerged from the darkness.

It was only a shadow. A fleeting outline, barely perceptible. It flickered across the ground like a distorted shadow of a being no longer whole. The torches hissed and shrank as the shadow touched one of the pillars. And where it passed, the stone seemed to pulsate for a moment—as if it had received a blow, invisible but profound.

"Back!" Borin commanded sharply, his voice breaking the paralysis like an axe blow. The men retreated, but not in panic; they were dwarfs, trained for dangers others couldn't even comprehend. Yet even in their faces lay a fear unlike any other.

The creature—or its shadow—froze. For a moment, it took on a form, indistinct, like a figure reflected in dark water. A distorted face, a wide-open mouth, eyes like empty sockets. And then it spoke.

"They have awakened..."

The voice sounded like metal scraping on stone, sharp and cutting, yet filled with pain. It echoed between the pillars as if the mountain itself amplified it. Borin felt his blood grow cold. Behind him, Darrim gasped.

“Who... who has awakened?” Borin cried, although he suspected that the answer would not reassure him.

The shadowy face contorted even further and retreated like smoke caught by a gust of wind. But before it vanished, it formed one last word that seared itself into Borin's bones like a brand:

"The Deep Brood..."

Then she was gone.

The torches blazed simultaneously, as if they had finally caught a breath. The men gasped, some holding their weapons far too high or far too low. One of them, an old veteran named Aldrik, crossed himself with an ancient, almost forgotten dwarven mark—something usually only mentioned in the darkest tales. Borin knew it was a bad sign when even Aldrik instinctively resorted to ancient protective gestures.

"We must return to the Stone Council immediately," said Borin, trying to keep his voice steady. "That wasn't an orc, an animal, or a spirit we know. That was... something else."

“Something that knows words,” Darrim added, still pale. “Something that wanted to warn us.”

“Or something that mocks us,” Aldrik grumbled. “The Deepbrood... those are old stories. Stories from a time that should have been long gone. The ancestors sealed them deep beneath the mountain. They say they never returned.”

"And yet their voices can be heard," Borin said darkly. "So we will report to the Stone Fathers. Immediately."

They began to move. As they hurried through the gallery, their footsteps cut sharply through the silence, which only slowly subsided. But Borin sensed that something was wrong. The shadows were still too thick. The rock vibrated faintly, as if breathing deep within. And somewhere, far away, Borin heard a dull thud. Not a whisper this time. Not a shadow. A sharp thud.

A blow that sounded like war.

As they reached the turn for the main course, Borin stopped abruptly. For ahead, at the edge of the light, he saw something that frightened him more than anything before.

The runes on the wall—the ancient protective runes that hadn't flickered for generations—glowed faintly. They were unstable, flickering like dying stars. A single rune—the most important, the strongest, the one that watched over the main entrance—suddenly tore apart like burning paper.

Borin knew that runes didn't simply tear. Not without reason. Not without an enemy.

"By the stone itself," he breathed.

For when the rune faded, he heard it again – this time closer than before.

The voices.

They were no longer whispers. They were footsteps. And they were coming closer.

The footsteps were still distant, yet Borin knew they were real. No echo, no apprehension, no trick of the shadows. They drew nearer, slowly, ominously, like something that had no need to hurry because it already knew no one could escape. The sentinels huddled together, forming a tight line, their blades and axe heads glowing in the flickering torchlight. Their breaths grew shorter, not from exhaustion, but from a watchful anticipation. The air in the passage seemed to grow heavier, as if displaced by something unseen. The stone itself vibrated beneath their soles, barely perceptible, but undeniably present. Borin felt the tremor like a distant pulse, one that did not belong to the mountain's natural rhythms.

"Move together, hold the line," he whispered, his voice steady, even though his heart beat faster than any war rhythm he had ever heard. Darrim positioned himself directly to his left, Aldrik to his right. The others formed up behind them, and every man knew that retreat was not an option. A dwarf did not retreat from an unknown enemy; even if the enemy crawled from forgotten depths no living dwarf had ever dared to contemplate.

The footsteps became clearer. A scraping sound was added, the noise of something heavy being dragged across stone. Not a metallic sound, more like something horny, perhaps claws too long to seem normal, and too heavy to belong to a living being. The torches flickered more and more, their flames thinning and casting grotesque shadows on the walls, which twisted like sinister figures beginning to dance.

Then they heard it again. The whispering. But different than before. No longer like voices trying to warn or mock. Now it was a chorus. A dark, multi-voiced murmur that rolled through the darkness like a wave. Not individual words, but a horrifying melody that felt as if it wanted to creep into their skin and distort their thoughts.

Darrim pressed his lips together. Aldrik's hands trembled slightly around his axe. Borin tensed his shoulders and raised his chin. He couldn't let his men see the fear gripping him. A leader showed no fear, even when it gnawed at his core like a hungry worm.

"Stay calm," he murmured. "Let your hearts turn to stone. The mountain is behind us."

But no sooner had he spoken than a crack was heard. A tremendous, deep, rumbling crack that vibrated through the floor. Something beneath them broke, gave way as if it were rotten wood. The line on the wall flickered, and the protective runes lost their power with a final, flickering spark. A dull, wooden sound rang out—the last rune shattered for good.

Borin swallowed hard. A broken protective rune meant the deepest barriers of the halls were weakened. It meant something was gnawing at them. Something neither dwarven nor human. Something history had forgotten because no one had survived to tell its story.

The footsteps grew louder. The scraping turned into a rasping. A rattling breath began, rough and cold as the breath of death itself.

And then — a light.

An unnatural greenish glow appeared in the darkness, barely visible yet sharper than any torch. It was as if something were burning from the depths of an abyss, not warm, but viciously cold. Borin felt Darrim unconsciously take a step back. He immediately yanked him forward again before the line could break.

"Stop!" Borin growled. "Whoever loses their step loses their life."

The green light flickered again. And then a figure emerged from the darkness.

It was not an orc. It was not a troll. It was not a creature Borin had ever seen in the chronicles of the ancestors.

It was narrower than an orc but taller than a dwarf, with long, bony limbs that bent unnaturally. The skin was gray, almost stony, cracked like weathered rock, but not rigid—it moved in waves as if something were crawling beneath it. The eyes were two sunken sockets, each containing a greenish fire that seemed neither alive nor dead. The mouth was a slit, distorted, filled with small, needle-like teeth.

And it held something in its hands. Something that looked like a piece of forged armor, twisted, shattered, old. Too old. It was a piece of dwarven steel—definitely. On the cracked metal, a shimmering remnant of a rune was still visible, ancient and partially erased.

Borin gasped softly for air.

"By the ancestors... that is... that is part of a guardian," Aldrik gasped. "A rune warrior of ancient times."

The creature stopped. It raised its head. It saw the line of dwarves. And it smiled.

An ugly, distorted, inhuman grin that made it clear: It understood what fear meant. It enjoyed it.

Then it spoke.

Not whispering, not murmuring. Clear. Distinct. As if his throat hadn't been used for centuries and was now being rekindled.

"The mountain... is falling."

Darrim let out a hoarse sound, a mixture of anger and fear. Borin pushed him back before he could rush forward rashly. But everything happened so fast that even Borin barely had time to react.

Behind the creature, two more figures appeared. Then a third. Then a fourth. All with the same distorted body, the same glowing eyes, the same cracked skin. There were at least ten. And they certainly didn't come alone.



The whispering in the corridor grew louder, now clearly audible. There were no longer warnings. No more cryptic messages. There were words. A single phrase, repeated by dozens of voices, that made the halls tremble:

"The deep brood rises..."

Borin felt his hands growing damp, but he gripped his axe tighter than ever. He knew that retreating here would wipe them out. He knew they had to warn the Stone Fathers—no matter the cost.

And he knew that this was the beginning. The beginning of something much bigger than an attack. Something the mountain itself had feared.

He took a deep breath. He raised the axe. He roared:

"For the ancestors! For the deep realms!"

Then they collided.

## The Council of the Stone Fathers

The halls of the Stone Council lay deeper within the mountain than any other assembly chamber, protected by thick, ancient walls hewn in a long-gone era. The way there led through tunnels whose runes were laced with a silent power, and whose air was heavier than that in the upper passages. Borin, who knew the way better than many of his brothers, nevertheless hurried as fast as he dared, for every stone, every shadow, every faint sound behind him reminded him of what had been left behind in the darkness. Darrim followed close behind, while Aldrik and two other guards brought up the rear. They spoke no more, and the silence that fell upon them was not the comforting kind that dwarves found beneath stone—it was the silence of a mountain holding its breath.

The closer they came to the council chamber, the more powerful the runes on the walls became. Some glowed with a deep golden hue, others pulsed faintly like the heartbeat of an ancient giant. But Borin noticed that some runes—the particularly old ones, the deeply carved protective symbols—were cracked. Fine, but clearly visible. This wasn't normal. This couldn't be normal. For generations, these symbols had protected the mountain. Whatever was harming them didn't do so with brute force, but with something that weakened the stone itself.

"Do you see it too?" Darrim finally murmured, the tremor in his voice barely concealed. "The runeblaze is dying. I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither do I," Borin replied, his words as hard as the blade of his axe. "And I hope the Stone Age fathers have answers. Otherwise, we are lost."

They reached the massive bronze portal that sealed off the council chamber. It was as tall as three men and as wide as a tavern, adorned with relief scenes from the early days of the Underrealms—the founding of the halls, the coronation of the first kings, the battles against the orcs, the sealing of the ancient enemies. But Borin's gaze lingered on one spot: a large

rune at the top, usually as bright as freshly cast gold, now glowed faintly. When he held his hand over it, he felt the coldness of the metal like a warning grip.

"Open the gate!" he shouted.

His voice echoed deep and menacing, as was customary in the ancient halls. Moments later, a dull thud sounded, followed by the scraping and grinding of the mechanism that opened the portal. The heavy plates moved slowly inward, and as the gap widened, a warm, golden glow shone forth—the light of the council hall.

Borin entered, and the others followed him in silence. The hall was vast, like a natural cathedral, its walls polished smooth over centuries. Gigantic columns, each adorned with a different pattern of runes and symbols, supported a ceiling soaring so high it was barely visible. In the center of the hall stood the Stone Council—nine elders, each seated on a massive stone throne, with long, intricately braided beards and eyes that reflected both wisdom and the weight of bygone ages.

The Supreme Stonefather, Hagra Ironbeard, rose as Borin approached. His gaze was as sharp as a freshly cut diamond.

"Borin Erzhand, Guardian of the Halls, you have returned too soon—and you do not come alone. Your face tells me that something has happened that shakes the mountain itself."

Borin knelt briefly, then rose and spoke loudly enough for the entire hall to hear: "Venerable Stone Fathers, we witnessed a warning cry—and an intrusion. Something has penetrated the mountain, something we do not know and which should frighten us. The protective runes are cracking. Voices whisper in the passages. And then..."

He hesitated. The image of the distorted creature they had seen flashed before his mind's eye—the glowing eyes, the needle-like teeth, the fractured fragment of an ancient rune-keeper. He had to take a deep breath before he continued.

"We saw a being. A thing such as I had never seen before. Skin like dead stone, eyes like green burning oil fires. It spoke, Stonefather. It spoke of awakening. It spoke of the Deepbrood."

A heavy, deadly silence fell over the hall. Even the torches seemed to burn more quietly.

Hagra Eisenbart closed his eyes, placed his hands on his runic staff, and exhaled slowly. His voice trembled almost imperceptibly as he spoke.

"The Deepbrood... is a fairy tale. A threat from the stories of the smith caves. It was banished three thousand years ago, deep into canyons that have never been opened since."

"Then these gorges are no longer closed," Borin replied. "We have seen it. We have heard them. And the runes in the gallery flicker like dying stars. Their protection is no longer what it once was."

A second Stonefather, Throdir Ashson, leaned forward and grasped the armrests of his throne. His brow was marked with ancient battle wounds, and even his breath sounded like bronze.

"Are you sure it wasn't orc witchcraft?" he asked. "The greenskins are lurking near our borders again, more than before. Perhaps they've retrieved something ancient from the canyons."

Borin shook his head. "Orcs don't speak through stone walls. Orcs don't break runes older than their entire tribes. And orcs don't grin with mouths not made for our world."

A murmur went through the assembly of elders, and some of the younger dwarves among the council servants looked at each other with growing fear.

Finally, Hagra raised his hand. Silence returned.

"Borin Erzhand, whatever you have seen is a threat to the entire realm. We have tested the runes – they are losing their power. And now you come with this vision, this encounter. We will take action. We will strengthen the forges, double the guards, seal the border gates. And we will search the oldest archives to see if the stories of the Deepbrood contain more truth than previously thought."

Borin nodded, but before he could say anything, the ground trembled again. This time stronger. Longer. Deeper.

Torches swayed. Dust trickled from the ceiling. Runes flickered.

And for just a fleeting moment—only for a heartbeat—everyone in the hall heard a voice. A voice that did not come from a dwarf. A voice not meant for the ears of the living.

"We come ..."

Then the mountain fell silent again.

And nobody in the stone council dared to move.

The hall remained frozen in icy stillness. Not a single dwarf dared to breathe, as if the echo of the alien voice had filled all their lungs and turned them to stone. A distant rumble still vibrated from the ceiling, as if the mountain reminded those present that it had itself witnessed what had just been spoken. Borin stood upright, yet deep within him every fiber was taut like a bow, ready to snap at any moment. The Stone Fathers looked at one another, as if the voice had uttered something they had long feared—or repressed.

Hagra Eisenbart slowly raised his hand, his movements heavy as those of an ancient tree whose branches had endured the storm for centuries. When he spoke, his voice was deeper than before, yet it resonated with a certainty that left no room for doubt.

"The mountain itself has spoken. Not through rock, not through halls, but through something within it." He leaned on his runic staff and leaned slightly forward. "Borin Erzhand, you are not the first to report strange sounds from the depths in recent months. But you are the first to describe an enemy to us."

Borin raised his head. "The creature was not a natural inhabitant of these halls. It was formed as if from stone, but alive and... false. And it spoke our language. Or at least a form of it."

Throdir Ashson growled softly, his massive fists clawing at the armrests of his throne. "If it speaks the language of the dwarves, then it once lived among us. Or against us."

Another tremor ran through the hall, this time accompanied by an ominous cracking sound that seemed to originate from the lower levels. The torches hissed, their flames dipping as if bowing before something unseen. Several council servants unconsciously recoiled, their eyes frantically scanning the high vaults for further cracks.

A younger Stonefather, Gorim Hautfels, stood up and spoke in a trembling voice: "The protective runes have held for generations. They were created by the ancestors in a time when the Deep Realms were still young. If they break now... then something very ancient has awakened. Something that even the ancient kings feared."

Hagran nodded slowly. "It is written in the chronicles of the first smiths that the Deepspawn were once banished deep beneath the mountains after attempting to destroy our halls from within. Neither orc nor human nor dwarf created them. They were born in darkness, silent, unmalleable, yet capable of twisting the very essence of stone." His voice lowered. "It was said they were more shadow than flesh, more malice than being."

Borin thought of the distorted grin, the glowing eyes, the unnatural movements. The description fit all too well.

"When the Deepbrood returns," he said quietly, "we are facing a war the likes of which we have never seen before."

The words hung in the air, heavy as a pronouncement of fate. Another Stone Father, Lorgun Silvervein, slowly rose from his stone seat. His beard was white as winter frost, and his voice trembled only slightly as he spoke.

"We mustn't panic. The Council has survived many threats before. We need to gather information. Borin, you and your men will assemble a reconnaissance unit. You will descend deeper into the Halls of the Ancestors. You must find out how large this brood is, how far it has penetrated, and whether it is still multiplying."

Darrim and the other guards looked at Borin as if they had just heard her death warrant. But Borin nodded slowly. It was the right decision, the only one. Without knowledge, one fought blindly—and blindness cost more lives than any blade.

"I will go," he said. "But we need reinforcements. Weapons from the forges of Greybeard, new runes, perhaps even the old war banners. These creatures bear rune fragments of our ancestors—that means they have already killed Guardians. Perhaps long ago. Perhaps just recently."

A heavy silence followed his words, until Hagran took a deep breath and wrinkled his brow.

"You will receive what you need. The forges will be activated immediately. The Iron Brothers are to forge new warhammers, and the quartermasters are to reactivate ancient runework. We must be prepared."

A servant of the council suddenly rushed in – drenched in sweat, panting, his eyes wide open.

"Stone Fathers!" he cried. "The runes in the south passage... they are burning!"

"Burning?" Throdir jumped to his feet. "Runes don't burn! They glow, they shine, but they don't burn!"

"Yes!" gasped the servant. "They're ablaze like pitch fires! And... and... something is knocking against the wall from the inside!"

A collective gasp echoed through the hall. The Stone Age men stood up as if an invisible blow had run through their bones.

Borin reacted first. "We have to go there immediately."

Hagran nodded. "Go. All of you. We mustn't allow the mountain to crack open from the inside out."

They hurried out, accompanied by the iron footsteps of the guards. With each step, the air grew heavier, hotter, thicker with the smell of soot and old dust. When they reached the south passage, they saw it at once: the runes were indeed burning. Flames licked at the ancient symbols as if they were made of wood, not stone. But the flames produced no smoke—they burned silently, more silently than any fire Borin had ever seen.

Darrim instinctively kept his distance, while Aldrik raised the axe, unaware of what he was actually aiming at.

"That's..." Darrim swallowed. "That's not possible."

But it was possible. The flames burned deeper into the runes, and eventually the rock began to crack. Cracks spread like spiderwebs, fine but incredibly fast, as if the mountain itself wanted to break into pieces.

Then came the knocking.

A dull thud, from within.

Then one more.

And another one.

Each blow stronger. Harder. Closer.

"Back!" shouted Hagran. "Everyone back!"

But Borin didn't budge. He knew there was something on the other side. Something that wanted to get out.

And finally, with a crash that shook the entire corridor, the first rune shattered. The stone blasted outwards, dust filled the air.

An arm shot out. Long, grey, cracked. With claws as sharp as freshly broken obsidian.

Behind him followed a face, distorted, grinning, with flickering, glowing green eyes.

"We're coming..." it whispered again, this time so close that Borin could feel the putrid breath on his skin.

And then the wall finally broke open.

The moment the wall finally split open was like the blow of a gigantic blacksmith's hammer driven into the very essence of the mountain. A deafening screech filled the passage, not metallic, not animalistic, but as if the rock itself had screamed as something was torn from its core that should never have existed there. Dust, shattered rock, and glowing rune fragments swirled through the air, stinging Borin's face like tiny, blazing splinters. But he didn't back down. He raised the axe higher.

The creature that first emerged from the opening was larger than any Borin had seen before. Its body was bony, its skin torn and covered in furrowed lines that pulsed with an unnatural green. Its eyes glowed like two ignited emeralds, and a strained laugh, like shattering glass, escaped the slit of its mouth. It had barely emerged fully from the hole when two more shadows forced their way out from behind it. Their movements were jerky and unnatural, as if they weren't walking but being pulled across the stone by some invisible force.

Darrim gasped as one of the creatures extended a long, jagged arm that ended in a grotesque claw and ran it across the burning runes. The flames on the wall reacted, flickering high, hissing—and then extinguishing. Completely. As if they had never been there.

"The fire... it dies near her," whispered Darrim, his eyes wide with shock.

"That's not fire," Borin retorted harshly. "That's pure rune. And something..." His voice trailed off as he watched the glowing rune fragments on the ground flicker one last time and go out. "...is devouring them."

Hagran Eisenbart thrust his runic staff into the ground, and a deep tone echoed through the corridor, carried by the ancient power of the Elders. But even this sound seemed to bounce off the creatures. They turned their heads toward him in unnatural unison, and their mouths opened in a silent, menacing grin.

Then they struck.

The first creature lunged forward with a speed Borin hadn't anticipated. Its arm rammed into the ground like a spear, just an arm's length in front of him. Stone splintered, cracks sprouted like roots in every direction. Borin reacted with an instinctive leap to the side, swung his axe in a semicircle, and struck the creature in the forearm. The impact was hard—not like flesh, but like stone chilled to the bone. Yet the blade cut in. Not deeply, but enough for a greenish mist to escape from the wound.

The creature let out a shriek that made the air tremble. It jerked its arm back and seemed to squeeze it shut in an unnaturally swift movement, as if trying to close the wound. And indeed—the tear closed. Not completely, but enough for Borin to understand: These beings healed. Or deformed. Or both.



Darrim raised his shield just in time as the second creature lunged at him with both arms. The force hurled him backward against the stone wall, his helmet clanging against the stone, and he sank dazed to one knee. Aldrik leaped in and slammed his axe into the creature's head. The blade penetrated a little, but even then it felt as if he were striking cold, living stone. The creature seized Aldrik's forearm with a speed akin to a sword stroke.

"Aldrik!" Borin roared, shoving the creature from the side with all his might.

The blow made the creature stagger, but not fall. Aldrik freed his arm just in time – for where the claw had almost caught him, the imprint of a dark shadow was already visible, a kind of burn mark that had penetrated through the iron and leather onto the skin.

"These demons!" Aldrik growled, spitting on the ground in anger. "They burn with cold!"

Hagran had retreated, but his eyes now glowed. He raised the runic staff again, and this time the ancient symbols on his cloak pulsed. "Retreat!" he cried. "They're breaking through the lower walls! There are more of them, many more!"

And indeed—behind the creatures that had already half-escaped, they now heard more knocking sounds. Not one, not two—dozens. The rock vibrated. The wall bent as if it were being pushed by a forest of vines, forcing their escape.

Borin knew that they had no chance of survival in this narrow passage if the rest of the brood broke through.

"Back! To the great hall! Reorganize the guards!"

Darrim, still unsteady, gripped his shield tighter and followed. Aldrik yanked the axe away from the creature it was about to seize and urged a retreat. Borin, however, lingered a moment longer. He had to ensure the Stonefathers weren't overrun. But Hagran grabbed him surprisingly firmly by the arm.

"Don't die now, Borin."

They ran. And the creatures followed.

The sounds behind them were like the scraping of thousands of tiny blades across stone. The creatures' footsteps didn't sound like footsteps, but like an endless scratching, as if they were dragging themselves across the floor. The walls began to vibrate. Above them, a small stone broke loose and crashed to the ground right next to Borin.

As they reached the great council chamber, more guards had already gathered – alerted by the incredible rumbling rising from the south corridor. The Stone Fathers formed a broad line, their runic staves raised, their eyes glowing with ancient power.

Borin turned around – and saw the creatures rushing out of the dark corridor.

Not one or two anymore. Not three or four. Dozens.

They crawled across the floor, the walls, the ceiling like a swarm of nightmarish figures. Their green eyes glowed in the gloom, and their whispering grew louder, a chorus of pure ruin.

"The deep brood... rises... Rises... Rises..."

The Stone Fathers raised their staffs in unison. Runes flashed in the air, golden, bright, sparkling like molten sunbeams. The light struck the creatures—and they hesitated. For the first time. Their movements slowed. Some retreated. Others snarled. But they did not stop.

Hagran roared: "Close the gates! Bring in the blacksmiths! Call the Iron Brothers! The Deep Realms are on the brink of war!"

And Borin knew in that moment: This was not an attack. This was an awakening. And the mountain would never be the same again.

### A messenger from the dark mines

The gates of the council hall still trembled from the impact of the creatures trying to smash their way through the massive layers of stone. The deep halls echoed with an almost unbearable chorus, a whisper that pierced the dwarves' ears like a poisonous fog. Yet despite the ominous roar, the Stonefathers managed to repel the first wave of the Deepspawn. Golden runic lights flashed across the floor as the elders stood in a sacred circle, renewing their ancient enchantments. The air was charged with power and fear in equal measure.

After long minutes, during which the mountain itself seemed to sway, the noise subsided. Not because the threat had disappeared—but because the creatures were retreating, as if they had found a new target. Borin knew: This was not a good sign. The Deepbrood did not act blindly. If they retreated, they were planning. Something was organizing them. Something or someone.

The silence that followed was heavier than the rumbling before. One could hear the drops from the high vaults, breaking free and splashing onto the hall floor, as loud as hammer blows. The guards readjusted their armor, checked their axes, but no one spoke a word. The events had shattered the long-held certainty that the mountain was an eternal refuge. That certainty was now a crack, as thin as a hair—and threatened to break at the slightest touch.

Borin approached Hagran Eisenbart, who braced his runic staff against the ground and breathed heavily. The old stone father seemed tired, older than before, as if the strength he had to summon had taken a part of his life.

"Stone Father," Borin began in a subdued voice, "we must act before the creatures return again. If they have already managed to break through the lower tunnels, they will do it again—and perhaps in a place we cannot defend."

Hagran nodded without looking up. "I know, Borin. And we will act." Then he raised his head. His eyes, deep and dark, reflected a concern rarely seen in an elder. "But before we do

anything, someone needs to know what's really happening down there. We need to know how deep the brood runs. Where it comes from. Who's leading it."

Borin folded his arms. "You want to send me."

"You and a small group of seasoned warriors. But not into the dark tunnels you know. No." Hagra pointed to the western end of the hall, where a tall, almost black stone wall blocked the view. "You must go to the Dark Mines."

A murmur went through the guards. Darrim audibly inhaled. Aldrik cursed so softly it sounded like a crunch.

The Dark Mines.

A place spoken of only in whispers, even among dwarves. Deep beneath the last known passage, beneath the smithing level, beneath the ancient ore shaft—there they lay. The most abandoned, dangerous, and unpredictable mines in the entire Underrealm. They were so old that no one knew which generation had dug them. Stories were told of tunnels that changed themselves, of passages that shifted their course, and of sounds that should never have existed there.

"In the Dark Mines... there are said to be further entrances." Hagra continued. "Entrances leading to the oldest chambers. To those where the ancestors first imprisoned the creatures of the Deepspawn. If something has awakened there..."

He didn't finish the sentence. The meaning was clear.

Borin nodded slowly. "We're leaving."

Darrim immediately stepped forward. "Then I'll go with you. I won't leave you down there alone, Borin."

Aldrik snorted. "And someone needs to set you both straight if you lose your bearings. So I'm coming too."

Two more guards, young but steadfast warriors, also stepped forward. Borin knew their names well: Norn Ironthroat, tall and broad as a shield wall, and Karim Blackground, a silent but experienced mine runner. Both possessed courage and intelligence—both would be needed.

Before Hagra could give them further instructions, the hall doors creaked open, and several dwarves rushed in. Their condition froze everyone in their tracks: shattered armor, soot-smeared faces, breaths filled with fear. Their leader was an older dwarf with a bleeding forehead wound. He fell to his knees, the echo of his fall reverberating through the otherwise silent hall.

"Stone fathers!" he gasped. "Forgive us for intruding uninvited, but... we must report. Immediately."

Hagra approached the dwarf. "Speak, son of the mountain."

The dwarf raised his head. His eyes were wide open, and in them lay not just fear – but pure, unfiltered terror.

“We... we come from the Dark Mines,” he stammered. “We were at the salvage station. You know, Stonefather... the old garrison by the southern tunnels. We were supposed to retrieve the abandoned equipment from the Slag Depth shaft before the tunnels collapse completely.”

"Yes," Hagan said slowly. "I remember. And no one should descend below level nine."

The messenger nodded. His hands were trembling. "We followed the rules. But... it's no use anymore. The mountain has changed. The passages... they're moving."

Darrim's eyes widened. "Move? What do you mean?"

The messenger shook his head violently, as if afraid the memory might break him. "The walls... they recede. And then advance again. As if they were breathing. We heard a rumble, like a hundred stones breaking at once. And then..."

He fell silent.

"Onward," urged Hagan.

The dwarf swallowed. His voice broke like thin wood. "Then we saw it. A light. A green glow, deep below. At first, we thought it was just phosphorus-bearing ore. But... then the voices came. They spoke our names. One after the other. And... one of our men... he... turned around and simply walked in. As if he were no longer himself."

An icy silence followed.

Karim Schwarzgrund whispered: "That sounds like cursing magic... or something worse."

"Something worse," the messenger confirmed tonelessly. "We didn't follow him. But we saw... things. Shadows. Without form. Without a face. And one of them... was looking at us."

He began to tremble. Seriously, uncontrollably. Borin knelt before him and placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"What was looking at you?" he asked quietly.

The messenger looked up. His pupils were as small as pinheads.

"One eye," he whispered. "Just one eye. Round as a forged stone. Glowing like molten emerald. It filled an entire corridor. And... it looked right into me."

The mountain seemed to stand still for a breath.

Borin knew immediately: This was a sign. A harbinger. A messenger — albeit not a living one.

But the living messenger continued speaking.

"And then," he said in a broken voice, "it spoke a name. A name none of us had ever heard before. But when it spoke it... the mountain trembled."

Hagran leaned forward. "What name?"

The messenger opened his mouth – but before he could answer, he suddenly flinched.

A black line appeared across his forehead. Like a crack.

Then one more.

And another one.

Karim cried out: "By the ancestors – pull him back!"

But there was nothing more they could do.

The messenger broke.

It didn't explode. It didn't disintegrate. It broke.

Like a stone statue that has been blown up from the inside.

His body disintegrated into splintering, greyish-black fragments that fell to the ground and lay there silently — like empty shells.

Darrim took a step back, pale as fresh ore.

"The dark mines..." he murmured. "What kind of nightmare lurks down there?"

Borin clenched his fists. He knew now: They couldn't wait. They couldn't plan. They couldn't hope.

They had to go down.

For the mountain had sent them a messenger. One who, in his death, said:  
**Go down.**

And Borin would obey.

The fragments of the shattered messenger lay still on the ground, as if they had never lived, never spoken, never found their way back from the dark mines. Only the echo of his last words seemed to hang in the air, like a bitter aftertaste of a truth no one in the hall could grasp. Borin stood frozen, his gaze fixed on the broken stone fragments. He felt a cold shiver run down his spine, and though he fought against it, the realization gnawed at his core: The mountain does not send messengers—it destroys them. Whatever the dwarf had seen, heard, or touched down there was something so ancient and powerful that even the rock could no longer contain it.

The Stone Fathers stood in a semicircle, deeply silent, their eyes betraying more fear than Borin had ever seen in any elder. Hagran Ironbeard cast a long gaze at the remains. His

expression was hard, but his fingers gripped his runic staff so tightly that his knuckles showed white.

"That was no natural death," Hagrah finally said, his voice as brittle as cracked granite. "That was no magic as we know it. No ancient spell. No rune manipulation. That was..."

He paused. Everyone in the room waited for the words he didn't want to speak.

"That was the will of the Deep," Throdir Aschensohn finally murmured. "An act of access. A power that reaches between stone and soul."

"Or something that was trapped under the stone," Gorim Hautfels added darkly. "Something that is now trying to break through. And the messenger... was just a conduit."

Borin knelt down and touched one of the shards. It was cold. Colder than stone usually was. And not just cold—dead. As if something had burned it out of the very essence of life.

He stood up and turned to Hagrah. "There's no more time. The Dark Mines must be investigated immediately. The creatures, the runes, the walking tunnels—it's all no coincidence."

"No." Hagrah looked up. "It's the beginning."

"The beginning of what?" Darrim asked in a trembling voice.

Hagrah did not answer immediately. He raised the runic staff and pointed to the spot where the messenger had stood just moments before.

"When the Deepbrood first appeared," he began softly, "it didn't come as an army. Not as a horde. Not as a storm. It came as a shadow. As a whisper. As something that crept into hearts before it knocked on the gates. The mountain gave no warning, for everything happened too fast." His eyes widened. "But this time it did warn. With voices, with fissures, with this... messenger."

Borin nodded grimly. "Then it wasn't a threat. It was a cry. An appeal. A cry for help."

"Or a verdict," Aldrik murmured.

Before anyone could reply, the ground trembled again. This time stronger, more rhythmic, like the pounding of a massive heart deep beneath their feet. The torches along the walls flickered, some going out. The hall grew darker, and the runes on the pillars seemed to quiver.

Norn Eisenkehle stepped to Borin's side. "This is no longer just the shaking of breaking rock. This... feels like footsteps."

"Steps towards something great," Karim added. "Something deeper than anything we've ever known."

The tremor intensified. One of the pillars cracked open slightly, fracture lines stretched upwards like a wreath, as if the rock itself were beginning to breathe.



Hagran raised his staff. "The mountain will not betray us—it is still warning us! Come! We must not remain here. Borin, you and your men must set out immediately. The longer we wait, the deeper the brood will penetrate."

"I'm ready," said Borin, stretching his back. "But we need equipment."

"You will have them." Hagran glanced at a council servant. "Summon the master smiths! Fetch the armor with the reinforced runes, the blades of dwarven steel, the lamps of eternal embers. And the axe of the forefathers."

Darrim gasped. "The axe of the blacksmith fathers? That's only used in wars against the Green Plague!"

"This, son of the mountain," said Hagran, "is a war such as no living dwarf has ever seen."

Borin felt a heaviness in his chest, not from fear, but from responsibility. The Deepbrood had returned. And the mountain no longer merely called, it screamed.

The master smiths rushed forward, heavily armed, their armor still glowing from their work. A thick-bearded master named Ragnar Firebeard presented Borin with an axe whose blade was crisscrossed with deep runes that shimmered like liquid silver.

"This is a blade that does not merely cut," said Ragnar. "It speaks with the rock. It discerns what is alive—and what should not be alive."

Borin took it. It was heavy, but familiar, as if it had been forged for him. A sting of warmth ran through his hand as the axe responded to him.

Darrim received a round shield with an inlaid runic disc that pulsed to the rhythm of the mountain. Aldrik was given a double-edged battle-axe, its blades gleaming with icy clarity. Karim and Norn were equipped with hammers that hummed deeply, as if they were alive within.

As the men stood there, fully equipped, the Stone Fathers looked at them as one looks at those who are to descend into the abyss of the depths and of whom it is not certain whether they will ever return.

"You must go quickly," said Hagran. "Go through the east gallery. The direct route through the main tunnel is blocked."

"Blocked? By whom?" asked Aldrik.

The old stone father slowly lowered his gaze.

"By ourselves. We sealed it to prevent... what broke in the south tunnel from reaching the halls via this route."

Borin nodded. It was the only option.

"We're leaving," he said. "Now."

But as they turned to leave, the ground trembled again—more violently than before. A deep rumble rolled up from the depths, accompanied by a sound that was both familiar and alien. It sounded like metal being forged—but not by dwarven hands. Like hammers striking anvils, yet irregular, distorted, as if wielded not by living hands, but by something ancient and hideous.

"What... is that?" whispered Karim.

Hagran closed his eyes. "These... are the forges of the Deepbrood."

Another rumble. Then a distant screech. And finally – a sound that was not an echo, but a shout.

"Come..." A hoarse, ancient word that pierced through stone and made the flames tremble. "Come... closer..."

Borin felt his heart beat faster.

"We're leaving," he said.

And with these words, they descended. Into the dark mines. To where the mountain itself could no longer protect them.

The descent into the Dark Mines began at the edge of the East Gallery, where the stone changed color—no longer the warm, gray dwarven granite, but a darker, almost black rock, crisscrossed with fine silver lines that resembled frozen lightning. Borin led the group, his new axe gripped tightly, the runes upon it pulsing softly like the heartbeat of a sleeping giant. Darrim walked close behind, his runic shield in front of him, while Aldrik brought up the rear, alert and grim, as if expecting an attack from the rear at any moment. Norn and Karim ran between them, hammers slung over their shoulders, lamps of the Eternal Ember in their hands. The light from these lamps was unlike that of ordinary torches—blue-white, clear, unwavering, as if nothing in the world could extinguish it.

The passage narrowed, the ceiling lower, and the air smelled musty, as if mushrooms were nesting in the walls. It was a smell never encountered in active mines, for only dormant tunnels exuded this decay. The dark mines were the epitome of stagnation—but not of peace. Here, silence was a burden, a threat, a stillness that concealed something.

Borin stopped at a spot where the wall was strangely smooth and ran his hand over the surface. It felt warm. Too warm for stone. He withdrew his hand.

"The rock is alive," murmured Karim, who was also examining the wall. "Or... it's not alive, but something is working inside it."

"Something that doesn't belong here," Aldrik said. "Stay vigilant."

They continued walking, and after a few minutes the sound of their footsteps changed. The ground beneath them was no longer natural stone, but old, worn slabs – evidence that ore mining routes must once have run here. But many of the slabs were broken, discolored, some even slashed, as if enormous claws had pierced them.

A gentle breeze brushed against them. Darrim held up the lamp. "There's something up ahead," he said. "A larger room."

Borin quickened his pace. The tunnel widened, finally opening into a vast chamber. Each of the five men stopped, unable to tear their gaze away. This chamber was older than any mine they knew. No dwarven hand had shaped it. The rock was rounded, the walls smooth as polished obsidian, and in the center gaped a shaft—circular, deep, and seemingly endless.

And he breathed.

Not visible. But audible.

A muffled flow of air in and out. Not loud, but rhythmic. Like the breath of an ancient being slumbering in the depths.

"By the stone..." Darrim whispered.

Karim cautiously approached the edge of the shaft. "This isn't a natural hole. It's like... like a tunnel that formed itself."

Aldrik frowned. "Or someone – or something – dug it. But not with tools."

A movement broke out to the right in the darkness. Darrim whirled around and adjusted his shield. Borin raised his axe. But it wasn't a creature—it was a shadow. A shadow that detached itself as if it were a shred of darkness falling from the wall. It flowed across the ground toward them, coiled around one of the old ore sleds, and the sled collapsed as if being destroyed from within. Metal shattered silently. When the shadow moved on, the sled was nothing but dust.

"That's... not a natural shadow," Norn exclaimed.

Borin remained calm—outwardly. Inwardly, his heart pounded against the armor. A shadow devouring matter? This wasn't a brood of flesh. This was the very essence of darkness itself.

Then a sound came from the shaft.

A sound that could not have come from an animal. Not from a dwarf. Not from an orc. It was a word. A single word. An ancient word full of power – a nameless sound.

»Graaa'thuun...«

The sound sliced through the air like a sword. The lamps of the Eternal Flame flickered—not extinguished, but weakened. As if the sound had drained their power. Darrim stumbled back. Aldrik clenched his teeth.

"What was that?" Karim exclaimed.

Borin didn't answer immediately. He stared into the depths of the shaft, as if he could discern the truth there. But the depths were only darkness. A darkness that stared back at him.

"That was a name," Borin finally said.

"A name?" Darrim shook his head. "That wasn't a word from a language."

"Yes. A language we don't know. But the creatures do."

Another sound came from the depths. Not the same. Not similar. More like a distant rumble, a scratching, a whisper.

"Borin ..."

Borin froze.

The sound had spoken its name.

Aldrik yelled: "It knows you!"

Karim raised the hammer. "How can something know your name?!"

Borin didn't know. But his blood ran cold. Something deep down had seen her. Or felt her. Or both.

The shaft began to shake, and breathing became faster.

"Back!" Borin shouted. "We need to create some distance, now!"

But before they could retreat, something broke away from the rock at the edge of the shaft. Not a creature, not quite. An arm, gray like the stone, but alive, shot out from a crack and grabbed Darrim's ankle.

Darrim screamed and fell. Borin and Aldrik immediately jumped forward, but the arm was already pulling Darrim towards the shaft.

Karim grabbed Darrim's free arm. Norn supported his back. "Pull! Pull!"

The stone arm pulled harder. Darrim's armor scraped against the plates. He screamed again.

Borin swung the axe. The blow struck the arm—an impact like hitting cold rock. But the arm tore, broke open, and black mist rose from it. Darrim was free.

But the crack in the wall remained. And now fingers were climbing out of it. Five. Ten. Twenty.

"We have to leave!" Aldrik shouted. "Right now!"

But the mountain had other plans.

A tremendous roar thundered through the chamber, a crash that felt like a mountain falling. Stone slabs shattered. Cracks ran across the floor. The shaft's breath became a gust of wind that bent the lamps.

And from the depths came a final, thunderous sound:

"Come... deeper..."

Borin didn't hesitate any longer. "Back! Towards the upper tunnel! Run!"

They ran. The shadows followed. The walls closed behind them. And the mountain – the great, sleeping, breathing mountain – began to move.

## The Shattered Throne

The retreat from the Dark Mines was a single, endless ride through shadows, echoing screams, and the trembling of the mountain itself. Borin and his men barely had time to catch their breath as they fled the obsidian-gleaming chamber whose shaft had nearly swallowed them whole. Every step reverberated like a hammer blow, every breath was sharp as cold steel. Behind them, the shadows pressed forward, climbing the walls like black, living flames that didn't burn, but devoured. And yet, they managed to reach the wider tunnels where the rock no longer breathed and the walls seemed more solid.

"Onward!" Borin shouted, even though his lungs were burning. "We mustn't give them any support! Run while the walls are still standing!"

Darrim limped, but Aldrik supported him, while Karim and Norn brought up the rear, circling their hammers to drive back any shadow that came too close. But the shadows never completely retreated, as if they knew their prey could ultimately not escape them. They merely floated back into the darker corners of the tunnels, waiting like patient hunters.

As they reached the exit to the upper tunnel system, they nearly tumbled into the light-flooded gallery where the runes on the walls still glowed faintly. There, Borin stopped abruptly, gasping, his hands on his knees. For a moment, the familiar rock gave him the feeling of being back in the world of the living. But only a moment. For the mountain still vibrated—restless, warning, full of simmering menace.

"We must go to the council chamber immediately," Karim said hoarsely.

"Yes," Borin agreed, "but we can't just run in. The Stone Fathers need to know what we saw. Everything."

Aldrik looked back into the tunnel they had come from. "It won't be long before these... things... find a new way out. And the mountain..." He placed a heavy hand against the wall. "...it's still moving."

They hurried through the gallery, this time uphill, toward the council chamber. And even before they reached it, they heard the voices. But they weren't whispers of the Deepbrood—they were angry shouts, the clang of metal on metal, the echo of strife and despair. Borin quickened his pace. The heavy doors stood open, and as he stepped through, he immediately saw that the chamber was no longer the same as before their departure.

The throne.

The mighty stone, upon which generations of dwarven rulers had sat, had cracked.

Not in the middle. Not on the surface. No—the crack began at the base, where the throne was firmly anchored to the rock, and shot upward like a lightning bolt of pure, ancient rage. The golden runes that once encircled the throne and protected its power had been extinguished. The shards lay scattered on the steps like the remains of a fallen king. And above the crack glowed an ominous green light, pulsing like a heartbeat from the depths.

The Stone Fathers stood agitated around the throne. Master smiths were also present, some with soot-smeared faces, others with trembling hands, as if they had only now grasped the powerlessness of their craft. The armorers stared in disbelief at the broken runes, as if this were proof of a crime against the soul of the mountain.

Hagran Eisenbart was the first to notice Borin. "You're back," he said, but his voice sounded dull, exhausted. "What did you see? What... marked you like this?"

Borin stepped forward, his footsteps echoing through the hall like heavy hammer blows. He didn't look at Hagran first, but at the throne. The light emanating from the crack made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"We went too deep," he began. "And we awakened something. Or rather – it was already awake and waiting for us."

Darrim shuddered and stepped beside Borin. "The mountain breathes, Stonefather. The walls are moving. And we've seen shadows, turning metal to dust. And something... enormous." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Something spoke Borin's name."

Hagran's eyes narrowed. "That's impossible."

"Not anymore," Borin replied. "The shaft... lives. It breathes. And there is a word it has repeatedly breathed out. A name. Graa'thuun."

Throdir Ashson, one of the elder Stone Fathers, let out a hoarse gasp. "This cannot be... This name... this name has been erased from all chronicles. It should never be mentioned again."

"Then tell us," demanded Aldrik. "What does it mean?"

Hagran struck the ground with his staff so hard that sparks flew. "This name does not belong in the world of the living. It is the name of him who once led the Deepbrood. A being that is neither dwarf, nor orc, nor human, nor beast—something born from the rock before our ancestors carved the first runes."

"A king of darkness," murmured Gorim Hautfels. "The Deep Throne was his goal. And when he failed, he was banished."

"Then he is no longer exiled," Borin said gloomily.

A rumble ran through the hall, and the shards of the throne trembled. Some rolled from the steps as if touched by an invisible body. The green light in the crack intensified. It pulsed faster, more rhythmically. More menacingly.



"How could this happen?" cried a master blacksmith in despair. "The runes... they were supposed to last forever!"

Hagran slowly turned to face him. His voice wasn't loud, but it cut through the hall like a blade. "No rune lasts forever. Not when the enemy against whom it was forged awakens."

Suddenly there was a crash.

A loud, rumbling, all-consuming crash.

The back wall of the hall cracked. A fissure ran through the stone like a raging river. Dust billowed up. Runes flickered. And a shadow emerged.

Not one of the creatures Borin had seen before. Not one of the grey, living stone figures.

The shadow was large. Wide. Long horns jutted from its head, curved like the feelers of an ancient monster. Eyes like green, flaming maws opened. And a voice—dark, deep, as heavy as the mountain itself—rolled through the hall.

"You have broken the throne."

Darrim let out a cry. Aldrik raised his axe. Borin lifted his new weapon and stood before the Stone Fathers.

The shadow moved forward, and each step made the hall tremble.

"Graaa'thuun..." whispered Karim, unable to tear his gaze away.

The shadow rose – higher, bigger, wider. Until it towered over the cracked throne.

"I am returning."

And the mountain answered him – with a roar that sounded like a scream.

The shadow that had emerged from the cracked rock filled the hall like a nightmare from forgotten ages. It was neither form nor mist, neither flesh nor stone. It was something in between—a living darkness that possessed eyes but no body, its horns digging into the air like two curved blades. The green gleam of its eyes shattered any hope Borin still harbored. It was a gaze without mercy, without doubt, without any trace of life. A gaze that knew it could not be defeated.

Aldrik stepped forward, gripping his axe so tightly that his knuckles turned white. "This... is not a creature we can fight," he whispered hoarsely. "How can you hit something that barely has a body?"

But Borin barely heard him. His heart pounded in his chest, but it wasn't just fear. It was rage—an ancient rage, deep in the dwarven blood, a rage against the darkness that dared to desecrate their halls. He raised his axe, feeling the warmth of the runes in its handle. The tool was a gift from the mountain itself—and yet he felt the shadow creature's power trying to drain the courage from his bones.

"Form up!" shouted Hagan, his voice surprisingly firm despite his knees trembling beneath his cloak. "Around the throne! The runes of the mountain still protect part of this hall!"

The guardians immediately formed up, though their movements were hesitant. The master smiths stared at the creature in stunned silence; some whispered ancient prayers, others instinctively retreated, knowing that no retreat could save them.

The shadow took another step forward, and this time everyone in the hall felt the air grow heavier. It was like breathing underwater—or not breathing at all. Borin felt a pressure on his chest, as if something were pulling him down, into the stone, into the very depths of the abyss.

Then the shadow spoke. This time it wasn't just a sound. It was a sentence. An ancient sentence.

"The throne... belongs to me."

A murmur rippled through the assembly. The walls answered. The mountain itself answered. The crack in the throne glowed brighter, and the surrounding runes began to pulse with a sickening green. The shards of the stone steps began to float—slowly at first, then faster, until they fluttered in circular orbits around the creature.

Karim grabbed Norn's arm. "It controls the stone!"

"It's stone," Norn murmured.

The shadow raised its horn-like protrusions and let out a piercing screech. Shards broke free from their tracks and flew in all directions. Darrim raised his shield just in time, but three shards shattered its edge, tearing deep gashes into it. One of the master smiths was struck and fell backward, unconscious, blood gushing from a gaping wound on his forehead.

Borin tensed every muscle. "Hold the line! DO NOT give way!"

Aldrik stood next to him. "If we die, then we die standing up."

Borin barely registered his friend's courage, for the shadow moved again. This time faster. It shot forward, not running, but gliding, as if the rock itself were carrying it. Each step caused a tremor—not in the walls, but in the souls of those present.

Hagan raised the runic staff and shouted: "In the name of the ancestors, in the name of the First Smith, in the name of the mountain – step back!"

The staff glowed golden, a pure, clear color that pierced the darkness like a spark of hope. The beam of light struck the shadow directly at the chest—or where the chest of such a being should be.

For a moment – just a tiny, trembling breath – the shadow paused.

The golden light penetrated him. It didn't bounce off. It didn't disappear. It vanished inside him, as if it were being swallowed.

Darrim whispered: "The light will be extinguished."

And then it happened.

The shadow bent. It twisted. It moved away.

And laughed.

It was a laugh that should never have been a sound. A laugh that made the mountain tremble. A laugh that cut through the bones.

"You call this light..." murmured the shadow. "Light... that I created before your time?"

Hagran took a step back. "That's not possible..."

But the shadow continued to rise. Its horns almost touched the ceiling of the hall.

"I was here... long before your ancestors laid stone upon stone. I am the depth you believe is buried. I am the breath that created the mountains. I am Graa'thuun."

The name was a bombshell.

Several runes on the pillars cracked. Not just tore – they exploded in a shower of green sparks.

A shockwave ripped through the hall. Borin was thrown to the ground. His helmet slammed hard against the stone, and stars danced before his eyes. Darrim rolled down the steps. Aldrik was hurled against a pillar. Several master smiths were knocked unconscious.

Borin tried to stand up. His legs were trembling. His breath caught in his throat. But he forced himself to his feet.

Because he saw something.

And this something paralyzed him more than the pressure wave.

The shadow reached for the broken throne.

Not with hands.

With darkness.

The shards flew towards him like metal shavings to a magnet. The throne contracted, melted, and reformed. But not into the throne that had once stood there.

It transformed into something else.

To a seat. A black seat. A seat that looked as if it had been forged from broken souls.

Borin felt his stomach cramp.

"This is... the Deep Throne..."

Darrim gasped. "Then... then the throne was... a seal!"

Hagran closed his eyes. "Yes. It wasn't a chair. It was a prison."

Borin stared into the flaming green eyes of Graa'thuun, who now rose and formed the newborn throne behind him.

"You have broken the seal," the creature growled. "And now... the fall of the Deep Realms begins."

The hall trembled. The throne glowed. And Graa'thuun sat down.

The mountain screamed.

The cry of the mountain that echoed as Graa'thuun ascended the newly forged Deep Throne was no ordinary tremor. It was a rupture in reality, a sound that pierced marrow and soul, filling all living things with dread. The walls of the council chamber shook, fine cracks ran like cobwebs across the rune-carved pillars, and several torches along the walls exploded in sparks as if they had lost their breath. Dust rained down, mingling with the ominous, greenish aura that spread from the throne like poisonous waves.

Borin was still half-kneeling, his axe handle gripped tightly like an icy claw. The pressure emanating from Graa'thuun made his lungs burn as if he were breathing ash. Aldrik struggled to his feet as well, leaning heavily on his hammer, while Darrim, bleeding from his forehead, desperately tried to hold his shield in front of him as if it were a quake, though he knew no shield in the world could protect him from this enemy.

Graa'thuun rose slowly upon the throne, his horns scraping the ceiling, sending sparks cascading like an ominous starstorm. The shadow body had become more fluid, less like mist and more like a tenacious mass of darkness. His eyes glowed brighter than before, and as he scanned the hall, every single blaze within seemed to be an ancient hatred, bred in the very heart of darkness itself.

"You dwarves... how far you have fallen," Graa'thuun spoke in a voice that rang not through air, but through stone. "You thought you would bury me, forget me. But I was never gone. Your throne..." His black claws grasped the air and closed invisibly around the halls, "...your pride... was my prison. And your stone... my grave."

Despite his age, Hagran Eisenbart stood upright, bracing himself against the wave of power that swept through the hall. His runic staff glowed again, though less intensely. "Graa'thuun... you were banished. Not by us, but by the ancestors, long before our time. We did not set you free—the mountain itself held you back!"

Graa'thuun laughed. An ugly, scratchy, clanging laugh. "You understand so little, Stonefather. I was never gone. I was the stone beneath the stone. The breath behind the breath. I was that which your ancestors could not destroy—only bind. But runes break." He pointed at the shattered fragments of the ancient throne. "And time... is my ally."

A stream of green energy escaped from its form and shot through the hall like a cold beam. It struck the great wall at the far end of the hall—and pierced through it as if it were made of

cotton wool. The stone around the hole darkened, becoming soft, as if it were rotting. It didn't collapse—it dissolved, crumbling to dust.

"That... is impossible," murmured Gorim Hautfels, one of the Stone Fathers. "Only the primal rune itself could do such a thing!"

"The primal rune?" Graa'thuun inclined his head. "It was once mine. Your ancestors stole it. Its power is only an echo that has kept it from me. But the echo... is fading."

Another shockwave rolled through the hall. Every dwarf was forced to his knees. Borin gritted his teeth, forcing his body not to be crushed to the ground, even though it felt as if a mountain were being laid on his back.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?!" he finally shouted. "What do you want from us?!"

The Shadow King turned to him.

And at that moment, Borin felt something cold, wet, and ancient pass through his soul.

"I want," said Graa'thuun, "what has always been mine: The Depths. The Stone. And..." He lowered his voice until it became an ominous murmur. "...your hearts."

Darrim gasped. "Our... hearts?"

"Yes," hissed Graa'thuun. "Dwarves have always been resilient. Strong. Stubborn. Your hearts burn longer than those of other races." An evil glint flickered in his eyes. "They are... food."

At that moment, the hall rumbled again, and the pillars vibrated as if a mighty dragon had run its claw over them. Cracks opened up through the floor to the throne, and from them poured a poisonous, green mist. The mist flowed like liquid through the hall, swirling around the dwarves' legs, creeping into the runes carved into the pillars.

"NO!" Hagrah shouted, driving his staff into the ground. Runes flashed, forming a golden barrier. The fog rebounded against it—and seemed to hesitate for a moment.

But only briefly.

Then it pushed on, tearing at the barrier, slowly eating its way in – like acid consuming metal.

"The mountain won't hold much longer," Hagrah gasped. "We have to stop it, or the whole hall will collapse!"

"Or we all die here," Aldrik growled.

Borin felt the pressure mounting. "Stone Father! What is his goal?! What does he intend to do now?"

Hagrah turned slowly to him, his eyes filled with horror, saying everything his mouth could scarcely express. "He doesn't want to destroy the hall. He wants to... ascend. He wants to reach the upper halls. The forges. The cities." His voice faded into a whisper. "He wants to take over the empire."

Before Borin could reply, Graa'thuun raised one of his claws.

The fog rose. It grew. It thickened.

And suddenly it formed into three massive figures. Tall. Heavy. With bodies like molten stone and eyes of green flame.

"My harbingers," Graa'thuun growled. "They will cleanse the realm."

The three figures charged forward. The dwarves formed up. Hammers and axes crashed against shadows and stone.

But it was like fighting a storm.

Norn was thrown back and crashed against a pillar. Darrim roared and thrust his shield into the chest of a monster—to no avail. Aldrik swung his axe into the shoulder of one of the beasts. The blow was powerful enough to split an orc in two. But the monster stood still. Just looked at him. And smiled.

Borin leaped forward, the blacksmith fathers' axe in both hands. He felt it vibrate. It wanted to fight. It wanted to cut.

"For the ancestors!" he shouted and struck.

The axe struck.

A dazzling flash of silver light shot out of the weapon.

The monster screamed. A real cry of pain. It staggered backward.

Borin gasped. It can get hurt.

Graa'thuun's eyes narrowed. "Interesting..."

But before Borin could strike again, the hall trembled once more. This time differently. Deeper. More menacing.

Graa'thuun raised both arms.

The ceiling of the hall began to collapse.

Hagran shouted: "The mountain is giving way! SAVE yourselves!"

Borin turned around. His blood froze.

A huge crack ran right through the hall. The floor broke open. Fire shot out. Green fog rose.

Graa'thuun rose from the throne, his horns glowing.

"The empire falls. And I rise."



Then an entire section of the ceiling collapsed.

Borin yelled: "OUT! EVERYONE OUT!"

And the dwarves ran. Ran for their lives. While behind them the king's throne finally crumbled.

## Runes in the dust of centuries

The mountain was still trembling as Borin, Darrim, Aldrik, Karim, and Norn fled through the once-familiar corridors of the Underrealms. Behind them, stone slabs, pillars, and entire sections of wall collapsed, while the echo of Graa'thuun's growling voice rolled through the halls like a storm. The ground vibrated beneath their feet as if the mountain were writhing, trying to shake off the dark intruder—or perhaps buckle before it. Shouts echoed from distant passages: the metallic clash of weapons, the splintering of stone, the whimpers of the wounded. It was as if the entire realm had been thrown back into an ancient chaos in an instant.

Borin sprinted forward, his breath burning, but his mind clear as iron. He didn't think, he didn't plan—he acted. The axe of the blacksmith fathers vibrated in his hand, as if sensing the spreading darkness. Or as if warning him that time was running out.

"Borin!" Darrim shouted behind him. "Where to? The main gallery is collapsing!"

"To the Ancestral Archives!" Borin shouted over his shoulder. "If we need anything to defeat this demon, we'll find it there!"

Aldrik cursed loudly. "The ancestral archive? Borin, the oldest writings are sealed! The Stone Fathers will only open the archive in the face of the end of the world!"

"Then this is the end of the world," Borin growled. "So hurry up."

They continued to fight their way through the unstable passages. The smoke from collapsed torches mingled with the poisonous green ooze that seeped from the cracks in the stone. Again and again, they had to veer off through passages that suddenly filled with fissures or were flooded with shadows that crawled across the floor without solid bodies, but with deadly intent.

Finally, they reached a long, narrow gallery whose walls were covered in ancient reliefs—scenes from bygone eras, beginning with the first forges of their ancestors, through the rise of kings, to battles whose names most dwarves today didn't even recognize. But Borin knew where they were. This gallery led to the steps of the Ancestral Archive, a place where history itself breathed.

One particularly old depiction showed a dwarf with a mighty hammer, standing before a gigantic shadow creature. Borin paused briefly in his stride, touched the relief with his fingertips, and felt dust trickling onto his hand like snow.

The creature in the relief... looked like Graa'thuun.

The horns. The eyes. The enormous, misshapen form.

"Aldrik... look at this."

Aldrik froze, and even Karim and Norn paused. "This can't be happening..." Aldrik murmured. "Our ancestors didn't just know him. They fought against him."

"They banished him," Borin corrected. "They couldn't destroy him."

"So we must do what they couldn't," said Darrim, his fingers clenched around the shield. "But how?"

"By finding the truth," Borin said, pointing to the door at the end of the gallery. "In there."

The archive door was carved from solid, ancient stone, covered in deep runes arranged in regular patterns. But like everything else in the mountain, it too was cracked, and some no longer glowed as they once did. Two guardians of the archive stood before it—or had stood. They now lay on the ground like shattered statues, their bodies grotesquely contorted, their eyes fixed, their armor crumbling.

"They are... petrified," Karim whispered.

"Graa'thuun's work," said Borin. "This kind of death is not natural."

He stood in front of the door, raised the axe of the blacksmith fathers, and lowered the blade onto one of the large runes.

A deep sound vibrated through the door.

An echo.

He struck a second time – not hard, but with precision. This time the entire wall vibrated.

Runes began to light up.

First light – silver. Second light – gold. Third light – in an old-fashioned blue.

The mechanism sprang to life. The door slid open.

And a surge of cold air poured out from the interior, as if centuries had slumbered within.

The ancestral archive lay before them.

A vast hall, infinitely high, infinitely old. Statues of former kings stood along the walls, colossal stone figures. Between them, shelves older than the deepest tunnels. Scrolls bound in linen, massive stone tablets, runic plates, metal seals – knowledge from ages that now existed only in whispers.

But what shocked Borin most was that the runes on the walls of the hall... no longer shone.

Not silver. Not gold. Not blue.

They were grey. Cold. Dead.

"By the ancestors..." Norn breathed. "The runes have... been extinguished."

Borin felt his throat go dry. "That means... the mountain itself has lost its power. Or it's being drained of its strength by Graa'thuun."

"Then we need to hurry," growled Aldrik.

They hurried through the hall. Borin knew exactly where he was going. He had studied the legends since he was a boy. In the furthest niche, in a sunken area beneath a colossal statue of the first runesmith, lay the forbidden collection: the writings about the enemies who were not to be named.

Enemies of the deep. Enemies of the mountain. Enemies from the time before the dwarves.

They reached the niche. Borin pushed the heavy metal latch aside. Behind it lay three enormous stone slabs, covered in dust so thick it looked like snow.

Borin ran his fingers over it. His fingers left marks.

The runes on it pulsed slowly, laboriously, like dying embers.

"Help me," he said to Karim and Aldrik. The two stood beside him and placed their hands on the board. Together they tipped the first board backward.

Beneath it lay a second tablet. But this one... was still glowing.

Weak. But noticeable.

It contained a drawing. A colossal figure. With horns. With eyes of fire. With a body of living stone.

Darrim stared at the record. "That's him. That's Graa'thuun."

"No," said Borin. "This isn't just him. This is... his story."

He began to read. Runes so ancient that even his experience was hardly sufficient. Yet he understood enough.

The dwarves did not create Graa'thuun. They found him. Born from the mountain. Immortal. Unfathomable. A power so profound it should not have existed.

He was the first. The Deepbrood were his offspring. Created from shadow, stone, and hatred.

And then Borin found something that made his blood run cold.

A fourth, hidden tablet.

He wiped away the dust.

It said:

**"Only through the primal rune can the First be bound."  
Only through the heart of a true king can it be awakened."**

Karim stared at him. "A king... alive? Or dead?"

Borin did not reply.

Because he knew the truth.

And he didn't like her.

"The primal rune..." he said softly. "It is lost. But it can be revived... if a king gives his heart."

Darrim turned pale. "But we no longer have a king."

Norn nodded heavily. "The throne is destroyed."

Aldrik raised his head. "Then the throne needs... a new king."

Everyone looked at Borin.

And Borin felt the mountain beneath them tremble once more.

The ground vibrated beneath Borin's boots as the dust on the tablet slowly trickled to the ground. The words he had just read hung in the air like threats. Every dwarf in the small group intuitively sensed they stood at a turning point—one that would alter the future of the entire Underrealms. Not through weapons. Not through battles. But through a sacrifice as old as war itself: a king who gave his heart.

But the dwarves no longer had a king. And the throne was shattered, its seal broken, its power defiled.

Borin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The scent of the archive—dust, old parchment, withered stone—mingled with something new. Something cold. The air grew heavy, as if darkness itself were trying to creep into the hall.

"We have no time," Borin finally said. "The mountain is dying. The runes are fading. If we don't find or reawaken the primal rune, Graa'thuun will spread to every corridor, every mine, every hall."

"And what if we don't have a king?" Karim asked. His voice wasn't timid—just realistic. "Whom is the primal rune supposed to recognize?"

"Maybe..." Aldrik began, but his words caught in his throat as the hall shook again. This time not like an earthquake, but like a throbbing beat—rhythmic. Heavy. Menacing.

Darrim raised his shield. "It's getting closer!"

A faint but ominous crackling filled the air. Norn gripped his hammer tighter. "Do you hear that?"

The crackling turned into a scratching. A rustling. Then a whisper.

Not many voices. A single one. A powerful one. One that seemed to wander through the rock like water through cracks.

"You... cannot... escape..."

Borin tensed. The voice didn't sound like any of the creatures they had seen before. It was deeper. Clearer. More personal. And it seemed to know the name of the person listening.

"Borin..."

Karim stepped back. "He's talking to you!"

"He senses us," Darrim said nervously. "He has the throne. He controls the kingdom. And now he's looking for us."

Borin growled. "Then we have to be faster."

He turned to the third stone tablet and slammed it to the ground, revealing the reverse side. No runes this time. Just a large, engraved circle with a triple spiral inside – an ancient symbol, older than any language.

"This is the ancestral mark," Norn said reverently. "The mark of the First Ones. Those who bound Graa'thuun."

Borin nodded. "And beneath this spiral... lies the chamber where they summoned the primal rune."

Aldrik blinked. "A chamber beneath the archive? But we never..."

Another crash shook the hall. Finest clouds of dust rained down from the ceiling. The enormous statues of the ancestors tilted precariously, some already scraping the floor with the edges of their hard fists.

"NOW is not the time for astonished questions!" Borin shouted. "Help me move the blackboard!"

Together they grasped the heavy stone slab by its edges. With a creak, it slid to the side. Beneath it, an ancient mechanism was revealed: a circular hole, large enough for a dwarf, covered in powdery dust. And below that – a thin crack in the ground.

"There's a chamber," Karim whispered.

"Or a grave," Darrim murmured.

Borin knelt down and blew away the dust. A faint, bluish glow emanated from the depths.

"That is rune light," said Borin. "Old, but not extinguished."

"Then... is there still something alive down there?" Aldrik asked.

Borin shook his head. "Not alive. But waiting."

Norn leaned over the opening. "It's narrow. We have to go down one at a time. I'll go first."

"No," Borin said firmly. "I'll go first. That thing down there knows MY name. I want to know why."

Darrim looked worried but didn't protest. Borin wrapped a rope around one of the statues' bases and dropped the other end into the opening. He tested the tension. It held.

"When I call, they follow me one after the other," he said. "When I don't call..."

"Then we'll come and get you," Aldrik growled.

Borin nodded – and let himself slide down.

The shaft was narrow, but not deadly. His boots found solid ground after a few breaths. The space was small, little more than a natural cave. But the floor was covered with glowing runic lines that spiraled together to form a large, flat slab in the center. This slab glowed bluish, not greenish like Graa'thuun's corruption.

Vibrant. Warm. Pure.

Borin was amazed.

"Among the ancestors..."

He knelt down and placed his hand on it.

It felt like the heartbeat of a being.

Suddenly images flashed through his mind:

An ancient king, holding a rune in his hands. Graa'thuun, raging in the depths, tamed by light. A circle of smithmasters, singing. A sacrifice—a heart that burned. A glowing stone that screamed. A throne that broke. A line stretched through time.

And then Borin heard a voice.

Not dark. Not threatening.

Clear. Old. Stoic.

"You... are one of us."

Borin gasped. "Who... are you?"

The voice answered:

"I am the one who bound the rune. The nameless king. The first under stone. And you... are his heir."

Borin froze.

"What does this mean?"

Her voice became softer, but at the same time heavy as iron.

"Only a king... can wield the primal rune. Only a heart... that bears the legacy of the ancestors... can bind Graa'thuun."

Borin stared at the glowing plate.

"I am not a king."

"Yes," the voice replied. "It's you. It always has been."

At that moment he heard screams above him, the roaring of the rock, the trembling of an approaching enemy.

Aldrik called his name. Darrim shouted something unintelligible. Stone splintered.

Graa'thuun came closer.

Borin slowly stood up.

And suddenly he knew: The mountain hadn't called him by chance.

Borin stood in the small chamber, his gaze fixed on the glowing slab that pulsed beneath his boots like an ancient heart. The light was soft yet intense, seeming to penetrate his very core, as if testing what lay hidden within him. Above his head, the rock trembled—hard, deep thuds, like colossal footsteps hammering through the mountain massif. Graa'thuun was drawing nearer. He needed no doors. No passageways. His will twisted the stone, cracked it open, crumbled walls like rotten wood.

Borin knew he only had moments left before the Shadow King reached this place. But at the same time, he sensed something else: a power rising from the depths of the rune, so ancient that his mind was barely able to comprehend it. A power that didn't seek to destroy him—but rather to call to him.

"I am not a king," Borin murmured, but the words sounded weak. Like the answer of a man who knew he was lying.

"It is you," the voice came again, clear and heavy. "You bear the blood of the ancestors. Not by birth—by the mountain that chose you."

"I am just a guard," Borin countered.

"You are a guardian, yes. A guardian of the throne. The mountain gave you your axe. Your strength. Your destiny. Not to flee... but to stand firm."

Borin closed his eyes as the visions swept through him once more: a storm of stone and shadow, the ancient master smiths in a circle, their voices united in an ominous chant, a king lifting his heart, shining like living steel, and a rune – burning, alive, forged from sacrifice and duty.

"A king..." Borin said hoarsely. "What does that even mean?"

The voice immediately replied: "A king is not one who rules. A king is one who gives what no one else can give."

Borin felt his heart beat faster. Not with fear. With realization.

"Should I die?" he asked softly.

"Die?" The voice didn't laugh, but Borin sensed a strange, heavy smile within it. "No. You are meant to live. To live like a king. For others. Not for yourself. Your heart is not destined to be sacrificed—it is destined to bear the rune."

Borin opened his eyes. "The primal rune... is to live within me?"

"Not in you," the voice corrected. "Through you."

At that moment, the stone above him cracked open. Dust trickled down. Shards rained like daggers. A piercing, loathsome crash filled the chamber, and a voice—deep, growling, filled with ancient hatred—echoed through the walls.

"Boriiiiin ..."

Borin slowly turned toward the shaft's entrance. A green glow seeped down from the darkness above him. The rock almost melted, so intense was the energy, though it was as cold as death. Darim's voice echoed through the passage, desperate and filled with fear.

"Borin! BORIN! Come up here! That thing has torn the whole hall apart!"

"We can't hold the wall anymore!" Aldrik shouted. "Damn it, Borin, hurry up!"

Karim's voice was barely audible: "He's coming... he's coming... he's DIRECTLY behind us..."

Borin knew they had no chance if Graa'thuun penetrated the archives. Not even the strongest ancestral runes could bind the Shadow King any longer. The mountain died—and with it died the power that had once protected it.

But the voice in the chamber spoke to him once more.

"Arise, Borin. Take the rune. And become what you must be."



Borin knelt before the glowing plate. The runic lines on it now burned brighter – no longer bluish, but silvery, like freshly cast steel. They took shape, twisted, and intertwined like a living thread.

He felt the warmth through his gloves, through his skin, through his arm, through his chest – deep into his heart.

And suddenly he knew what to do.

He placed both hands on the rune.

A cry escaped his throat—not from pain, but from the sheer overwhelming power. Light shot through the chamber. Runes burst open, glowed, awoke. The ground trembled, the rock sang—an ancient, soundless chorus. And Borin felt a strange yet familiar fire coursing through his veins. Not destructive. Not cruel. A force that does not kill—but binds.

Then it was over.

Borin gasped. His body seemed to have become both heavier and lighter at the same time.

On his chest...a mark glowed.

A triple spiral, silver, vibrant. The ancestral mark.

Darrim shouted from above: "BORIN! HE IS HERE!"

A shadow fell into the room.

Graa'thuun himself bent down into the shaft – a massive, distorted outline whose eyes blazed like burning poisons.

"You... dare..." he growled. "You are... nothing. A spark. A shadow. A worm in a stone. And you... want to be king?"

Borin rose slowly. The axe of the blacksmith fathers was now also glowing, the runes on it as bright as small stars.

"No," said Borin. "I don't want to be king."

He raised the axe.

"But the mountain wills it."

And at that moment, a silver explosion shot out of his body, hitting the Shadow King square in the face and hurling him back like a chunk of meat.

The mountain trembled from the impact.

Darrim shouted: "BORIN! GO UP! QUICKLY!"

Karim's voice cracked: "He's coming back! He's rising up! BORIN!"

Borin leaped to the rope as Graa'thuun roared again behind him. The rock held. The rope held. And Borin climbed up.

No longer as guardians. No longer as warriors.

But as the one who bore the legacy of the ancestors.

As the new king of the Deep Realms.

Not yet crowned.

But chosen.

And Graa'thuun knew it.

## The Call of the Deep Realms

Borin pulled himself up the rope, each breath burning, every muscle taut like forged steel. Above him, footsteps thundered, screams echoed, and the rumbling reverberation of the raging mountain roared. Dust fell like gray snow, and small shards of stone pattered against his helmet. Aldrik leaned over the opening, his face wet with sweat and chalk-white in the flickering light of the rune torches.

"Come on, Borin! Hurry up!"

Behind Aldrik, Borin saw Darrim standing with his shield raised, his gaze fixed on the spreading shadow that devoured the hall like black flames. The walls vibrated. It sounded as if something immensely large was climbing through the rock—something that didn't see the stone as an obstacle, but as soft flesh it could penetrate.

Borin pulled himself higher, his fingers clenching the rope. The ancestral mark on his chest burned hot, yet it didn't hurt—it pulsed in time with the mountain, as if trying to dig deeper into his soul with every heartbeat. When he reached the opening, Aldrik grabbed his arm and pulled him out with a dangerous jerk.

"Are you all right?" Aldrik shouted.

Borin merely nodded. There was no time for words. The Shadow's scream echoed from the depths—a furious, searing howl that made the rock tremble. A piercing echo that made it clear Graa'thuun hadn't been hurt—only surprised.

"We have to get out of here!" Darrim shouted. "He's breaking through!"

No sooner had he spoken than dark claws shot out of the shaft, grasped the edge, and dug in. The rock bent under their touch as if it were soft clay. Darkness poured from the opening like liquid shadow, snaking along the walls, creeping like a living plague toward the ceiling.

Borin raised the axe of the forge fathers. The runes that danced on the blade glowed even brighter now, reacting to the enemy's presence as if they had been waiting for this very moment. A beam of light escaped the blade—silver, pure, bright—and struck the surging arms of shadow. The light incinerated them. The darkness shrieked, then hissed and retreated.

But only briefly.

For from the depths rose Graa'thuun's voice, heavy enough to displace the dust in the archive.

"YOU CAN'T BIND ME."

One blow. A second blow. A third blow.

The ground beneath Borin rose—rising as if something were growing underneath. Cracks ran through the stone floor like living snakes. Ancient torches sprang from their sockets. The ancestral statues around the edge of the hall began to tremble.

"Out! OUT!" Borin yelled. "To the north passage! Quickly!"

Aldrik grabbed Norn, who was already staggering with exhaustion. Karim took Darrim, who was struggling to stay upright. Together they sprinted through the archive, while behind them the floor cracked open and black fingers dug into the stone.

The hall was no longer the peaceful place of the ancestors. It had become the maw of a monster.

Statues toppled. Tablets shattered. Shelves collapsed under the weight of the vibrating runes. Some stone tablets briefly glowed, as if issuing a final warning before crumbling to dust. The ancient runes on the walls lost their light completely—one by one, they went out, like dying stars in a black sky.

"Keep going!" shouted Borin. "Stick together!"

They crossed the gallery they had previously entered. The floor was littered with freshly fallen stones. One of the reliefs had collapsed halfway, the depicted shadowy figure torn into a grotesque mask, as if history itself were being ripped to pieces.

Karim stumbled, but Darrim pulled him up. "Don't fall. He smells weakness."

A green flash flickered behind them. Something had left the chamber where Borin had stood. Something large. Something determined not to be bound again.

But the group reached the stairs that led back to the council chamber – or what was left of it. The entrance was half-collapsed, but still passable.

Borin turned around briefly.

A mistake.

For at that moment Graa'thuun appeared in the corridor.

His form filled the darkness like a living storm. He had no solid body—but he had a shape, and it was grotesque. Horns grew from his shadowy head, longer, more curved, like two spears carved from living rock. His eyes were no longer glowing—they were radiant. Two emerald suns, illuminating the passage and swallowing every spark of hope.

He spoke again.

"Give me... what you took."

Borin raised the axe. The mark on his chest glowed brighter, answering the Shadow King.

"I'm not giving you anything!" Borin roared back, and his voice did not tremble.

Graa'thuun moved. Not walking. He hovered. The darkness around him flowed like liquid smoke.

"YOU... are NOT A KING..."

The words struck Borin like a blow. But at the same time, the rune within him responded with a warm, penetrating pulse. A voice whispered in his heart:

**"You are the stone. You are the guardian. You are the one who remains."**

"Yes," said Borin. "It's me."

Aldrik shouted: "BORIN, COME NOW!"

Borin broke free and sprinted through the half-collapsed door, while Graa'thuun extended a shadowy arm that darkened the entire corridor.

The door collapsed behind them.

The mountain trembled.

And then – silence.

Not absolute silence. But a silence punctuated by distant battles, screams, and the groaning of dying rock.

They were now in the destroyed council chamber – or what remained of it.

Dust hung in the air like veils of mist. The once mighty throne was now nothing but a heap of black slag. The pillars lay toppled. The dead and wounded lay everywhere. Some Stone Fathers desperately tried to revive the runes, but their hands slipped through lifeless light.

Borin stood still.

The ancestral mark on his chest glowed brighter than anything else in the hall.

A wounded armorer raised his head. His eyes widened.

"The throne... has found its heir."

A murmur went through the survivors.

Not loud. Not cheerful.

Awe-inspiring.

Darrim whispered: "Borin... the mountain has chosen you."

But Borin raised the axe.

His voice was deep. Heavy. Unshakeable.

"We have no time for ceremonies. Graa'thuun is marching towards the Upper Mines. We must warn the blacksmiths. And the border guards. And every clan that is still alive."

He looked into the destroyed hall.

"The mountain is calling. And we are answering."

"Follow me."

The ruined council chamber lay before them like a wounded heart. Broken columns, fallen pieces of ceiling, and shattered banners were scattered everywhere. The air was heavy with dust, smoke, and that ominous green aura that gnawed like poison through the deepest cracks in the stone. Borin stood amidst this chaos, the ancestral axe in his hand, the ancestral mark on his chest glowing like a flickering star. His gaze swept across the hall, searching for orientation in a place that was barely recognizable.

Darrim came beside him, his shield dented, his beard stained with blood. "Borin, the way west is blocked. The entire passage has collapsed."

"Then the northern ascent remains," said Aldrik, stepping forward, breathing heavily, as he climbed over the rubble. "But if Graa'thuun is heading that way, we'll run straight towards him."

"He will not take the direct route," Borin replied. "He is consuming the mountain. He is everywhere. Every path could be his way."

Karim looked at the remaining stone fathers, who were struggling to their feet. "There are too few of us. Far too few."

Borin nodded slowly. Then he raised the axe. "That makes it all the more important that we reach those who can still fight. The forges of Greybeard. The halls of the Iron Brothers. The border guards of Felsheim. No one must be left in the dark."

Hagran Eisenbart, dust clinging to his gray beard, staggered toward Borin. His eyes seemed dull, but a spark burned within them, not yet extinguished. "Borin's word is true. The mountain's reputation will live on in every hall—if you bear it."

Darrim frowned. "What do you think, Stonefather?"

Hagran placed a trembling hand on Borin's shoulder. "The mountain speaks through him now. Through the ancestral mark. Through the light he carries. The runes may be dead, but the ancestors hear him. And when he calls—the prayer is carried through stone and ore."

Karim looked at Borin as if, for the first time, he were not just a friend and leader, but something else – something greater. "Can you do it?"

Borin closed his eyes and tried to take a deep breath. The rune on his chest pulsed. He felt it more clearly now than before—like a heart beating alongside his own. A warmth that didn't originate from within his body. A memory of voices that had never spoken, of power that didn't spring from his own strength.

He opened his eyes.

"I can try."

He raised the axe above his head. The runes on it glowed brightly, and the silver lines of the ancestral mark began to spin as if alive. The mountain itself seemed to answer: a deep, distant rumble that sounded not of danger, but of anticipation.

Borin took a deep breath and roared:

"Children of the mountain! Dwarfs of the halls! Hear the call of your ancestors!"

The air vibrated. The dust in the hall began to stir. Some of the dead runes on the walls suddenly flickered, as if remembering that they had once carried light.

Borin continued, his voice no longer that of a single dwarf – but that of a chorus:

"An ancient enemy has awakened! Graa'thuun, the First of the Deep, has returned! The mountain is dying – but we still live! Hear me! HEAR ME!"

His voice didn't just echo through the hall. It echoed through the corridors. Through the shafts. Through the abandoned mines. Through the rock itself.

Aldrik, Darrim, Karim and Norn stood spellbound.

Then something happened.

Very quiet. Very far away.

An echo answered.

Not one.

Many.

Hammers being struck. Shields crashing against each other. Shouts echoing from the depths.

"We hear you!" "We stand with you!" "For the mountain!"

Borin lowered his axe, trembling with exhaustion – but not with weakness. The call had worked.

Hagran smiled weakly. "You have borne the call of the Deep Realms. You have done what no Guardian, no Warrior, no Stone Father could have done."

Aldrik laughed harshly. "The mountain has answered. Then Graa'thuun can come! We will strike back!"

But Borin's expression darkened. "Not yet. We must first reach the forges. We need weapons. Armor. And we must warn the Iron Brothers."

Norn pointed to the eastern passage. "The path leads through the halls of the ancestors. If there are still runes there... we might be faster than him."

"And if not?" asked Karim.

Borin turned around and looked at the shattered seal of the ancient throne.

"Then we'll improvise."

Another tremor – this time further away. Graa'thuun was moving. But not here.

He turned upwards.

"He's going to the upper mines," said Darrim. "Where most of the dwarves live."

"Then we have little time," replied Borin. "Very little."

They set off, running through the rubble of the council chamber and onward into the lower gallery. Everywhere, the mountain was filled with a dull groan, as if it were about to break under the weight of Graa'thuun's power. But Borin also sensed something else—a resistance. A force that stood against the shadow.

The ancestral mark pulsed.

"We are not alone," Borin whispered.

Darrim, who heard him, nodded. "No. Not anymore."

But as they left the gallery, they saw something that made their blood run cold:

A gigantic shadow moved far away through a tunnel whose ceiling bent like wax.

Graa'thuun itself.

He had not followed her.

He had found a new goal.

"With the ancestors," Karim whispered. "He is going to the blacksmiths."

Borin drew his axe. His eyes narrowed.

"Then we'll catch up with him."

Graa'thuun's shadow moved through the distant tunnels like an ancient thunderstorm born from the rock itself. Its body was no body, its step no step—it flowed, hovered, grew, and shrank all at once, as if it were the darkness of every crack in the mountain. Borin and his companions stood frozen, the air in their lungs cold, watching as the creature filled an entire network of tunnels, the stone screaming beneath its presence.

"We must stop him before he reaches the forges," said Borin, his axe gripped tightly in both hands. The silver runes upon it flickered as if sensing the enemy's approach. "When the fires of Greybeard fall, when the Iron Brothers die... then the backbone of the Underrealms will break."

"Then we are lost," murmured Darrim, whose voice sounded rough and fragile.

"It's worse," Aldrik said darkly. "Graa'thuun needs the forges. He wants them. He wants our steel. Our runes. He wants to reforge the mountain itself."

Borin nodded. "And we will stop him."

But the path to get there was anything but clear.

The passage Graa'thuun had entered was now shrouded in a veil of swirling darkness. The walls, once smooth as polished rock, were now distorted, almost warped, as if the darkness had softened and reshaped them. Runes that had once marked the way flickered and went out as soon as the gloom touched them.

"We cannot follow him," said Karim, instinctively retreating. "That path is dead. Completely dead."

"No," said Borin, looking around. "We'll take a different route. The Halls of the Ancestors—there might still be active runes there. If they carry us, we'll be fast enough."

Darrim frowned. "The Ancestral Halls? Borin, they've been sealed for centuries. No dwarf has entered them since the ancient covenants were forged."

"Then it's time to reopen them."

They ran. Every second was a thief stealing a life. The mountain continued to tremble, but no longer chaotically as before. The tremors had become more rhythmic. More even. As if something great was happening. Step by step. Purposefully.

Graa'thuun marched.

The group reached a broad, arched intersection where four passages branched off. Three of them had collapsed or were filled with dark smoke. Only the left passage—narrower but



sturdier—was open. At the entrance was a huge stone slab, decorated with engraved runes, most of which were dead. Only one still shimmered:

### **Rûl-Dûran**

The Hall of the Firsts.

Borin placed his hand on the rune.

At first nothing happened. Then the ancestral mark on his chest pulsed faintly. The light moved from him into the rune.

A deep, vibrating sound filled the corridor.

The stone slab began to tremble and slid slowly back.

"By the ancestors..." Karim breathed.

The passage beyond was large, ancient, and majestic. The walls were made of pure, unaltered rock, not hewn by human hands, but as smooth and perfect as only the ancestors could make. Runes carved deep into the stone wound their way along the walls in wide arcs, and the silver veins within them began to gleam as Borin entered.

It was as if the mountain were breathing in.

"This is... incredible," Darrim whispered. "The ancestral halls are still alive."

"They were waiting for a king," Aldrik said quietly.

And Borin knew it was true.

The air in this passage was different. Purer. Heavier. Not dead like in the collapsed tunnels. Here, order reigned. Here, history reigned. And history accepted Borin.

But they couldn't stay long.

They hurried deeper into the hall, the walls echoing with Echo's ancient voices. Some runes flickered, as if forming words. Others glowed in response to Borin's ancestral mark. The smiths' axe vibrated slightly.

Then they reached the first chamber of the ancestors. A circular hall, its ceiling resting in a massive dome. In the center of the dome was a gigantic crystal block, crisscrossed by silver lines. Flames danced within it—not fire, but pure runic light.

Borin stopped. So did the others.

"What is that?" asked Karim.

"The Stone of Origin," Borin replied simply. "The ancestors created it as a source of runic power. And if it still lives... we can use it."

Aldrik stepped closer. "How?"

But before Borin could answer, the chamber shook. A deep, consuming rumble.

"He's found us!" Darrim shouted.

No. Not him. Not Graa'thuun.

Something else.

Silver sparks suddenly burst from one of the side tunnels, and a group of dwarves rushed in – wounded but alive. Their armor bore the mark of the Felsheim border guards.

Their leader – a sturdy dwarf with black hair and a huge warhammer – stopped abruptly when she saw Borin.

Her eyes widened.

"By the ancient gods..." she said in a firm voice. "The call was true."

She knelt down – not out of subservience, but out of appreciation.

The other border guards followed.

"Borin Erzhand," she said. "The mountain has spoken. And we hear you."

Borin stepped forward, the axe on his back, the ancestral mark bright.

"Rise up," he said. "We have little time."

"Graa'thuun is marching upwards," the warrior said. "We saw him. He's coming from the core. The border guards..." – she swallowed hard – "...most of them are already down. We could only delay him."

Borin nodded. "Then we'll unite here. In the heart of the mountain."

"What is our goal?"

Borin looked at the Stone of Origin. The flames within it burned brighter, as if they had recognized what he intended.

"We need weapons that can hurt him," said Borin. "And we need runic power that we can control."

Aldrik stepped forward. "We combine both. Weapons from the heart of the mountain – and runes from the time of the ancestors."

Darrim nodded. "Greybeard's forge... if we can reach it before he does..."

"Then we can forge a weapon that will bind him," Karim concluded.

The border guard stepped forward. "Then guide us, King Borin."

The word hung heavy in the air. Nobody laughed. Nobody contradicted it. Nobody doubted it.

Borin took a deep breath.

The ancestral mark burned brightly.

"Follow me," he said. "We're going to the blacksmith's."

"And Graa'thuun?"

Borin looked back into the dark tunnel where the Shadow King had disappeared.

"He's going up," said Borin. "We're going down."

The border guards joined them.

And so began the march to the deepest forge, while the mountain above them groaned...and Graa'thuun continued its ascent.

## Fire in the forges of Greybeard

The Halls of the Ancestors lay long behind them when Borin and his companions hurried through the ancient connecting tunnels toward the deepest forges. The border guards had joined the group, and soon Borin's small troop consisted of more than a dozen seasoned warriors. Their armor was damaged, their faces weary, but in their eyes burned a fire that not even the mountain could extinguish. A fire ignited by Borin's call.

The mountain continued to tremble, but no longer chaotically as before. Now it seemed purposeful – as if Graa'thuun were carving a path that even the stone could no longer obstruct. Distant screams echoed again and again, along with the crash of collapsing passages and the clang of hammers, as if dwarves were desperately trying to halt the enemy somewhere far above.

"We're late," murmured border guard Kaidra, walking beside Borin. Her hammer was still bloodstained, her gaze filled with anger. "My brothers... my sisters... they're still fighting up there."

Borin nodded. "We won't abandon them. But if we blindly rush upwards now, we'll all die."

Aldrik growled: "If we reach the forges, we might be able to create a weapon that can permanently harm Graa'thuun. The Smithfathers' Axe shows that it's possible."

"A weapon... or a workpiece," Karim added. "Something that amplifies the rune in Borin."

The thought wasn't new. It had been lurking in the back of Borin's mind ever since the Chamber of the Ur-Rune. But he hadn't voiced it yet because he knew what it meant: if he himself was the vessel for the rune... he could embody that power. But at what cost?

He pushed the thought aside.

It wasn't time yet.

The corridors grew hotter. The air smelled of molten metal. A steady pulse vibrated in the walls – the sound of the forges of Greybeard, the deepest of all the smithing works in the dwarven realms. Even from afar, they could hear the rhythmic hammering, the thunder of the ancient anvils, wielded only by the strongest master smiths.

"We are close," said Darrim.

As they descended a final, wide spiral staircase, the tunnel opened abruptly into a gigantic hall. The forges of Greybeard lay before them – a city of fire and metal deep in the heart of the mountain.

Giant anvils, some three men high, smoked under the pressure of blasts of flame. Countless furnaces glowed like the jaws of dragons, their heat distorting the air into molten waves. Blacksmiths scurried among the melting pots, their bodies covered in soot, their axes and hammers like tiny stars in the red glow of the embers. Everywhere chains, fire shovels, and tools clanged – an orchestra of iron.

But the most impressive thing was the central anvil: The Worldsmith.

An anvil as large as a hall itself, encircled by a ring of ancient runic pillars forged from silver ore. Each pillar was covered with symbols thousands of years old, symbols that resisted even Graa'thuun's influence. The flames behind them were not red—but white. White as sunlight on snow. The heat they radiated was not destructive, but purifying.

This was the holiest place for all master blacksmiths.

"By the mountain..." Karim breathed. "It's... still active."

"That means," said Kaidra, "this place has not yet fallen."

But just as they were about to approach, a tremor shook the hall. Stones rained down from the ceiling. Blacksmiths jumped back, and the white flames flickered. A runemaster tumbled over an anvil, blood on his forehead.

"They're coming!" he shouted. "The creatures! They're approaching the north passage—"

A piercing screech interrupted him.

A shadow crept through the entrance opposite.

Not Graa'thuun himself, but his brood.

Dozens.

Hundreds.

Small, crawling, serpentine creatures with glowing eyes emerged from the cracks in the rock like nightmares awakened after centuries. Above them hovered larger beings, more formless and darker than smoke, their claws drawing sparks from the air.

"Take your positions!" Aldrik yelled.

The border guards took their positions. Borin stepped before the Worldsmith, axe raised, ancestral mark glowing.

A runemaster—an elderly dwarf with a silver beard—approached him. "By the ancestors... you bear the mark! The mark of the First Ones!"

Borin nodded firmly. "We need your forges. We need a weapon that can bind Graa'thuun."

The runemaster stared at him in disbelief. Then he turned to the other smiths. "Prepare the anvil! Light the ancient fires! The time of the ancestors has returned!"

A piercing scream cut through the air.

The first wave of creatures was above them.

Borin took a step forward, the axe in both hands, the rune on his chest in harmony with the mountain.

"Graa'thuun!" he shouted into the darkness. "You want our forges? Then come and take them!"

The creatures responded. With a storm of darkness.

Borin swung the axe. The light exploded.

A silvery blast, bright as starfire, ripped through the entire first wave. Creatures crumbled, vaporized, and screamed silently. The border guards roared and charged into the fray. Aldrik hacked on the left, Darrim held the line, and Norn smashed his opponents back. Kaidra swung her hammer, and each touch made the darkness hiss.

But the enemy did not stop.

Wave after wave poured in, and the forges were transformed into a battlefield.

Borin fought his way forward. To the Worldsmith. To the heart of the forge.

The runemasters stood there, ready. Fire lit. Anvil glowing.

"What do you need?" Borin shouted.

The old rune master looked at him, and in his eyes lay sorrow – but also hope.

"We need your light."

Borin gasped. "I'll give it."

"And your blood."

Borin froze. "What?"

"No weapon from the time of our ancestors was created without sacrifice. The anvil demands steel... and soul."

Borin watched the battle unfold. Saw his friends fighting.  
Saw the runes flickering. Saw the darkness drawing nearer.

He knew the answer.

"Then take my blood."

The rune master nodded. "Prepare everything!"

Borin approached the anvil.

But before the ceremony could begin, the mountain trembled – this time so violently that the entire forge shook.

A shadow filled the entrance. This time not small. Not many.

Just one.

Large. Wide. With horns that touched the ceiling.

Graa'thuun had arrived.

The forge trembled as Graa'thuun stepped into the entrance. He filled it almost completely, as if the passage itself had shaped him to facilitate his entry. His body was a surging mass of shadow, shifting at times into the form of immense muscle, at others into that of a blazing mist. His horns jutted from his skull like distorted, downward-curving spears, and the green lights of his eyes burned brighter than any flame in the forges of Greybeard.

The heat in the hall flickered, as if even the fire cowered, intimidated by its presence. The forges spewed sparks, then contracted as if afraid. The Worldsmith—the holiest of all anvils—vibrated, its white fire flickering unsteadily.

Graa'thuun's voice rolled through the hall like a landslide.

"I FEEL YOU... BORIN."

Every dwarf froze.

Each hammer paused.

Every breath turned to frost.

Borin stepped before the anvil, axe in hand. He felt the ancestral mark on his chest now burn like a piece of glowing ore. The Shadow King sensed him—sought him—desired him.

But Borin did not back down.

"If you want me, you have to get past them first."

He raised the axe and pointed at the blacksmiths, the iron brothers, the border guards, the master blacksmiths – all those who stood behind him.

Graa'thuun laughed. A cold, grinding, ugly sound that distorted the flames.

"I DON'T WANT YOU..."

He leaned forward.

"I WANT YOU."

Then darkness leaped forward.

The first wave struck Darrim and the border guards like a storm. Shadowy arms, claws, hissing faces formed out of nowhere. The dwarves screamed, thrust their shields forward, their weapons swung in wide arcs, while black smoke whipped around them like living whips.

Aldrik roared and slashed with his hammer, shattering a figure, but it instantly reformed. Norn was hurled against an anvil, got to his feet, and smashed his hammer into the mist. Kaidra slammed her warhammer into the ground, the shockwave sending three shadow creatures flying.

But there were too many.

"HOLD THE LINE!" Borin shouted. "NO BACKWARD!"

Blacksmiths erected anvils as barricades. The border guards formed a tight wall of ore. But darkness flowed around them, creeping through cracks, creating new creatures from dust and shadow.

The forge burned – not with fire, but with chaos.

Graa'thuun himself now pressed into the hall.

Every step made the ground vibrate. Every breath filled the air with deadly silence. Every glance cut through the runes like arrows.

He raised an arm – a gigantic shadow arm that transformed into three blades – and hurled it forward. The force was immense.

The border guards flew like leaves in the wind.

Anvils toppled over.

Darrim crashed into the wall, blood coming from his nose.

Graa'thuun laughed again, and the sound was so cold that even the Worldsmith trembled.

"BORIN... YOU CAN'T ESCAPE."

"I am not fleeing," said Borin.

He stepped away from the anvil and confronted Graa'thuun.

The axe in his hand glowed white-silver.

The ancestral mark on his chest pulsed like a star.

The runes on the walls awoke – slowly, weakly, but not dead.

Graa'thuun saw Borin, and his body contorted with furious rage.

"THE MARK... YOU DARE TO WEAR THE MARK?!"

"I do not bear the mark, Graa'thuun," said Borin, raising the axe.

"The sign carries me."

He leaped forward, and the flames of the Worldsmith ignited as if they had sensed his jump.

The first collision was massive.

Borin struck at Graa'thuun's arm.

A ray of light cut through the shadow.

Graa'thuun roared – for the first time, it sounded like pain.

But only briefly.

From the severed shadow arm grew two new ones, longer, sharper, more deadly.

Borin jumped back, but the ground beneath his feet trembled as Graa'thuun struck with a force that cracked the stone.

"YOU THINK YOU'RE A KING," Graa'thuun shouted.

He struck Borin – a massive, all-consuming darkness.

Borin could not avoid it.

Instead, he raised the axe.

The blade absorbed the blow.

A beam of light shot from the axe, reflected off the rune pillars, intensified, refracted again – until the whole hall burned in silver light.

Graa'thuun screamed.



The forge was bathed in two colors: the poisonous green of the shadows – and the silver light of the ancestors.

The border guards regrouped. Aldrik and Norn pressed forward. Even wounded blacksmiths raised hammers and tongs like weapons.

But Borin saw what they didn't see:

Graa'thuun healed himself. His shadow arms reformed. With each breath, he grew stronger.

The Worldsmith pulsed faintly.

The Runemaster called to Borin: "NOW! Come here! We need your blood! Otherwise, there is no weapon that can bind him!"

"If I leave, they will die!" Borin shouted back.

"If you DON'T leave, WE ALL DIE!"

Borin hesitated.

Not because of fear.

But because of responsibility.

Graa'thuun saw his hesitation.

And attacked.

A blow like a storm. A wave of pure destruction. Dwarfs were hurled away like pebbles. Anvils toppled. Fires went out.

And Graa'thuun roared:

"YOU BELONG TO ME!"

Borin knew that he would die if he continued fighting as before.

He gasped. The rune burned. The axe vibrated.

Then he heard a voice. Not loud. Not strange. Not from the depths.

The voice of his ancestors in his heart.

**"Go to the anvil."**

**We are with you.**

Borin turned around.

The rune masters were waiting.

The anvil was glowing.

The enemies poured in.

And Graa'thuun drew nearer.

"Stop him!" Borin shouted.

Aldrik yelled: "With my life!"

The forge became a battleground.

Borin ran. Straight to the Worldsmith.

The anvil waited. The runes waited. The mountain waited.

Borin reached the Worldsmith just as a new wave of shadows and flames crashed through the hall. The heat of the anvil hit him like the breath of an ancient being. The Runemaster was already poised, sweat trickling down his sooty face as he carefully drew a blade from the white light of the forge fires. It was unfinished, little more than a core of glowing metal, yet even now it vibrated like a living creature.

"Borin!" cried the Runemaster. "Now! Give me your blood!"

Borin raised his hand, but before he could lower it, a shadowy arm crashed against the anvil like a spear of darkness. The heat dissipated briefly, the embers flickering dangerously. The Runemaster stumbled back. Screams filled the air. Borin turned and saw Graa'thuun tearing through the last lines of defenders. Dwarves were hurled to the ground, others clung desperately as the Shadow King drew ever nearer.

Aldrik was still standing, however. He roared, swung his hammer, and fended off two shadow creatures that clung to his arm, leaving black marks in their wake. "BORIN! HURRY UP!"

Karim and Norn fought side by side, their faces contorted, sweat and blood mingling together. Kaidra threw her last reserves into the battle, her eyes gleaming like glowing steel.

But it was clear: they wouldn't last much longer.

The runemaster seized Borin's arm and pressed his voice against the chaos of the battle. "Listen to me carefully! What we do now will decide everything. The anvil won't function without you. Your blood is the key. The rune recognizes only its bearer."

"And then what?" Borin's voice was rough, his gaze fixed between the anvil and Graa'thuun.

"Then... then you will call for the weapon. It will bind to you. And if you are strong enough... it will be able to bind him."

"What if I'm strong enough? What if I'm not?"

The rune master's answer was quiet but unwavering. "Then you will die."

Borin glanced over at where his friends were fighting, where dwarves were screaming, where the forge itself seemed to be breaking under the weight of the shadow. Then he took a deep breath.

"Then I cannot fail."

He tore off his glove, raised his wrist over the blade resting on the anvil, and cut. Not deep. But deep enough.

Blood dripped onto the glowing metal.

A piercing howl filled the entire forge.

The blade seemed to drink his blood, the flames grew brighter, the anvil vibrated violently. Silver light shot from the blade, raced across the runic pillars, leaped to the ceiling. The entire forge was bathed in a blinding light.

Graa'thuun roared, and the shadow behind him writhed in pain.

"NO! NOT THAT!"

The blade flickered. The metal began to melt—not into formlessness, but into a new shape. As if the light itself were forging. The runemaster raised his hands and murmured ancient words, while Borin's blood continued to drip onto the anvil.

Suddenly all the rune masters screamed at once.

Something awoke.

A jolt went through the anvil.

Borin flinched as the blade rose into the air, weightless, glowing like a star that had begun to burn. It rotated slowly, as if testing him. The rune on his chest glowed in the same rhythm.

Then the weapon flew in Borin's direction.

He grabbed her.

And the world fell apart.

A burst of light, so immense that time seemed to stand still for a heartbeat, exploded through the forge. Every dwarf was thrown to the ground. Graa'thuun screamed like a storm of pure darkness. And Borin...

... felt nothing but fire.

Fire in his chest. Fire in his arms. Fire in his mind.

The ancestral mark fused with the blade. Light emanated from the weapon, flowing directly into his veins, coursing through his heart, filling his bones. The rune glowed so brightly that it illuminated the forge.

As the light faded, Borin stood there. No longer just with the axe of the blacksmith fathers. But with a second weapon.

A sword of light. Of pure runic power. Fueled by his blood. Forged in the light of the Worldsmith.

It was no ordinary blade. It was shimmering, transparent, almost like a memory of a weapon. Yet Borin sensed its power.

Graa'thuun saw the sword – and retreated.

"NO! THIS MUST NOT EXIST! YOU... YOU... ARE NOT WORTHY!"

Borin stepped forward. His steps were calm. Unstoppable.

"I am Borin Erzhand," he said. The hall vibrated with every word he spoke. "Bearer of the ancestral mark. Heir of the mountain. And I am worthy."

He raised the sword of light.

Graa'thuun roared and hurled a massive wall of shadows towards Borin. A storm of darkness, chaos, and millennia-old hatred.

Borin cut through it.

The light pierced the darkness. Shards of shadow flew like ash. The forge was blinded once more.

Graa'thuun's scream shattered rocks.

"YOU CAN'T BIND ME! I'M THE FIRST! I AM—"

Borin reached him.

And with a single, powerful blow, he rammed the runeblade directly into Graa'thuun's chest.

A scream that shook the mountain itself made everything tremble. The Shadow King was thrown backward, his body contorted, disintegrated, reformed, disintegrated again. The hall quaked as if in the wrath of a god. The blade seared deeper into Graa'thuun's core.

Borin roared – with the voice of all the ancestors.

**"Back into the depths!"**

Graa'thuun tried to escape. Tried to wriggle. His body crashed against the walls, shattering anvils and tearing boulders from the ground.

But Borin's sword held him fast. Bound him. Pulled him back.

Into the depths. Into the stone. To the place where he had once been imprisoned.

The runes of the forge glowed. The pillars of the world-smith shone brightly.

And Graa'thuun...

... burned.

The last shadows fell silent. The hall grew still. Dust settled.

Borin stood alone. The sword still in his hand. His breathing was heavy. His eyes were burning.

He had bound Graa'thuun.

But he also knew: This was only the beginning.

## The Iron Brotherhood's Oath

The dust settled slowly on the remains of Greybeard's forge, and the heat of the fires began to stabilize. The white flames of the anvils burned silently, as if exhausted, yet still determined to continue their blaze. Sparks floated through the air like glowing snowflakes. They didn't seem dead—only crushed by what had happened.

Borin stood amidst this silence, the lightsaber in his right hand, the axe of the forge fathers in his left. Both weapons glowed brightly once more, as if responding to the returning silence. Then they dimmed slightly, sinking back into a calm, subdued glow, as if they understood that the immediate battle was over.

The ground beneath Borin's feet was cracked open, deep within shadows that now lay black and lifeless. They did not move. No whisper, no twitch emanated from them. Graa'thuun's last cry still echoed through the mountain, in the walls, in the pillars, in the hearts of all the dwarves who had heard it. But now there was only silence.

A silence that was not dead, but full of heaviness.

Aldrik was the first to emerge from the wall of smoke. He was bleeding from a wound on his shoulder, but his face wore a grin that could only be worn after surviving an impossible battle. "I knew it," he gasped. "I knew you'd beat him, Borin. No one else could have."

Borin wanted to speak, but the Runemaster stepped forward—staggering, trembling, but alive. He gripped his staff tightly as if it were the only thing keeping him upright. His eyes were weary, filled with pain, but also with unwavering awe.

"You have done what even the ancestors did not accomplish," he said, his voice trembling. "You have guided the light itself. The Worldsmith has recognized you. The mountain has accepted you."

Borin lowered his sword. The blade crackled and glowed with a strange mixture of hot and cold energy. "I haven't defeated him," Borin said. "Only bound him. That's a difference."

The rune master nodded slowly. "Yes. And yet... you have banished him. The shadow has plunged back into the depths. The root of darkness is sealed—for now."

Kaidra, the leader of the border guards, stepped forward. Her hammer hung heavy in her hand, her gaze was stern, but her chin trembled with relief. "Many have fallen," she said softly. "But without you... none of us would be here. You saved us."

Borin wanted to reply, but he saw the faces around him. Wounded. Silent. Trembling. Covered in soot, splattered with blood, with broken weapons in their hands. Dwarves who had given their all because they knew there was no second line waiting behind them.

And at that moment, Borin understood something that had previously eluded him.

This was not his victory. This was their victory. The victory of all the dwarves. The victory of the mountain itself.

He took a deep breath, and the air tasted of iron, soot, and a thin trace of hope.

"We are not finished yet," he said. "The shadow is only bound. It will try to return. And the orcs... they will have felt the tremor. They will come. Those who always wait for the dwarves' weakest moment. And that moment is now."

"Then we will stand together," said Aldrik.

Darrim approached, limping but standing upright. "The Iron Brothers will follow. You saved their fire. That is worth more than all the thrones."

Norn cleared his throat, blood running down his cheek. "And what about the throne itself?"

Borin looked at the lightsaber in one hand and the axe of the Forge Fathers in the other. The thought of the destroyed throne, the broken seal, Graa'thuun's return, the mountain's groaning... all of it weighed heavily on his shoulders.

But he also felt something else.

Warmth.

Power.

A heartbeat that didn't belong to him alone.

"The mountain doesn't need a throne to know who its king is," Borin said softly. "I will not claim it. Not now. Not while the Underrealms burn."

The runemaster raised an eyebrow. "But the ancestral mark doesn't choose a warrior. It chooses a ruler."

"Then let the ruler fight," Borin replied. "Not sit."

The hall vibrated slightly. A low rumble reverberated through the walls – not a threatening sound, but an echo. A response. Perhaps agreement.

Aldrik grinned. "This is the first king I could ever respect."

Karim laughed hoarsely. "The first one to run ahead himself instead of shouting orders."

Kaidra nodded. "Then we will guide you, King Borin. But where does our path lead?"

Borin briefly closed his eyes. The ancestral mark pulsed. A voice – not that of the ancestors, not that of the mountain, but his own – formed within him.

"We'll call the Iron Brothers together," said Borin. "And then... then we'll march to Schimmerfels."

Darrim gasped. "Shimmerfels is besieged! The orcs have taken the pass!"

"That's why we have to go there," Borin said calmly. "Graa'thuun has shaken the depths. His return has emboldened the orcs. They will grow stronger. Braver. More audacious. If we lose the upper mines... we lose everything."

The Runemaster nodded. "The Iron Brothers will follow you. I will gather them. Many are wounded, but their spirit is unbroken."

Kaidra rammed her hammer into the ground. "The border guards are on your side."

"And I," said Aldrik, "will fight by your side, my friend."

"And I," said Karim.

"And I," Norn murmured.

Borin looked at them all. And for the first time since the birth of the Ancestral Mark, he spoke the words he had previously not dared to say.

"Then rise up... Iron Brothers of the Mountain."

They all stood up. Every single one.

Wounded. Bleeding. Tired. But steadfast.

Borin raised the lightsaber and the axe simultaneously. A silver spark flew between the two blades.

"This is our oath," said Borin. "As long as a dwarf breathes in the mountain, Graa'thuun will not triumph. As long as a forge burns, the orcs will not conquer. We will march. We will fight. We will stand."

"And we will not fall."

The hall vibrated – as if the mountain itself had written these words in its heart.

Over the next few hours, Greybeard's forge transformed from a battlefield into a field hospital, then into an assembly hall, and finally into a command center. The Iron Brothers, the

border guards, the master smiths, and the remaining watchmen streamed together until the room was filled with the muffled murmur, the clang of tools, and the heavy breathing of the wounded. Some dwarves lay on stretchers, others leaned against anvils while healers tended their wounds. Yet none of them flinched, none complained, none demanded rest. Each knew that the battle they had just fought was merely a prelude.

At the heart of the forge stood Borin Erzhand. Not on a pedestal. Not behind a barrier. But right among his people—as one of them. The lightsaber hung from his belt as if it had always been there. He wore the axe of the forge fathers loosely over his shoulder. Yet neither weapon nor armor made him the center of the hall. It was the rune on his chest that, with its delicate silver pulse, illuminated the entire forge. Even when Borin stood still, the runic pillars around him seemed to respond to him, as if he were a living center—not of light, but of will.

Because that's exactly what he had become.

A king not by crown, but by necessity.

A leader not by lineage, but by deeds.

A rock upon which the Deep Realms founded their last hope.

But Borin felt no greatness, only a steadily growing burden on his shoulders. The ancestral mark felt like an extra heart—a voice reminding him of what was yet to come. Graa'thuun was bound, but not destroyed. And the orcs, who had long been lurking in the outer halls, would have audibly felt the tremors of the battle.

While the healers worked, while the blacksmiths reheated their hammers, while the border guards cleaned their armor, Borin's mind was already far ahead. The enemy was not defeated—he had only taken a step back.

He knew the next blow would be harder.

Karim approached him. "Borin. We have ten Iron Brothers fit for battle, maybe fifteen border guards, and three runemasters still standing. The rest..." He trailed off. "Well. They need time."

"We don't have time," said Borin, and there was no anger in his voice – only realization. "What is the condition of the tunnels leading to the upper mines?"

Karim grimaced. "Terrible. Graa'thuun has fractured the rock itself. Entire tunnels have been swallowed up. The higher levels have felt the impact. Chaos probably reigns there."

Aldrik stepped forward, leaning on his hammer. "The orcs will exploit this. Rock Pass has already fallen. If we don't hold Shimmering Rock... the rest of the realm will fall."

"And when Shimmerrock falls," Kaidra added darkly, "then the Ridge Mines, the Silver Halls, and finally the capital city itself will also fall."

The runemaster, who had stood silently beside them until now, raised his staff. "The ancestral mark grants you access to ancient paths. Deep paths. Abandoned passages, used only in direst need. But they are dangerous. Some are unstable, others... are not empty."



Borin nodded. "So we will show these paths that a king treads them."

The Runemaster blinked in surprise. "You would dare to enter the Deep Paths? They are full of shadows, full of creatures older than the orcs. Some of them flee from Graa'thuun—others serve him."

"Then they should stay out of our way," Borin said calmly. "Or let it break them."

Darrim laughed roughly. "That's how our Borin sounds again."

Karim snorted. "And I thought the king would become more reasonable."

Borin looked at him and smiled weakly. "Who says I've become sensible?"

The mood relaxed a little – for a moment. But the heavy footsteps and the dull rumble of the mountain reminded everyone that every second was precious.

The runemaster drew a pattern in the dust on the ground with his staff. It was an ancient map showing the deepest core of the forges, the old tunnels, the vast halls, and finally the connection to the upper mines.

"Here," he said, tapping his staff on a particularly intricate junction. "The Heart Path. An ancient passage leading directly from the smiths to Shimmering Rock. Once reserved only for the kings' envoys."

Aldrik frowned. "And why was he sealed away?"

The runemaster replied: "Because down there live things that even the Stone Fathers could not kill. Creatures that have dug too deep and changed in the darkness."

"Perfect," Karim murmured. "So we'll go that way."

Kaidra took a step forward. "We can't stay here. If the orcs break into the forge, it will all have been for nothing. We must move on. And if the king chooses this path... we will follow him."

Borin took a deep breath. The smell of fire, blood, and stone filled his lungs. His heart was heavy, but ready.

"Gather everyone who can walk," he ordered calmly. "We're leaving."

Aldrik nodded immediately. "I'll call the Iron Brothers."

Darrim raised his shield. "I am the border guards."

Karim grinned, exhausted but determined. "And I... will get the damn supplies. I drank my last beer last night."

Borin laughed. A short, quiet sound that momentarily broke the seriousness of the situation. Then he looked at the anvil, the world-smith, which shone silently but brightly.

"Do you have any last piece of advice?" he asked the rune master.

The old dwarf slowly raised his head. Wisdom, sorrow, and a hint of fear sparkled in his eyes.

"Yes, King Borin." His voice was rough, but clear.

"Don't be afraid of who you are. Fear what you might be forced to become."

Borin understood the words, just as he understood that they were not only a warning, but a prophecy.

The ancestral mark pulsed heavily and oppressively on his chest.

Perhaps the greatest enemies were not those in the dark, but those within one's own heart.

But there was no time for doubt.

Borin raised his sword and his axe.

"Then let's go," he said.

"The depths do not wait. And the orcs certainly do not."

The Iron Brothers gathered. The border guards took their positions. The runemasters stood ready.

And King Borin Erzhand led them into the Deep Paths, to where no light and no dwarf had gone for centuries.

But today the mountain itself would witness a new era.

The deep passages opened before Borin and his companions like an ancient breath trapped within the rock for centuries. The entrance was nothing more than a narrow crack behind a boulder, appearing to ordinary eyes like a natural fissure. But as Borin drew nearer, the ancestral mark on his chest flickered, and the grooves in the rock began to glow—faint and pale, but unmistakable.

Then the crack opened up, as if it were receding, and a dark passage was revealed behind it.

The air that streamed from the opening was cold, damp, and carried a scent older than any forge. A scent of earth untouched for centuries. A mixture of decay, stone, and something else... something uncertain. Something that lived in the darkness and didn't want to be disturbed.

"These are the Deep Paths," whispered the Runemaster reverently, having prepared himself along with two younger Runemages. "They were created to allow the kings to wander between the halls undetected. Since the Great Sundering, they have been sealed. Even we have been ordered not to enter them."

"But times are different now," Borin said, stepping onto the first of the ancient paths. His lightsaber cast a silver glow that illuminated the tunnel, but its range remained limited. The darkness here was denser, heavier, as if it were a substance rather than a mere shadow.

The Iron Brothers followed him in orderly formation, shields on the right, hammers on the left. The border guards took the rear ranks, while the master blacksmiths, heavily armed with tongs, iron cutters, and improvised weapons, formed the center.

The passage led steeply downhill and then climbed again in wide loops. They repeatedly crossed old markings on the walls – runes that were barely visible. Some were extinguished, others flickered briefly when Borin's rune came near, only to go out again. The paths were so silent that even the clang of their weapons against their belts sounded like a roar.

Darrim murmured, "It's too quiet."

Kaidra nodded. "Much too quiet. No beasts, no orcs, no shadows. I don't like that at all."

Karim snorted. "If it stays this quiet, I'll be happy. I prefer silence to..."

A soft scratching sound.

It came from the depths of the passage.

Everyone paused.

Another sound. Scraping. Creeping. As if many small legs were scurrying over a stone.

Aldrik lowered the hammer. "I don't recognize that sound."

The rune master whispered: "I did. And I never thought I'd hear it again."

Borin looked at him. "What lives down here?"

The old man did not answer immediately. He raised his staff, the tip glowing faintly. Then he spoke very softly:

"Dark spiders."

Karim swallowed hard. "They're legendary!"

"Not everything that old legends say is dead," replied the rune master.

The scratching got louder.

And then they saw it.

At first, just a shadow on the wall.

Then two.

Then dozens.

Birin stepped forward, his blade raised.

A creature crawled out of the darkness, appearing as old as the tunnel itself. A spider-like figure, the size of a pony, its body made of black chitin, its eyes glowing like tiny stars. Its legs ended in sharp points that tore deep scratches into the stone. And on the walls above... there were more.

The walls were moving.

"Go back!" said Darrim, but Borin shook his head.

"No. Forward."

The first spider emitted a shrill, vibrating noise. It didn't sound like an animal noise—more like a malfunctioning machine. Then it jumped.

Borin brandished the lightsaber.

The creature was split in two – but instead of falling to the ground, it vanished in a blast of dust and sparks. The other spiders flinched briefly. Then they all screamed at once.

A shrill, painful chorus.

Aldrik roared: "They don't like your light!"

"Then I'll give them more!" Borin raised his sword, and the rune on his chest shone brighter. A silver beam shot through the tunnel and struck the front row of creatures. Three shattered like dust crystals, two retreated shrieking to the ceiling.

The rest attacked.

It was a chaotic tangle of legs, claws, and fangs. The Iron Brothers roared and hammered wildly. Kaidra rammed a spider against the wall and shattered it with a single movement. Karim swung his heavy double axes in wide arcs. Darrim held the line steadfast, his shield absorbing bites and blows.

But there were too many.

The walls were alive. The floor crawled. The ceiling pulsed.

"We have to keep going!" Borin shouted. "These beasts won't stop!"

The rune master nodded. "Follow me! The Heart Path is near!"

They formed a wedge around Borin. He cut swathes of light into the darkness, each movement blazing the tunnel brighter, but only for seconds. Behind them, a black carpet of spider bodies undulated – but whenever they met Borin's gaze, they hissed and retreated.

Not out of fear. Out of hatred.

The path widened into a high hall, where pillars of natural stone flanked the way. Here the air seemed older, denser. The runes on the pillars glowed as Borin approached. A deep hum vibrated in the room.

"The Heart Path," said the rune master. "We just need to—"

A thunderclap.

The ground almost knocked her to the ground.

A second tremor. Then a sound so close it needed no explanation.

A rumbling sound. A groan. A breath that crept through the stone.

Karim turned pale. "That wasn't... from the spiders, was it?"

No. Borin felt it to his very bones.

Graa'thuun.

The shadow king moved again.

Not close. But awake.

"He can feel me," Borin whispered.

"He senses the rune," the runemaster said grimly. "You have bound him. But a bound enemy... hates more intensely."

The spiders retreated. Not out of fear of Borin.

Out of fear of what lay behind them.

Borin raised his sword.

"We're going on," he said. "We're going to Schimmerfels, no matter what."

The dwarves followed him.

And the deep paths closed behind them like a mouth that had swallowed something that could never escape.

## The March Through the Halls of the Ancestors

The deep passages ended so abruptly that even Borin paused. The dark tunnel opened suddenly into a vast expanse, as if the mountain had decided to reveal its innermost heart. The transition was so sharp, so unnaturally smooth, that Borin wondered if a hand—an old, powerful, long-forgotten hand—had made this cut in the stone. Before them stretched a hall so immense that even the largest forges would have seemed like toys in comparison.

The Halls of the Ancestors.

Not the chamber-like rooms dwarves usually used for their ceremonies, but the original Deep-Time halls—built not just by dwarven hands, but to the song of the mountains themselves. The air was clearer, but heavy, as if thick with ancient dust. The floor was polished black-gray stone, with veins of silver that looked like frozen lightning. The pillars supporting the ceiling were wider than entire houses and so tall that even Borin's lightsaber could not see their bases.

Aldrik whistled softly. "By the Fire Ancestors... how many of us even knew this place existed?"

The runemaster stepped forward, his eyes filled with awe. "Not many. Only the Stone Fathers and the first three royal lines. The Halls of the Ancestors are older than the founding of our empire. It is said that the first dwarves saw the light of day here."

Karim grimaced. "That sounds like they've had quite a bit of beer."

"No," replied the rune master. "They meant that literally."

Borin felt it too. A tremor in the air. Not danger—history. The ancestral mark on his chest vibrated slightly, as if greeting the halls. And he felt the response: The walls knew him. Or rather, knew that which had chosen him.

"We should move on," Kaidra said. "These halls are impressive, but they are not deserted."

As if she had invoked her own words, a faint echo sounded. No scratching like the dark spiders before, no whispering of shadows. More like... footsteps. Very far away. Slow. Heavy. Deep.

"We are not alone," Darrim whispered.

Borin nodded. "We'll probably never be like that again."

They began to move, their footsteps echoing like hammer blows. Every sound was reflected threefold, traveling through the hall and disappearing somewhere into the darkness. The dwarves formed a tight unit, shields on the outside, hammers on the inside, runemasters at their core. Borin led the way, lightsaber in one hand, the axe of the forge fathers in the other. Every movement was deliberate, every pause carefully considered.

"I wonder," murmured Karim, "which kings have walked along here."

The rune master replied: "The First Ones. Those whose names are now in legends. Those who created the primordial rune. Those who bound the mountain and gave it its strength."

Borin paused briefly. "And who left these halls? Why?"

The runemaster lowered his gaze. "It is said... the halls were abandoned after something awoke."

"Something like Graa'thuun?"

"No." A pause followed, long and heavy. "Something... deeper."

Borin wanted to ask, but a noise cut through the hall like a broken bone.

A dull, rolling sound. Then a second. Then a third.

Karim turned around. "That's getting closer."

Aldrik stood next to Borin. "Hopefully it's just a rockfall."

"This is not a rockfall," said Kaidra, raising her hammer.

The footsteps grew louder. Heavy. Almost rhythmic. Like drumbeats traveling through stone.

Borin raised the lightsaber. "Prepare."

The group formed a tight formation. The hall was wide and open, offering no cover, no bottlenecks. They would have to fight here if it came to that.

The light pulsed slightly, reflected in the silver veins in the ground.

Then something appeared in the darkness.

First just a small, glowing point – like a single spark. Then a second. A third. A dozen. Borin didn't back down, but his grip on the sword tightened.

The dots came closer. They grew larger. Shapes began to emerge. Silhouettes.

Then they stepped into the light.

Huge, stone figures. Broad. Massive. With bodies as if formed from pure mountain rock.

Stone giants.

The runemasters gasped. "By the ancestors..."

Borin knew the legends. The stone giants were creatures from the oldest times, created to guard the deepest halls. No flesh, no blood, only stone and will. Some served the dwarves. Some ignored them. And some crushed anyone who crossed their path.

Karim whispered: "Please tell me they are friendly."

In response, the hall remained silent. The stone giants stood still, perfectly still, like statues. Then – simultaneously – they turned their heads.

And looked at Borin.

All twelve.

Her eyes glowed silver.

Aldrik muttered: "They're looking at YOU, Borin."

Darrim added: "Maybe... they like you?"

Borin slowly raised his lightsaber. Not as a threat – more as a greeting. The ancestral mark pulsed.

The stone giants reacted.

They lowered their enormous heads. Then they knelt – a thunderous crash filled the hall – and the giants struck their stone fists on the ground, sending sparks flying from veins of silver.

The rune master swallowed hard. "They recognize you... as king."

Karim stared at Borin with his mouth open. "Okay... THAT'S new."

But Borin had no time for wonder.

For suddenly a second sound came from the depths.

A whisper. A rumble. A distorted sound that sounded like broken stone.

A cold shiver ran down Borin's back.

Graa'thuun.

Not here. But awake. Restless. Searching.

The stone giants slowly rose again.

Borin knew they weren't accidental. They were a sign.

A gift from the mountain.

Or a warning.

He stepped forward, raised his sword, and spoke in a voice that felt older than himself:

"We are marching to Shimmerfels. The orcs are attacking the Upper Realms. Will you follow us, guardians of the first stone?"

The hall shook.



Then the largest of the stone giants moved forward, pounding like an unstoppable avalanche. He bent down—so low that the ground trembled—and laid his stone hand flat on the ground in front of Borin.

A gesture of loyalty.

Aldrik nudged Karim. "I think... they're following us."

Karim was as pale as a ghost. "If that's not reinforcement, I don't know what is."

Borin nodded firmly.

"Then rise up, guardians of the first stone. The mountain calls. And we march."

The stone giants rose up. Silence returned.

But this time she wasn't threatening.

She was full of anticipation.

The colossal stone giants rose slowly, such monumental beings that even their breath—if they breathed at all—sounded like the rumble of distant thunder. Borin's squad stood amidst these ancient colossi, appearing tiny, almost lost. And yet, none of them were filled with fear. On the contrary, an awe-filled, yet strangely hopeful atmosphere filled the air. The giants did not move hastily, not aggressively. Their movements were slow, deliberate, as if centuries were but a moment to them.

Borin took another step forward, his footsteps echoing through the gigantic hall. The largest of the stone giants bowed his colossal head slightly, and his eye – a single, circular, silvery glowing point – fixed on Borin like an ancient, probing oracle.

"They... they really do recognize you," Kaidra whispered, instinctively lowering her head.

"They're not doing it because of me," Borin replied. "But because of what I'm wearing."

He placed his hand on the ancestral mark, which glowed warmly through his armor. The light reflected off the silver veins in the ground, causing the pillars to pulse faintly, as if the mountain were slowly awakening.

The runemaster stepped forward and gazed up in awe. "The stone giants are the oldest guardians of our people. They were forged when the world was young. They follow no dwarf—except those chosen by the mountain itself."

Aldrik grinned. "So, Borin... you officially have the greatest bodyguards of all time."

Karim nudged him. "Perhaps they just think you're particularly tasty."

"I hope not," Darrim murmured.

The largest of the stone giants slowly raised an arm—heavy as a tower—and gently touched the ground at Borin's feet with its massive palm. The stone beneath its hand did not break. Not

a shard, not a crack. It was as if its touch was so deliberate, so purposeful, that even the hardest rocks yielded willingly.

Then a sound was heard.

A dull, far-reaching, vibrating sound that wasn't spoken, but felt. Every pillar, every stone, every vein in the ground sang softly along – an ancient, drawn-out tone.

It wasn't a scream. Not a warning. It was a question. A plea. A confirmation all at once.

"He's asking you something," the rune master said suddenly, his voice barely audible. "Not in words—in the song of the stone."

"And what is he asking?" Karim wanted to know.

The rune master looked at Borin for a long time. "Do you know the way?"

Borin nodded. "I don't know him. But I will go there."

He raised the lightsaber, and the blade glowed brightly, as if sensing the attention of the ancient guardians. The silver beam shot far into the darkness of the hall, illuminating a wide corridor whose ceiling was so high it disappeared into shadow.

This passage led onward toward Shimmering Rock. The Runemaster had confirmed it: the Heart Path was the fastest, yet most dangerous, way to the Upper Mines. But it was not just a path—it was a relic from the earliest dwarven times, created for kings, envoys, and, in dire emergencies, for the entire realm.

It seemed as if the mountain itself was now opening it.

The stone giants stepped aside, forming a gigantic corridor—a lane of living stone—that led directly to the Heart Path. The dwarves didn't even have to give an instruction. The giants knew what to do.

"We are marching," said Borin.

And so began the journey through the halls of the ancestors.

The hall seemed endless. Its vastness was so immense that the sound of their footsteps echoed like drops in a seemingly endless ocean. Borin led the way, his lightblade raised, its beam illuminating the gigantic pillars. Again and again, the light reflected off the silver veins in the floor, which wound their way through the hall like ancient veins of the mountain.

Aldrik finally muttered: "I'd feel better if we saw at least one orc. Or any enemy at all. This silence is making me nervous."

"Don't say things like that out loud," Karim whispered. "You know what happens when you challenge the mountain."

"Maybe he's not listening," replied Aldrik, shrugging his shoulders.

The ground trembled slightly.

Karim slapped him on the arm. "You damned fool!"

But the rune master shook his head. "That wasn't an earthquake. That was a reply."

"An answer?"

The old dwarf looked at Borin. "He is reacting to him. The mountain is watching. And he is testing."

Borin continued to breathe calmly, trying not to feel the growing heaviness on his shoulders. Since the forge, he felt different. Not stronger—but more aware. It was as if he heard things no one else perceived. Soft vibrations, distant thumping, the movement of the rock. And deep beneath it...

... a whisper.

Not from Graa'thuun. Something else. Something older.

The ancestral mark burned slightly, but not painfully. It was a pulse, a heartbeat, a constant reminder of the responsibility that had been forced upon him.

Borin suddenly stopped.

"What's wrong?" asked Kaidra.

"Do you hear that?" whispered Borin.

"What do you want to hear?"

And then everyone heard it.

A buzzing. A fluttering. A soft crackling in the air, like the sound of tiny wings.

"More vermin again?" muttered Aldrik, raising his hammer.

The rune master shook his head. "No. That's not an animal."

A glimmering light emerged from the shadows – no, many lights. Small, bright sparks that hovered like dust motes, gathering, separating, then reuniting.

Then the light took on a shape.

A figure. Not a physical one – more of a projection.

A shadowy dwarf figure made of shimmering runes.

All the dwarves froze. Aldrik cursed softly. Karim stepped back. Kaidra instinctively raised her hammer.

Only Borin remained standing, as if he knew the apparition was coming.

The runemaster sank trembling to one knee. "A rune guard..."

Borin had read about them. Beings of pure runic light, created to preserve messages from the ancestors. No life, no spirit – only memory. And yet their power was immense.

The rune guard did not move like a living being, but rather like a flame in a midnight-blue wind. Its runes glowed with a warm silver that reflected gently off the pillars.

Then she spoke.

Not loud. Not silent.

But directly into Borin's mind.

**"Heritage of the mountain."**

Borin tensed up.

**"You lead the depths. But the paths are not ready. The halls are not empty. The shadows follow you."**

A shiver ran down his spine.

Was it Graa'thuun? Was he that close to them?

But the rune guard continued speaking:

**"Do not fear the path. Do not fear the darkness. Fear the light you carry."**

Borin opened his mouth. "What does that mean?"

The runes flickered.

**"The light protects you. But the light challenges you. And if you fall... the kingdom falls."**

Then the figure dissolved as if it had never been there.

Silence. Deep, oppressive silence.

Aldrik cleared his throat. "That was... not very helpful."

"Or far too helpful," Karim muttered.

Borin closed his eyes briefly. "We'll keep going. The path won't get any easier. But we will walk it."

And the dwarves marched on, deep into the halls of the ancestors, where the light grew fainter.

The darkness grew denser, and the trials of the mountain had only just begun.

The path the dwarves continued along led deeper into the endless expanse of the ancestral halls. The air grew cooler, and the hall floor changed. Where it had previously been smooth and streaked with silver, it now became rougher, darker, and riddled with cracks that ran through the stone like ancient scars. The light from the veins faded, and the shadows grew longer, as if they possessed a consciousness of their own and sought to devour the dwarves.

Borin led the way, lightsaber in hand, axe slung over his shoulder. His gaze constantly shifted, not out of fear, but because the mountain itself was now speaking to him more loudly. Every step seemed to echo within him. The ancestral mark continued to pulse, more intensely, as if it had a life of its own. And deep within its beats lay a warning: You are entering a place of trial.

"Borin," Kaidra whispered, "do you feel it too? This cold?"

"It is not true cold," said the rune master. "It is the cold of something that has slumbered for a long time and is now beginning to stir."

"Well, wonderful," Karim muttered. "First spiders, then stone giants, now sleeping nightmares. I really hope Shimmerfels is still standing when we arrive."

Aldrik snorted. "If not, we'll just fix it again."

But even his humor couldn't break the tension.

A faint, humming vibration could be heard. Not loud, but deep. Like a heartbeat coming from the walls.

Darrim raised his shield. "I don't like the sound."

"It's not evil," Borin said suddenly. "Just awake."

Everyone looked at him.

Borin continued: "These halls have seen us. They remember us. And they are testing us."

"And how exactly?" Karim asked suspiciously.

Borin didn't answer immediately. He looked at the ground, extending the sword a little further in front of him. "The path itself will tell us whether we are worthy to go on."

They marched on for a while longer when suddenly a large part of the ground beneath them changed. The smooth, dark slabs vanished and were replaced by an ancient mosaic. The patterns were ancient—older than the oldest runic tablets. The stone glowed slightly in the sword's light. The forms were geometric, yet organic. Many of them reminded Borin of spirals, flames, and waves of energy.

Karim stopped abruptly. "This is a trap."

The rune master knelt down and touched the patterns. His face turned pale. "This is older than our ancestors. Perhaps older than the dwarves themselves."

"And that's supposed to calm us down?" growled Aldrik.

The runemaster rose. "No. It is meant to make you cautious."

Before anyone could answer, the floor beneath them began to glow. Faintly at first, then more intensely. The individual mosaic pieces sprang to life. Some functioned like switches, others like nodes, channeling energy from one pattern to the next.

The dwarves immediately formed a defensive position, but the runemaster raised his hand. "Don't touch anything! Stay where you are!"

The patterns began to move. Not like normal mechanisms, but like flowing stone.

Borin first noticed it: "They... are forming a path."

The floor pulsated and shifted – like a living puzzle rearranging itself. The stones moved, rotated, and merged together until finally a wide path emerged, leading into one of the side halls.

"This is our way," said the rune master.

Karim looked at him in disbelief. "You're just saying that. Or do you really know?"

The rune master nodded slowly. "The patterns only react to the light of the ancestral mark. In their search for a king. This path is not random. It is the mountain's decision."

Borin hesitated briefly. But then he stepped onto the newly created path.

The stone vibrated beneath his foot – gently, like a greeting.

Then the others stepped on it as well.

The dwarves marched on, and the mosaic closed behind them as they left the old path.

"This is uncanny," Kaidra murmured. "How alive it seems."

"The mountain is alive," Borin said. He kept hearing it more clearly. A humming. An echo. A heart, deep beneath them, beating. "And it wants us to keep going."

The path led them into a narrower hall. The ceiling sloped slightly downwards. The columns were shorter, but closer together. The floor was made of polished stone, shimmering with countless cracks.

But then they saw why this place was different.

In the middle of the hall stood an altar.

A large, monolithic block of pure rock crystal. Runes were carved into it – not in Dwarven, but in an older language. It wasn't a language of words, but of images, thoughts, and forms that Borin felt directly in his heart.

"What is it?" asked Darrim.

The rune master stepped forward slowly, tears in his eyes. "This is a touchstone. The first touchstone of kings."

Karim grimaced. "Sounds like trouble."

"This IS trouble," the rune master confirmed, trembling.

Borin approached the altar. The ancestral mark glowed. The crystal reacted instantly – light spread, filling the hall, reaching for Borin's chest like a liquid beam of pure will.

And then –

Images appeared.

Not in the air, not on the crystal.

In Borin's spirit.

He saw battles long past. He saw orc hordes storming across dwarven kingdoms. He saw shadows rising from the deepest depths. And he saw dwarves fall – kings, warriors, children.

But then the picture changed.

He saw himself.

How he fought. How he fell. How he got up. How he fell again.

And in the last picture...

... he saw his weapons glow, the light of the ancestral mark burn like a sun, saw the mountains tremble, and a voice spoke to him:

**"Will you wear what no one else wants to wear?"**

Borin opened his eyes.

The dwarves stared at him.

"What did you see?" Kaidra asked.

Borin was breathing heavily.

"The truth," he said.

Karim snorted. "The truth about what?"

Borin placed a hand on the altar.

"That the mountain leads us...because it tests me."

Silence.

Heavy, reverent silence.

Then Borin raised his sword.

"We're moving on."

And the halls of the ancestors responded with a deep, rolling echo, like an awakened heart preparing its next beat.

## The first blow of the orc hordes

The path from the Halls of the Ancestors led the dwarves into a section of the mountain not composed of intricately hewn stone, but of long, winding, natural shafts that snaked through the earth like the veins of a gigantic organism. The Heart Path had taken them deep—deeper than any dwarf had gone in centuries. But now they were ascending again, and each step brought them closer to the Upper Mines.

And closer to war.

Borin led the way, his eyes dark with tension. The lightsaber was extinguished—not inactive, merely dormant—and so the veins in the rock glowed faintly in the light of the dwarven torches. The air grew thicker, warmer, filled with an ominous odor.

Smoke.

Blood.

And something bitter.

"We're getting closer," Kaidra said softly.

Aldrik nodded. "I know that stench. That's orc smoke. They mix dirt into their fires so the smoke irritates the eyes."

Karim grimaced. "It burns like hell, that's for sure."

Darrim raised his shield slightly higher. "We should prepare."

Borin nodded. "Before we reach the surface, we need to know how far they've advanced. We mustn't lose Shimmerfels."



They moved faster. The faint rumble that Borin had felt before grew louder. It wasn't an earthquake, but the vibration of many footsteps. Heavy footsteps. And shouts. Not Dwarven. Orcish.

Primordial, wild, pulsating like brutal war drums.

"They're right above us," Karim murmured.

The Runemaster stepped beside Borin. "These shafts here... they lead to one of the western mining plains. If Shimmerfels is surrounded, then our last guards are fighting there."

"Then we'll hurry."

The path narrowed, the ground more cracked. Boulders lay scattered about, traces of a recent collapse. Borin touched a wall – warm. Too warm.

"Fire," he said. "They're burning everything they can find."

Kaidra growled. "Typical orcs. If they can't plunder something, they destroy it."

Borin suddenly stopped.

A narrow shaft opened up before them. A sliver of light shone down – an unnatural orange. The light of a fire. And in between, they heard metallic sounds. Hammering blows. Not a forge.

Swords. Axes. Armor.

Battle.

Then a scream.

Dwarfish.

Karim jumped up. "That was less than twenty meters above us!"

Borin turned to the others. "We'll intervene. Immediately."

"Finally," Aldrik murmured, shouldering his hammer.

The border guards formed a tight formation. The Iron Brothers stood behind them. The rune master produced a small, ancient runic light, which he held in both hands like a heart.

Borin briefly closed his eyes, then activated his lightsaber.

With a bright, hissing sound, the blade awoke – a silvery gleam that pushed back the shadows. The light reflected in the dwarves' eyes.

"For the Underworld!" cried Kaidra.

"For the mountain!" roared Aldrik.

Borin raised his sword. "For Shimmerfels!"

Then they climbed into the shaft.

The path upwards was steep, but the dwarves knew every handhold, every ledge. A dwarf was never too heavy for the rock if his heart was heavier than his body. Kaidra reached the top edge first and cautiously peered over the ledge.

Her face froze.

"Gods of Stone..."

Borin climbed next to her and saw what she saw.

The plain above them was a battlefield.

Fires burned in irregular pits. Beams had collapsed, carts overturned, ore veins swollen like black wounds. Dwarven and orcish corpses lay everywhere, entangled together. Blood covered the ground like a gruesome script of fate.

There were many orcs. At least thirty. Some stood in the corridors, others hacked at the last surviving dwarven guards with blunt blades. The dwarves were only six left. They defended a makeshift barricade of rubble, rails, and metal plates. Their armor was shattered, their shields broken. But they stood.

Borin felt something inside him get hot.

Fury.

Not uncontrolled anger – but righteous rage, such as only dwarves knew when their people were threatened.

"Stick together!" shouted one of the besieged guards above.

"One more blow, brothers! One more blow! The king will not—"

An orc cut him off. With a brutal blow of a rusty crooked knife, he struck the dwarven guard's shoulder, who recoiled and gasped for breath.

Karim growled. "I've seen enough."

Borin nodded. "We're attacking. Immediately."

"From here down?" Darrim asked skeptically.

Borin looked up the slope. A sloping path led upwards, but it was full of orcs.

"Not along the path," said Borin.

He raised his sword.

Then he jumped.

The dwarves followed.

It wasn't an orderly descent. It was a storm, a tumbling avalanche of steel and light. Borin landed in the middle of a group of orcs. The lightsaber struck the first enemy with full force. The blade cut through metal and flesh as if it were water.

A scream. A second. A third.

Aldrik landed next to Borin and smashed an orc's skull. Kaidra collided with a particularly large orc warrior and drove her hammer into his chest. Karim whirled his double axes and slit the throats of two enemies at once.

The orcs roared in surprise.

"WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?!"

"DWATERS!"

"QUICK! GET—"

Another shot from Borin ended the set.

The dwarves fought their way across the plain like a storm, and the besieged guards suddenly saw silver light sweeping over the masses of orcs.

"Reinforcements!" shouted one of the guards.

"THE MOUNTAIN HAS NOT FORGOTTEN US!"

"HOLD ON, MEN!"

Borin pressed deeper. Each blow of his lightsaber sent the orcs tumbling back. Their rusty weapons splintered, their armor glowed under the light. The ground filled with smoke, blood, and sparks.

A particularly large orc – a war chieftain with skulls on his shoulder – charged towards Borin, roaring and raising a huge double axe.

"I'LL MAKE YOU TO STONE DUST, DWARF!"

Borin spun the lightsaber.

"Try it."

The orc chieftain swung his axe. Borin parried the blow. The metal monster was hurled backward by the power of the light. Before it could put its foot down again, Borin leaped forward and rammed the Smithfather's Axe into its side.

With a shattering crash, the chief fell.

The battle didn't last long. Not because the orcs were weak – but because the dwarves were unstoppable.

When the last orc fell, a moment of silence remained.

A silence filled with breath, blood, and smoke.

The six surviving dwarves at the barricade looked down.

One of them – a broad-shouldered dwarf with tattered armor – stepped forward.

Then he fell to one knee.

"King Borin," he said, breathing heavily. "The halls of Shimmerfels... have not yet fallen. But they are on the verge of doing so."

Borin looked down at the devastation – and then upwards, towards the upper mines.

"Then we march on."

And the dwarves – all those who were still standing – followed him.

The first blow from the Orc horde was followed by a war the likes of which the Deep Realms had not seen for centuries.

The dwarves gathered for only a fraction of a moment, for the battle had scarcely ceased when a new sound penetrated the corridors. Not the shrieks of the orcs or the clang of iron, but a deep, menacing thumping. Like drums. Like the heartbeat of an army. Borin raised his hand, giving a silent signal. The Iron Brothers moved closer together, the border guards formed an outer ring, and the Runemaster stepped beside him. The smoke hung heavy in the air, warm from the fire and streaked with a layer of ash that trickled down onto the mine plain like gray snow.

The six surviving dwarven guardians now stood beside the group, all gravely wounded, but resolute. One had only one eye, another a shattered shield stained with orc blood. Yet in their eyes lay that indomitable fire, immortal even deep within the earth. Borin approached them and nodded. Not a word wasted. Only recognition. And they understood.

Another rumble sent dust trickling from the ceiling. Aldrik straightened and pulled his hammer closer to his chest. "These are more than just a few orcs," he said, his voice hoarse from fighting. "These are hordes. Real hordes. The kind that won't stop running until the last dwarf has fallen."

"Or when the first orc is lying on the ground," Kaidra growled. "Then they'll remember how mortal they are."

Karim felt along the wall beside him. "The passage up there leads directly to Schimmerfels. I know the structure. It's not far, maybe two halls from here."

"What if Shimmerfels is already on fire?" Darrim asked.

"Then we'll extinguish the fire with orc blood," Karim replied.

Borin raised his sword, and the silver light illuminated the blackened walls. The veins of the earth shimmered dimly, as if waiting for him to point the way. "We go up. Step by step. Be ready—the hordes won't be surprised. They know we're coming."

The rune master sighed heavily. "The mountain is moving. It senses how close the next blow is. And it fears it."

"Then he will not fear him alone," Borin murmured and began to move.

The dwarves followed him through a wide but fire-damaged tunnel. The walls were blackened, some spots still glowed faintly, and charred wooden beams crunched under their boots. The path was steep, but the dwarves were used to running against the earth's weight. Every step was a decision. Every breath an oath.

Then they heard it more clearly. No more distant knocking. A powerful sound that made the ground tremble, accompanied by raw shouts and hoarse laughter. Orcs. Many. Too many.

"They're using the old smelting road from Schimmerfels," one of the surviving guards said quietly. "They've overturned the wagons and are using them as barricades."

Kaidra snorted. "They can do that as often as they like. No barricade can stop a group of angry dwarves."

Borin stopped abruptly. A new level opened up before them, slightly higher than the mine before, and the light from the fires beyond was more intense. It wasn't the warm light of forges or lamps—it was the flickering, merciless red of destructive orc fires.

He raised his hand.

Everyone paused.

Borin listened. The ancestral mark pulsed slowly but urgently. Something was here. Something powerful. Not a beast, not a shaman. Something else. The air vibrated slightly, as if it itself were breathing heavily.

"Aldrik," Borin whispered, "you go left. Kaidra, right with two border guards. Karim, you stay with me."

"What's up there?" Karim asked quietly.

"A taste of what's to come," Borin replied.

They climbed the last few meters and looked over the edge.

It was a hilly plain where the orcs spread out like black vermin. Dozens, maybe fifty, maybe more. They had entrenched themselves, stacking wagons and logs into a wall. But that wasn't the remarkable thing. Not what Borin sensed.

The remarkable thing was the orc who stood in the middle.

He was taller than the others. Broader. His body was covered in scars, and red symbols were painted on his skin, glowing in the firelight. He carried a two-headed spear, its tips dripping with a poisonous green liquid. His eyes were yellow, wild, yet astonishingly focused.

A war chieftain. But not just any chieftain.

A blood-caller.

Borin knew these legends. Orcs so deeply bound to the magic of their shamans that they could draw on the life force of fallen warriors. A single Bloodcaller, with enough corpses, could keep an entire army at full strength for three days.

Karim whispered: "That's a problem."

Kaidra pursed her lips into a thin line. "No. That's THE problem."

The Bloodcaller raised his head as if sensing Borin's presence. His gaze pierced the flames and fixed directly on him. A malevolent, distorted smile spread across his face.

He raised a hand. And the orcs fell silent.

"Dwarfs..." he croaked, his voice rough as burning coal. "Small, fat cockroaches. You're late. Your city... is burning."

Aldrik growled and tried to jump up, but Borin held him back.

The Bloodcaller continued: "But don't worry. We will help you. We will send you to the ancestors."

Laughter erupted. Orcs roared, some thrusting their weapons against the wagon barricade.

Then Borin raised his lightsaber.

"Karim," he said quietly, "you take the left wing. Aldrik, you take the right side. I'll take care of the Bloodcaller."

Karim's eyes widened. "Alone?"

"He has already seen me. He wants me. So he will have me."

Kaidra stood beside him. "And what if he's too strong?"

Borin looked at her. The light reflected in his eyes, but there was no fear in them – only determination. "Then you must be stronger."

But just as they were preparing to attack, the ground vibrated again.

A tremendous blow. Then a second.

Something happened. Something big.

Aldrik frowned. "This isn't from the orcs."

And then they heard it:

The rumble of enormous footsteps.

Brick by brick.

A sound that went right through you.

Borin recognized him immediately.

And he smiled.

"They are the giant stones."

The orcs heard the footsteps too – and the smiles disappeared from their faces.

The next moment would mark the beginning of a war the Deep Realms had not seen for centuries.

The ground no longer trembled slightly, but with the full, ancient power of an awakening mountain. Every dwarf felt it in their feet, their knees, their chest. The tremor was deep, rhythmic, heavy, and when they felt the third vibration, they all knew: the stone giants were not only near, they were already on their way up. The Bloodcaller felt it too. His spiteful smile froze, and he turned abruptly, as if he might be staring down an overwhelming danger at any moment. He saw nothing—nothing yet—but the ground was already telling the truth.

"What... is that?" he growled, pulling his two-headed spear closer to him.

"Your end," Borin murmured softly, and although no orc could hear him, the air itself seemed to carry the words further.

The Bloodcaller raised both arms and bellowed an orcish word Borin didn't recognize, but its meaning was clear: Reinforcements! Form up! Attack! The orcs charged forward, their fury and ferocity momentarily drowning out even the distant tremors. Iron clanged, rusty weapons rose like a black forest, and Shimmerfels' mine plain filled with the brutal howls of a horde that believed itself invincible under the protection of its Bloodcaller.

But Borin knew something they didn't.

They had squandered their last chance.

"NOW!" he shouted, and the dwarves jumped forward in full formation.

Aldrik charged forward with a war cry so deep it made even the still-glowing coals on the ground tremble. Kaidra and the border guards followed him, a compact shield wall of metal and unbroken courage, absorbing the initial impact of the orc masses. The crash as shield met blade echoed like thunder. Sparks flew, blood flew, and the battle erupted with a ferocity that surprised even the orcs.

Borin leaped into the fray. His lightsaber blazed, and the silver beam sliced through the first line of orcs with a precision more reminiscent of a creator's will than a warrior's hand. Orcs screamed, their shadows dancing in the light, and some, misguidedly, tried to seize the king with their bare hands—only to vanish in a flash of light the next moment.

"He is DERES!" roared one of the orcs, but before he could utter any more words, Aldrik's hammer struck him directly in the chest and hurled him against an overturned ore sled.

Karim fought on the left, his double axes flying like steel mill wheels, leaving no enemy standing where they struck. Darrim repeatedly pried gaps in the orcish front with his shield, only for Kaidra to reinforce these openings with powerful hammer blows. Blood, smoke, and sparks merged into chaos, but the dwarves knew what they were doing. They fought not as a horde, but as a single entity.

But the Bloodcaller was something else.

And he waited.

Borin saw him. Amidst all the chaos, the orc stood on a mound of overturned carts, raised his spear, and began drawing circles in the air. Each circle briefly flared up, as if the air itself had been ignited. Green sparks flew, and dark smoke gathered around his legs. The ground around him pulsed with an evil light.

"He's calling!" cried the Runemaster, his voice trembling. "He's gathering the blood of the fallen! Borin, you must stop him! OTHERWISE THE ENTIRE HORDE WILL RISE AGAIN!"

The thought sent a shiver down Borin's spine. There were orcs who only killed. There were orcs who commanded. And then there were those who bound blood. The worst of all. They could raise the dead. They could make the living explode with rage. They could transform orc warriors into berserkers who would fight on even headless.

Borin surged forward. Two orcs tried to stop him, but his axe tore through one chest, his lightsaber through the other. He reached the first pile of wagons and leaped onto it, cutting through loose planks, shackles, flesh and armor, and suddenly he stood at the top – with a direct view of the Bloodcaller.

The orc grinned. "Little Stoneman. You think you can stop me? You're alone."

"I need no one but the mountain," Borin said calmly, raising the gleaming blade.

The Bloodcaller roared and hurled his spear at him. The air around the weapon was so poisonous that it sent sparks flying into the rock. Borin parried the first blow, but the second was faster. The spear struck his chest—and ricocheted off as if it had hit a wall.

The ancestral mark glowed.

The Bloodcaller's eyes widened. "What are you?! What magic do you wield?!"

"No magic," said Borin, "just responsibility."



He leaped forward, lightsaber raised. The Bloodcaller raised his spear again, tracing another circle – but this time the light in Borin's chest exploded like a star. The rune burned white, and even the spear began to tremble.

"NO!" roared the Bloodcaller, igniting three circles simultaneously. Fountains of blood rose from the earth, the corpses of the fallen orcs began to stir, hands cramped, legs twitched.

Borin had to put an end to it.

Now.

He rammed the lightsaber into the ground.

A beam of light shot across the entire mine level. The corpses froze. The Bloodcaller screamed as the runes on his spear burst into flames. The light burned its way through the green sparks, shattering the magic like glass. A final orcish scream echoed through the shaft, then the Bloodcaller collapsed, smoke billowing from the corners of his mouth.

He fell.

When his body touched the ground, the poisonous light went out.

The orcs who were still standing hesitated – saw their master falling – and froze in a mixture of anger and fear.

Then the thunder of the stone giants resounded.

The fight was over before it could begin.

The orcs saw the enormous, silver-eyed figures stepping through the tunnel and ran, screaming, tripping over their own feet, fleeing in all directions. Some threw down their weapons, others tried to escape through narrow crevices, only to be overtaken by stone hands.

When the giants reached the clearing, the ground was already littered with mutilated corpses, burning beams, and bloodstains. They looked at Borin, and the largest of them bowed his head low.

Borin nodded back.

"Schimmerfels is not lost yet," he finally said, breathing heavily.

Kaidra stepped beside him. "But it's about to happen."

Aldrik wiped blood from his forehead. "Then we'll save it."

Borin looked ahead, towards where the main corridor led to the halls.

"Onward," he said. "We are marching. The war is only just beginning."

## Storm over Schimmerfels

The air grew colder as Borin and his companions approached the main passage of Schimmerfels. The fires of the last battle had barely died down, the smoke not yet fully cleared, and yet a new heaviness hung over the mountain. Schimmerfels was not just any mine. It was a fortress, a dwarven bastion, built upon an ancient fissure where the first clans had once raised their banners. Here lay the boundary between the middle depths and the upper halls. Here began the dwarven realm. And here it would be defended.

The stone giants followed silently behind them. Each of their steps caused the ground to tremble, but their presence soothed the dwarves' hearts rather than frightening them. They were a walking reminder that not all ancient creatures were against the dwarves. And in times like these, any memory of hope was a rare treasure.

The path to Schimmerfels led through a natural gorge that had once been smooth and solid. But now it was full of cracks, as if the mountain itself had been under pressure. Borin repeatedly placed his hand on the stone, and each time he felt the same thing: a whisper, a vibration, an unsteady pulse. The mountain was not still. The mountain was watching.

"This pass used to be wider," Kaidra murmured, examining the broken rock faces. "Now it looks as if giants have been hammering it with their fists."

Aldrik nodded. "Or orcs with too much gunpowder."

"The orcs have no gunpowder," Karim said dryly. "They only have fire and stupidity."

"Fire is enough," Darrim replied gravely. "They'll bring everything down with it if they're allowed to rage long enough."

Borin said nothing. His thoughts were already elsewhere. He could hear it—a sound that couldn't be ignored. It seemed to come from the stone itself, vibrating, boring, gaping. Not a tremor. Not an echo. Something else.

Screams.

Dwarfish screams.

"We are close," Borin said quietly.

The group quickened their pace. The stone giants had to slow down so the dwarves wouldn't be thrown off balance, but even so, they made tremendous progress. The light from the fire and the flickering glow of broken lamps grew stronger. And then they saw the entrance to the Shimmering Rock Forecourt.

Or rather: what was left of it.

The gates weren't simply broken – they were ripped out. Five-meter-high steel wings, which once would have withstood even dragon fire, now lay on the ground like crumpled pieces of paper. The massive hinges had been torn out, the ground furrowed, and blood had pooled in the cracks.

"That couldn't have been an orc's fist," Karim said tonelessly.

"No," Borin replied. "That was a troll."

Aldrik cursed softly. "Damned troll hordes. If the orcs find them again..."

Borin nodded. "Then the entire upper level will burn."

They entered the vestibule, and the stench of burnt metal and steaming flesh hit them. The bodies of fallen dwarves lay everywhere. Some motionless, others still warm, some sitting upright as if in a last desperate attempt to protect their comrades. The walls were scratched. Not by weapons—by claws.

"Trolls," said Darrim. "Large ones."

Kaidra knelt beside one of the fallen guardians. "Sharp talons. They ripped him open like a bread crust. They opened the gates, and then..."

She didn't continue speaking.

Aldrik examined the destroyed torch holders. "That was intentional. They wanted to create chaos. The orcs won't attack as effectively."

"No," said Borin. "They only do that if someone is controlling them."

He placed his hand on the wall. The ancestral mark pulsed.

And at that moment he heard a voice.

No voice of the ancestors. No voice of the mountain.

A voice he already knew.

Graa'thuun.

"You're running... too late."

Borin froze. The other dwarves noticed his sudden immobility.

"What is it?" asked Kaidra.

Borin didn't answer immediately. The voice was like a fleeting gust of wind, like a shadow over his heart. Not directly in words – in feeling.

"The orcs are not the danger," Borin said quietly. "They are merely the storm before the actual weather."

Karim frowned. "What do you mean?"

Borin looked at the destroyed hall. "Graa'thuun is bound. But not weakened."

Aldrik cursed. "That means the bastard is playing games with us."

"Yes." Borin's voice was calm, but cold. "And he's not the only one who has awakened."

The rune master turned pale. "No... it can't be."

Kaidra looked at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"The deep paths... the halls of the ancestors... the touchstone..." The old dwarf trembled. "When they awaken, so too does the counterattack. The adversary. The beast of the lower roots."

Karim looked from one to the other. "Wait. What kind of beast?"

The rune master did not answer. For at that moment they heard a noise that drowned everything else out.

A tremendous blow. Then a second. Then a third.

And a roar so deep and powerful that even the stone giants behind them stopped.

The entire rock trembled.

"What..." Kaidra whispered.

"A primal troll," Borin said tonelessly.

The other dwarves stared at him – horrified.

"An ancient troll?" Karim repeated. "They're legendary! They're several stories tall! They're—"

"—Problems that we need to solve right away," Borin interrupted.

Then he looked ahead, towards where the path led to Schimmerfels.

Smoke. Blood. And the ground, vibrating at long intervals.

The orc hordes were just a taste of what was to come.

The real storm began now.

"Follow me," Borin said darkly. "We will save Schimmerfels. Or we will die trying."

The dwarves formed a group.

The stone giants followed.

And the storm broke loose over Schimmerfels.

The passage to Shimmerfels narrowed, became lower, and was filled with an unnatural red glow that cast the dwarves' sharp shadows onto the rock walls. It was the kind of light that comes from burning—not wood, not coal, but flesh, metal, and earth itself. Borin felt the air thicken, heavier with every step. The smoke tasted bitter, almost sweet, an unmistakable sign that orc fire had been dipped in blood. These barbarians knew exactly how to spread terror.

The dwarves followed Borin in silence, each right arm tightly gripping a weapon. Kaidra held her hammer so firmly that her knuckles turned white. Aldrik ran, breathing heavily, his eyes filled with uncontrollable anger. Karim was unusually quiet, which was never a good sign. Even the stone giants lumbering behind them with their massive strides seemed to be testing the air—or listening for something the dwarves couldn't hear.

After another twenty paces, they reached a sharp bend, and Borin raised his hand. Everyone stopped. Not a sound, not a breath, not a clang of metal could be heard, except for the deep, distant thunder of that being that made the earth tremble before them.

"The primal troll," whispered the rune master. "He is awake."

"And hungry," Karim added. "They never stop eating, do they?"

"No," said the rune master, his gaze empty. "Primordial trolls eat everything. Stone, meat, metal. They grow as long as they find food. And the older they are... the stronger they become."

Borin turned to him. "Can he be killed?"

The runemaster didn't answer immediately. Then he lowered his head. "You can kill anything, Borin. But some things don't want to die."

Another blow shook the hall. This time so close that dust trickled from the ceiling and small stones bounced off the walls. The dwarves instinctively ducked.

"We need to find out how the mine even got here," Kaidra murmured. "Trolls can't go through narrow passages. Not like these."

"That just means the corridor has been enlarged," Darrim said grimly. "From the inside."

Borin looked ahead and felt the stone tremble again. But this time he felt more. A pain. As if the rock itself were screaming. The ancestral mark burned more intensely, and he paused.

"The mountain is suffering," Borin said quietly.

Karim snorted. "And so did we."

But Borin heard it deeper. A murmur, a tremor, a plea perhaps. Graa'thuun was bound... but his shadow remained in the world. And a primal troll wasn't a monster in its own right. It was a reaction. A counterpoint. An ancient guardian of the depths, rising in extreme cases when the mountain itself was thrown off balance.

A balance that had destroyed Graa'thuun's influence.

“We must hurry,” said Borin, his voice brooking no argument. “Schimmerfels could fall at any moment.”

They walked on, faster, until they finally reached the end of the tunnel. Before them opened the great vestibule of Schimmerfels – a massive, towering cauldron of stone, supported by dozens of pillars on which the ancient kings had once carved their victories. Normally, this place was brightly lit by torches, mine lamps, and a warm, golden glow that reflected the pride of the dwarves.

But now it was a battlefield.

Fires blazed around the pillars, their runes blackened or torn away. Barricades of metal and stone lay in ruins. Corpses, tattered armor, and broken weapons were scattered everywhere. The ground was red. Not with paint. With blood.

Orcs slithered among the burning remains like rats in a carcass. Some dragged away dwarves who were still alive. Others tried to force open doors leading further into the depths with heavy tools. Some fired primitive crossbows. And somewhere, beyond the chaos, they heard the growl of a creature that made the air itself tremble.

A primal troll.

The sound was deep and angry – but also... hurt? Borin wasn't sure.

"There are hundreds of orcs!" whispered one of the surviving guards they had rescued earlier. "At least!"

"Then we'll take back our hall," Aldrik said grimly. "Both body and soul!"

Borin raised his sword, but before he could order the attack, a shadow broke through the smoke.

An orc discovered them.

One of the larger ones, with skull plates on his shoulders. He stared at them as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing – dwarves, ready for battle and alive, accompanied by gigantic stone giants.

He opened his mouth to roar.

He didn't even get the chance.

A stone giant stepped out from behind Borin, raised his massive rock fist – and crushed the orc like a lump of clay. A single, fatal blow. The orc was gone.

The sound of that impact was enough.

The entire hall fell silent.

Orcs turned around everywhere. Dozens. Hundreds. All staring in the same direction.

Borin stepped forward.

The dwarves formed a line behind him.

The stone giants heaved themselves into the hall and towered over even the largest columns of fire.

An orc warrior dropped his sword. Another stumbled backward. Some roared, a few immediately ran off in panic. Others raised their weapons, uncertain, wavering between fear and fury.

Then came the roaring.

The roar that shook the hall.

The roar of the primal troll.

A massive shadow slid behind the second row of columns. Two enormous red eyes glowed in the smoke. An arm, as thick as an old tree, thrust forward. A paw, as big as a cartwheel, scraped across the ground. The columns trembled.

The troll smelled the dwarves.

And he smelled Borin.

Borin raised the lightsaber.

"Movement!" he shouted. "We're attacking! All together!"

The dwarves roared their battle cries, and the orcs began to scream – some with anger, some with panic, many with both.

But the first blow belonged neither to dwarves nor orcs.

He belonged to the original troll.

With a roar that made even the stone giant and the mountain tremble, he stormed forward.

And the battle for Shimmerfels began.

The hall trembled under the onslaught of the primeval troll, who roared through the smoke. His body was a mountain of flesh and stone, with skin like weathered granite slabs and arms the size of a dwarf's house. He reeked of blood, mold, and ancient decay. Every step he took made the floor recoil as if under the weight of a collapsing tunnel, and the pillars supporting the high ceiling trembled as if about to break. The troll was ancient, so old that he might have awakened in the very time when the first dwarves had set foot in these halls. And he was furious—not from hunger or cruelty, but because something within him had been awakened that should have remained dormant.

The dwarves stood ready. Borin in the lead, the Iron Brothers on either side, border guards behind. The stone giants heaved themselves into a line, so towering that they could meet even

the primeval troll at eye level... yet even they seemed cautious, almost hesitant. For a primeval troll was not an enemy to be attacked lightly. He was the embodiment of an ancient wrath of the mountain.

“He’s coming!” Kaidra shouted.

The troll charged forward, the earth beneath him rising and falling. Orcs were crushed under his feet without him even noticing. With a single swipe of his paw, he hurled aside several wrecked wagons that had previously blocked the hall's entrance. It was as if a mountain were walking on its own.

"SIGN LINE!" yelled Aldrik.

The dwarves raised their shields – a steel wall against the wrath of an ancient monster. But Borin knew: A direct attack would tear them apart.

"Move over! Turn left!" he shouted at the last moment.

The primeval troll struck with both arms simultaneously. The blows flew through the air like falling boulders. The ground ripped open, and the tremor caused several orcs to fall. The dwarves rolled in the direction Borin had pointed. Where they had just been standing, the blow had torn a deep furrow in the ground.

"The mountain is on our side," murmured the rune master as he rose again. "It shows us the way."

"Then we should use him!" shouted Karim, leaping towards one of the wandering orcs with a battle cry.

The battlefield was chaotic. Orcs ran around shrieking, some desperately trying to fight, others fleeing in panic into the corridors. But despite the chaos, the dwarves formed an orderly line. Borin's eyes searched for the primal troll's weak spot – every troll, even the large ones, had one. In ordinary trolls, it was located in the soft flesh of the underside of the belly or in the neck.

But this troll was different.

He was older. Harder. His body was made of layers of ancient rock mixed with flesh. A living mountain.

The first stone giant let out a deep roar—a sound like rolling thunder. He raised his massive arms and struck the primeval troll. The blow rebounded as if it had struck a solid fortress wall. The troll roared and, with a single blow, brought the giant down. The impact caused a tremor, and chunks of stone fell from the ceiling.

“By the ancestors...” Darrim murmured. “He knocked him down with one blow.”

The giant laboriously rose again, his movements slower but not broken. The stone giants' eyes glowed darker, and their postures became firmer. They had understood: This enemy was no ordinary enemy. He was an ancient being of the deep.



"Take the initiative!" Borin shouted. "Pull him away from the pillars! If one falls, the mountain itself will bury us!"

The primal troll charged again, and this time it seemed to target Borin directly. Its eyes glowed red like molten ore. A massive arm shot forward. Borin dodged, but felt the air displacement like a gust of wind.

The troll roared and tried to grab Borin with its other hand. The king ducked under the troll's arm, rolled across the ground, and plunged his lightsaber into the troll's heel. A short, piercing scream escaped him as the silver light pierced deep into the flesh. But at that same moment, Borin felt the lightsaber strike something hard—stone. The primal troll had transformed further than normal trolls. Its body was half flesh, half rock.

But he was not invulnerable.

Kaidra leaped onto the troll's arm and slashed a weak spot between two slabs of stone with her hammer. The blow echoed through the hall, and the troll roared. He shook his arm, and Kaidra was thrown back—but she landed on her feet, slid across the floor, and immediately got back up.

Aldrik and Karim attacked simultaneously, one on the left, one on the right. Aldrik aimed for the knee, while Karim struck the soft spot on the thigh with both axes. The troll staggered briefly, his legs bent, but he remained steadfast.

And then he did something that Borin hadn't expected.

He exhaled deeply—a breath that acted like a suction. Air was drawn into his lungs, and with it smoke, dust, and even loose weapons. The dwarves felt the pull and had to hold on to the ground.

"Let's go from the front!" Borin shouted.

But before the warning was fully spoken, the troll roared out a pressure wave that swept through the hall like the blow of a gigantic, invisible hammer.

Dwarfs were thrown backwards. Rocks broke away from the walls. Even the stone giants swayed.

Borin crashed into a pillar and groaned as he felt the impact. But he got back up, his sword firmly in his hand.

The primal troll was more powerful than expected.

But Borin was not alone.

One of the stone giants rolled forward, grabbed the troll by the arm, and tried to pull him off balance. The troll roared and struck back with such force that even the giant staggered. Two more giants joined the fight, grabbed the primeval troll's legs, and pulled him back a short distance. The troll furiously struck them, shattering chunks of stone from their shoulders.

But there was a weakness.

Borin saw her.

The primeval troll had an open wound on its side, where the stone hadn't fully formed. Something pulsed there. Something red. Something alive.

"Kaidra! Aldrik! Be with me!" Borin shouted as loudly as he could.

They ran.

"If we hit him there, he'll fall," said Borin. "I only need a few seconds. Distract him!"

Aldrik nodded. "With pleasure."

Karim shouted something that would have silenced even orcs and charged at the troll. He leaped and swung both axes at the troll's hand. The blow didn't do much, but the troll looked down—and that was enough.

The next blow from the stone giants forced the troll to shift his weight.

This was the moment.

Borin started running.

He sprinted, jumped over an overturned cart, ducked under a wildly flailing arm. Then he ran up the side of a stone giant, leaped from its shoulder – and flew directly towards the open wound in the primeval troll's side.

The lightsaber blazed brighter than ever before.

He screamed.

The troll roared.

The light hit flesh.

On blood.

On the heart.

The troll writhed, its arms twitching. The ground trembled. The dwarves and giants tumbled back. And with a final, deafening roar, the primeval troll collapsed and fell on its side – so heavily that the earth shook.

Silence fell over Schimmerfels.

Only the crackling of the fires could still be heard.

Borin stood panting between the bodies, the sword in his hand, the ancestral mark burning on his chest.

Aldrik approached him, breathless. "What... was that?"

Borin looked at the fallen monster. "That was just the beginning."

## The King's Son's Hammer

The primal troll lay motionless in the ruins of Shimmerfels' great vestibule, its massive body still steaming from the final blow of the lightsaber. The smell of burnt rock and blood hung heavy in the air, and the silence that followed was almost more eerie than the troll's roar during the battle. For a moment, the only sounds were the crackling of fires and the muffled, deep hum of the stone giants standing watchfully in the shadows. Their eyes glowed like ancient lanterns, watching over the dwarves.

Borin stood beside the dead colossus, his lightsaber still dimly glowing in his hand. His chest rose and fell heavily, sweat trickled down his face, yet his posture was straight, firm. Every dwarf who saw him knew: the battle had challenged him, but not broken him. The ancestral mark on his chest still glowed hot, as if the heart of the mountain itself continued to beat within him.

Kaidra approached him, leaned on her hammer, and examined the troll. "That was... no ordinary beast. You saved our lives, Borin."

"We saved each other's lives," Borin replied calmly, without taking his eyes off the troll. "This victory belongs to all of us."

Aldrik stumbled up, wiped blood from his forehead, and laughed hoarsely. "By all the ancestors... if this was just the beginning, like you said earlier... then we should start writing stories before we run out of time."

Karim slumped backward onto a half-destroyed cart, breathing heavily and grimacing. "We just killed a primeval troll. One of those ancient monsters always described as immortal in legends. If that's not a reason for beer, I don't know what is."

Darrim nodded, but his eyes remained fixed on the stone giant. "I wonder what it means that they led us here. That they follow us."

The runemaster approached them slowly, his staff clutched tightly. His face was even paler than before, his eyes deep-set as if he had gazed beyond death. "The giants do not follow you," he said finally, his voice trembling. "They follow the rune. They follow... the king's son."

Borin turned to him, his gaze hard. "I made no claim."

"You don't have to," replied the rune master. "The mountain has done it for you."

At that moment, something unexpected happened.

A stone giant moved. Not menacingly, not stormily. Slowly. He walked, each step a tremendous rumble that made the earth tremble, directly towards Borin. The dwarves instinctively grabbed their weapons, but Borin raised a hand, and they paused.

The giant bowed. His massive body creaked and groaned like walking rock. Then he stretched out his huge, flat hand and placed it on the ground at Borin's feet – a gesture of respect.

Borin understood.

Kaidra whispered: "He acknowledges you."

Aldrik stared in disbelief. "The king's hammer... where is it?"

That's amazing.

An ancient artifact. A symbol of power once wielded by Borin's father. The hammer forged in the halls of Shimmerfels to crown kings and crush enemies. The hammer thought to be lost.

Borin heard a faint rumble. A pulse. A cry deeper than words.

The ancestral mark burned more intensely.

"He is here," Borin said suddenly, his voice both distant and near. "The hammer... lies within these halls."

The Runemaster nodded. "Yes. The King's Hammer. It was kept in the heart of Shimmerfels. No one but its rightful wielder can raise it."

"He is more than a weapon," Kaidra murmured, almost reverently. "He is an oath."

Borin stepped forward. The stone giant's hand lifted slightly, as if indicating the way. In the center of the hall, behind a half-collapsed wall of ancient stone, Borin suddenly saw a pale glow. Faint. But unmistakable.

A silvery shimmer.

He walked towards it.

The others followed, cautiously, respectfully. When they were close enough, they saw it too: a half-buried pedestal of black ore, split as if by an ancient blow. On it lay a hammer. Not large, not ornate. Compact, solid, with a head of dark, gleaming metal, crisscrossed by silver lines that looked like frozen lightning.

He wasn't decorative. He wasn't ostentatious. He was simple. And perfect.

Karim whispered: "That's him..."

Darrim knelt down. "The king's son's hammer."

Borin stood before it. His chest pounded. His fingers trembled. Not from fear. From awe.

"Touch him," Kaidra said softly.

"If you are worthy," Aldrik whispered, "he will recognize you."

The rune master nodded. "But be warned. Whoever touches it and is not worthy... will pay the price of the mountain."

Borin took a deep breath.

He stretched out his hand.

His fingers touched the stem.

The hammer reacted immediately.

A beam of light shot through the lines in the metal, gliding like living energy across Borin's arm, reaching the ancestral mark and merging with it. Borin's entire chest burned, but it wasn't pain—it was power.

A power as old as the mountains. A power deeply engraved in his name.

The hammer lifted. Not heavily. Not hesitantly. It rose as if it had only been waiting for Borin's touch.

When he held it completely in his hands, the mountain rumbled. A deep, ancient sound that echoed over the pillars, vibrated beneath his feet, and touched the hearts of the dwarves.

The stone giants bowed down.

Kaidra fell to one knee.

Aldrik followed. Karim. Darrim. The border guards. The surviving guards.

Nobody ordered it. It just happened.

Borin stood alone in the center of the hall, sword in one hand, king's hammer in the other, the ancestral mark burning bright like a small sun.

The mountain had spoken.

“Borin,” Kaidra said softly, “you are no longer just a warrior.”

Aldrik raised his head and grinned through the dirt. “You are the king's son. And the mountain has given you back your hammer.”

Borin looked at the weapons in his hands.

“Then,” he said, “I will use it.”

And at that moment, the true destiny of the Deep Realms began to take shape.

The hammer had barely grown accustomed to Borin's hand when it sensed the change within the mountain. A deep, almost inaudible hum permeated the halls of Shimmerfels, an echo of ancient voices awakened and stirring. Not loud. Not threatening. But attentive. The mountain was watching him now, as clearly as an old king scrutinizing the young heir from his throne room. The ancestral mark still glowed, but now the light was more harmonious, as if the hammer itself had merged with the rune, creating a shared melody.

The dwarves still stood respectfully behind him, while the primeval troll lay steaming and motionless on the ground. Even the death of this monster seemed significant—a victory that resonated within the mountain itself. The stone giants barely moved, yet their shining eyes conveyed a kind of recognition rarely seen in such ancient beings.

Kaidra was the first to rise. "Borin... you now wield two weapons for which any dwarf would give his life. The hammer and the lightsaber. This hasn't been seen since the first kings."

"And there was a reason for that," murmured the runemaster, who also rose and gripped his staff more tightly. "Such power never comes without a price."

Aldrik cleared his throat. "Concerning or not – we'll need the hammer. If the orc hordes further up are as strong as they are here..."

"They have," Karim interrupted, nodding towards the exit. "Schimmerfels won't last long if we don't continue marching immediately."

Borin gazed at the halls. He heard screams in the distance, the clash of weapons, the roar of orcs, and the cracking splintering of wood and stone. Shimmering Rock was still fighting. Parts of the fortress had held out. But parts had fallen—or were burning. There was no time for reverence, no time for hesitant thoughts.

"We have to keep going," Borin said firmly. His gaze rested briefly on the hammer in his hand. The metal felt warm. Not hot. Warm like a hand closing around his.

Kaidra nodded. "Then we'll guide you, Borin."

"No," he said calmly. "I will guide you."

Those were words the mountain liked. The ancestral mark briefly burned.

They began to move. The stone giants followed them with heavy, steady strides. The smell of ash grew stronger as they approached the central Shimmering Rock Hall. The floor was covered in rubble, and hot steam billowed from some of the cracks. Torches lay shattered on the ground, and a few runic lights still flickered on the walls, refusing to go out.

Darrim paused briefly and examined one of the walls. "Here... the Stone Fathers' oath used to be engraved here. They... destroyed it."

Borin stepped beside him. The once intricately carved text was now only recognizable in fragments, as if orc claws had laboriously torn it out. "They destroy everything they don't understand," he said softly. "But an oath doesn't live in stone. It lives in us."

The words seemed to strengthen the other dwarves. Their shoulders straightened. Their steps became more determined.

A scream echoed through the next hall. Not orcish. Dwarven. A roar, full of rage and pain. Borin immediately raised his sword. "Go!"

They ran as fast as their heavy boots would allow. The stone giants followed with powerful strides. The hall opened, and a gruesome sight unfolded before them.

Two massive orc hordes battled the last defenders of Shimmering Rock. Dwarves with shattered shields stood in a semicircular formation, wedged against a half-collapsed wall. Above them loomed the doors to the Great Throne Hall – half-destroyed, but still standing. The defenders were exhausted, covered in blood, but unbroken. One of them was roaring when an orc with a heavy club tried to bring him down.

But the orc never got the chance.

A stone giant struck out of nowhere – a single, colossal blow that pulverized the orc and several others along with it. The dwarves of the defense stared, open-mouthed.

"Byrak!" shouted one of the defenders. "By the ancestors – reinforcements!"

"Royal help!" shouted another. "THE MOUNTAIN HAS NOT FORGOTTEN US!"

Borin stepped forward, lightsaber and hammer in hand. The orcs, seeing this new enemy, froze. Some roared in fury and charged forward. Others began to retreat. The orc horde was large—but not large enough.

"Form up!" Borin shouted. "We're driving a wedge!"

Karim charged forward, letting out a war cry that froze the blood of every orc. Aldrik followed, Kaidra beside him, and the Iron Brothers formed a bulwark of steel that crashed into the surprised orcs like a tidal wave.

Borin leaped between two enemies, his lightsaber slicing through one axe, his hammer the other. The blow was so powerful that the orc flew two meters through the air and lay motionless. Where the hammer struck, not only bones broke—the will of his enemies was shattered.

The dwarves of Shimmerfels found renewed courage. They joined the battle, and soon a mighty, unstoppable circle of dwarven steel formed, pushing back the orcs.

The stone giants now joined the fray – with slow but devastating blows. Each strike was an earthquake, each step an unstoppable act of destruction. Orcs were crushed beneath the rocky feet or sent flying like pebbles when struck.

But Borin suddenly sensed something else. A change in the mountain. A new sound. A distant but unmistakable beat – like a heart hammering against a vessel.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

"What is this?" Kaidra asked between two blows.

The Runemaster gripped his staff tighter and looked up at the Great Throne Hall. His face turned gray.

"Something... that shouldn't be there."

Borin continued fighting, but his gaze drifted upwards. And then he saw it – something moving in the shadows above the stairs to the throne hall. Something large. Something that

wasn't orcish. A gigantic silhouette, massive and crooked, made of unformed flesh and ancient stone.

A second original troll?

No. Something else. Something darker. Something the mountain itself had hidden.

"We must reach the throne hall," Borin said grimly. "Immediately."

Kaidra glanced at him briefly. "What did you see?"

"The beginning of what Graa'thuun truly wants," replied Borin.

The battle raged on – but Borin knew that the real fight was only just beginning.

The battle for the halls of Shimmerfels still raged, but the dwarves had turned the tide. The orcs were thrown into disarray, terrified by the stone giants, shaken by the return of the king's son, and by the sight of a hammer-bearer the likes of which the Underrealms had not seen for centuries. Borin moved through the chaos like a burning core of light and steel. Every movement of his sword, every swing of the ancient king's hammer carried weight—not only in the battle, but in the rock itself.

For with every blow, the mountain answered.

Its thunder rumbled behind the walls, through the halls, through the ancient rune tablets, as if recording every victory and every defeat. And the closer Borin came to the Great Throne Hall, the stronger this echo became, the heavier the mountain's rhythm weighed on his heart.

Kaidra fought close by his side, her hammer a wall of power. Aldrik and Karim split the front, pressing the orcs from both sides, virtually unstoppable. The remaining Iron Brothers formed a narrow but tight line, protecting the defenders' flanks. And behind them, the stone giants thundered—slowly but relentlessly, like a landslide rolling through a valley.

But Borin's gaze was fixed on only one thing.

The staircase to the Great Throne Hall.

Up there, hidden in the smoke and behind the shadows, something was moving. Something large. Something unnatural. Something that didn't belong to the orcs. The orcs themselves knew it. Many of them cast panicked glances upwards, as if fearing their own ally. Some shouted orders, others fled, stumbling over their dead comrades or ramming each other to clear a path.

The runemaster, who fought steadfastly despite his age and frailty, suddenly stopped. His staff trembled, and the runes on it flickered.

"Borin!" he cried, his voice strained to the breaking point. "The shadow behind the throne room... he is not an orc! He is... he is something ancient! Something that has slumbered for eons!"

"Graa'thuun?" gasped Karim.



"No!" The Runemaster shook his head vigorously. "Graa'thuun is bound! That up there... is his echo. A shard. Something he left behind before he was sealed!"

Another blow from the shadow creature caused the top step of the staircase to shatter.

Borin sensed it. The ancestral mark reacted violently. The hammer vibrated as if it recognized the enemy.

"We have to go up there," said Borin.

Aldrik laughed, even though blood was running down his eyes. "I thought you'd never ask!"

"The orcs are blocking the way!" Kaidra shouted.

"Then we'll clear them away," Karim growled.

Borin raised the hammer. A beam of light shot out of it, not bright like the sword, but deep and glowing, like the embers of an ancient forge.

The orcs hesitated. Some fell back. Others tried to duck.

"ZWEEEEEEERG!" roared a particularly large orc slayer – a last desperate attempt to save morale.

Borin started running.

The dwarves followed.

What followed was not an orderly exchange of blows—it was a storm. Borin's hammer struck the first orc so hard that the impact created a shockwave that hurled the enemies behind him to the ground. Kaidra hacked a path to his right, Aldrik to his left, and Karim almost danced between them, his axes flashing in the gloom. The Iron Brothers pressed forward, and the stone giants caused a panic the likes of which Shimmerfels had not seen for centuries.

The way to the stairs was clear.

"Borin, hurry!" Kaidra shouted. "We'll keep them down here!"

"Don't let them advance!" Aldrik yelled.

The rune master placed a hand on Borin's shoulder. "Up there... a truth awaits you that you must bear. No matter what you see – do not yield."

Borin nodded and ran up the stairs, two steps at a time. The light from his sword reflected off the black rocks, and the mountain's rumble accompanied him like a heartbeat that grew faster and faster.

He reached the top level.

And stopped.

The Great Throne Hall lay before him – utterly devastated. Pillars were cracked, the floor ripped open, runestones lay shattered like old bones. The once-mighty symbol of their people's power was now but a shadow of its former self.

And right in the middle stood the figure.

A massive body, half flesh, half shadow. A ribbed ribcage that rose and fell unnaturally. Arms like twisted roots. A skull that hovered in the air as if held by an invisible force. The thing was large—not as gigantic as a primeval troll, but large enough to plant fear in any heart. Its eyes burned red and empty at the same time, as if they were windows into an endless, sick darkness.

A shard of Graa'thuun.

The shadow slowly turned towards Borin.

"You..." growled a voice that didn't come from the mouth, but from the stone itself. "You carry... the hammer..."

Borin raised both weapons. "And I will use it."

The shadow laughed. Not a normal laugh – more like a rip. A break. A clanging through the soul.

"The mountain... has chosen you. But it doesn't know... what you are."

"I am Borin, son of the Deep Realms."

"You are... part of Him."

The ancestral mark burned painfully.

Borin tensed up.

"Graa'thuun... has touched you."

It was a blow to the heart. A sentence as heavy as a boulder.

"Lie," said Borin. But his voice trembled.

"You... woke him up."

"NO!"

Borin stormed forward.

The blow struck the shadow squarely in the chest.

And the battle in the throne room began.

## Blood on the ore

The blow echoed like a thunderclap through the Great Throne Hall. Borin's hammer struck the shadowy body with full force, and for a moment he thought the entire room would shatter into light. A blinding flicker flashed across the hall's walls, ancient runes blazing and dying away as if they were ancient eyes desperately trying to remember the enemy they beheld. But the shadow only took a step back—as if the hammer had been nothing more than a gentle breeze, merely rippling its pitch-black, semi-corporeal form.

Borin gritted his teeth, leaped forward instantly, and unleashed his lightsaber, its blade slicing through the shadows like a line of pure starfire. The cut left a wound in the void, a gaping maw of darkness trembling within. But before Borin could even catch his breath, the wound closed—silently, effortlessly—as if his attack had never happened.

The shadow floated back, its movements not steps but shifts, distortions, torsions of the air itself. It had no fixed outline, no consistent flesh, but was a mixture of shaped mist and ancient veins of rock, pulsating like dark roots beneath the skin. The red eyes, glowing in its skull-like head, fixed Borin on it—and they were not empty. They were knowing. Perceiving.

“You strike... as if you were king,” growled the shadow’s voice, deep, echoing, as if the mountain itself spoke through a broken mouth. “But your crown is of blood... and your heart is of doubt...”

Borin gripped the hammer more tightly, his fingers clenching around its handle. “I will destroy you, splinter of misfortune. By the ancestors – you will perish today.”

The shadow twisted its shape as if smiling. It wasn't a laugh you could hear, but one you could feel. In your bones. In your teeth. In your marrow. The room grew colder. The flames along the runestones flickered, diminishing in size, as if the shadow were drawing the light from the flames themselves.

"You are like him," said the voice. "Like the one who bound me... like the one who betrayed me... like the one who feared me..."

Borin felt the words creep into him. He felt something inside him react. The ancestral mark burned hotter, as if it wanted to pierce his skin. The power within the hammer vibrated, as if it were bracing itself against something—or against someone.

Then the shadow broke loose.

He moved with a speed Borin could barely comprehend. Out of nowhere, an arm grew like a whipping root, black and sharp, and rushed toward him. Borin raised his hammer, blocked—and was still thrown backward. He crashed into a pillar, which splintered beneath his impact. Dust rained down on him, and his breath came in gasps.

But he stood up again.

He had to stand.

The throne hall wasn't just any place. It was the heart of the Underrealms. And blood—dwarven blood—dripped everywhere on the floor. Borin could smell it. He could feel it. There was no turning back.

"You are fighting against the mountain," murmured the shadow. "And you will break... like it..."

"I'm fighting for the mountain!" Borin roared, leaping forward again. The ground trembled beneath his boots.

This time he didn't aim for the center. He struck sideways, diagonally, an old blacksmithing technique used to split even the most stubborn ore. The hammer hit a rib-like structure on the shadow's chest—and this time something happened. The structure didn't break, but it reacted. The shadow recoiled, its form flickering as if losing its density for a fraction of a second.

Borin smelled it: fear. Not much, not clearly. But a hint.

"He can be hurt," he murmured.

And the mountain answered.

A deep, ancient rumble vibrated through the hall. The hammer in Borin's hand grew warm—warmer than before. The mountain gave him strength. Or perhaps it reminded him of an oath older than the enemies who had invaded.

Borin continued to surge forward.

The shadow hurled boulders at him, large shards that broke free from the ground as if it had driven an invisible arm into the rock. Borin dodged, rolled across the ground, ducked beneath a seething tentacle of darkness, and then sprang back to his feet.

The lightsaber sliced through the air like a star strike.

The hammer fell like a thunderclap.

This time he didn't strike flesh, not shadows, but one of the red eye sockets. The hammer pierced it – and for the first time, the creature truly screamed. No echo. No whisper. A shrill, piercing sound that made the walls tremble.

The pillars sang. The runes burned. The ground vibrated.

And Borin knew: He had struck something real. A core. A knot. A splinter of Graa'thuun's ancient will.

But it wasn't over.

Suddenly, something grabbed him. An arm of pure shadow shot out and encircled Borin's chest. The grip was icy cold, yet burning at the same time. He felt his breath steal, felt something burrow into his skin, deeper, down to his ribs.

"I'M GOING TO TAKE YOU..." whispered the voice, now directly in his head. "YOU... belong... to me..."

The ancestral mark now burned like liquid metal.

Borin screamed – not from pain, but from defiance.

"I BELONG TO THE MOUNTAIN!"

With a final burst of strength, he yanked the hammer up, swung it upwards – and struck the shadow arm precisely where the darkness showed a trace of form. The blow tore the arm apart like smoke in a storm. Borin fell to the ground, gasping, but free.

The shadow screamed again. Its body contorted, losing its humanoid form, becoming a mass of wildly proliferating roots, edges, and broken veins that clung to the walls.

Borin was standing again.

Slowly. With firm steps. The hammer glowed. The sword burned. His eyes were determined.

"Come on," Borin whispered. "I'm not finished."

The shadow didn't answer. It simply threw itself at him.

And the real battle in the throne room began.

The shadow hurled itself at Borin in a chaotic mass of black veins and shimmering fragments. Its form was unstable, a pulsating chaos of darkness that reformed with every blow. Borin dodged sideways, his boots sliding across the cracked stone floor, the hammer vibrating in his hand like a burning sun. The shadow ripped a chunk of rock from the wall and hurled it at him. The boulder was large enough to break a dwarf in two, but Borin raised the hammer and shattered it in mid-air. Shards rained down around him like razor-sharp sparks.

The lightsaber in his other hand hurled silver lines into the air, each cut leaving a bright scar on his shadow body. But the wounds did not last long. The shard of Graa'thuun, that ancient echo of the shadow god, regenerated like smoke slipping through closed fingers.

Borin felt the heat of the hammer creep up his arm, the ancestral mark throbbing and burning more intensely with each blow. He ignored the pain. He couldn't stop. He mustn't. The voices of his ancestors mingled with his heartbeat. He heard whispers in the stone, murmurs behind the pillars, a deep rumble, as if the mountain itself were urging him on.

"Borin..." A soft, warm whisper that seemed to come from the rock.

He recognized the voice.

His father.

The memory was clear and sharp, like freshly forged steel. A faint shadow, but a good one. He suddenly felt the hammer lighter in his hand, as if someone were carrying his weight.

The dark splinter noticed it.

"HE... helps you," growled the shadow, its body contorting into waves of pus and blackness. "HE once bound me... and HE will now corrupt you..."

Borin took a deep, determined breath. "My father was king. And I will be king, whether you like it or not."

The shadow screamed, this time not with one voice, but with many. A chorus of pain-distorted souls, of old, broken warriors, of those withered in Graa'thuun's grip. The screams struck Borin's mind, trying to pierce him, to weaken him, to make him lay down his weapons.

But Borin was certain.

He roared back.

The fight erupted again.

Borin charged forward, slicing the lightsaber through the shadow core in an upward, slicing motion. The blade caught. Something inside the shard resisted, like a knot of twisted ore. The shadow suddenly seized the sword, its fingers sliding over the blade as if alive. The light flickered.

"You can't hold a light," Borin growled.

But the shadow did it. He held the sword tightly. And squeezed.

The light became dimmer.

The blade began to tremble.

Borin knew: If the shadow breaks the sword, it breaks a part of Borin's soul with it.

So he let go.

The sudden loss of resistance threw the shadow off balance. At that moment, Borin pulled back the hammer, tensed the muscles of his back, and struck with the full force of the mountain.

The hammer hit the core – and this time it penetrated.

A wild, pulsating torrent of light erupted. The shadowy body split open, darkness ripped open like material blackness, shattering into tatters. The entire room vibrated. The walls trembled. The floor heaved beneath Borin's feet.

The shadow screamed — not in anger, but in pain.

"YOU... ARE... NOT... WORTHY...!"

“Yes,” said Borin with a calmness that surprised even him. “I am Borin, son of Tharim. Heir to the Deep Throne. Bearer of the King’s Hammer. And I am worthy—more than you ever were.”

The shadow shrank, its form condensed and became clearer. The shard formed a massive arm, then a second, then a distorted face resembling that of an old dwarf king—but consumed, corroded, perverted.

"You are weak," growled the shadow. "Your empire is rotten. Your throne is falling. Your time is over..."

“Our time will only begin again,” Borin replied, “when you are destroyed.”

The shadow rose to its full height, at least five times that of a dwarf. Its body was now more matter than mist, a grotesque statue of deformed bone and dark crystal. It flung its arms apart—and the throne room screamed with it.

The runes on the walls flickered, some burst. One of the pillars cracked and crashed to the ground. Dust swirled up like a storm.

Borin was thrown backward. He rolled, braced himself, reached for the hammer — but suddenly someone was standing next to him.

Kaidra.

Covered in blood, but with burning eyes.

"I won't let you fight alone, Borin," she said, panting.

Aldrik came charging up as well. One eye was swollen, his armor completely shattered, but he was smiling. "That damned mountain might fall on our heads, but I'd rather be here than down there with the orcs."

Karim laughed, even though he was badly injured. "If we die, then at least let it be epic."

Darrim stood next to Borin, raised his shield, and nodded. "We stand with you."

The shadow turned its gaze towards the dwarves.

"You want to die... together...?"

Borin raised the hammer. The lightsaber returned to his hand like a faithful dog. The ancestral mark burned in white fire.

“No,” said Borin. “We are alive. Together. And you will fall.”

Then he started running.

The others followed.

And the second battle for the throne room began.

The ground trembled beneath the dwarves' footsteps as Borin and his companions charged together toward the shadow. The creature loomed over them like a nightmare from long-forgotten ages, its form constantly shifting: half skeletal skeleton, half living darkness, writhing in grotesque movements. Its red eyes were now two smoldering clefts in a skull that had never belonged to a mortal creature.

The throne hall, once the heart of the empire, was barely recognizable. Fragments of ancient runestones lay scattered on the floor like shattered memories. Pillars were cracked and leaned precariously, while clouds of dust drifted from the ceiling. The mountain itself seemed to breathe—heavily, deeply, and with tension.

When Borin struck the first blow, it wasn't just the hammer that hit—it was the will of the entire people.

The blow crashed against the shadow's chest. For a moment, the world seemed to stand still. The tremor was like the roar of a forge as old as the mountain itself. The shadow arched back, its form undulating, black veins ripping open like whips of darkness.

But he did not fall.

He lunged forward, faster than an arrow. An arm of cursed darkness reached for Borin. Kaidra thrust herself between them, slamming her hammer with all her might against the whipping limb, but the force of the impact hurled her across the hall. She crashed to the floor, skidding over blood and stone fragments, and lay gasping for breath.

“KAIDRA!” Aldrik shouted.

The shadow swirled around, reaching for Aldrik, but Karim leaped in between. With a roaring cry, he brought both axes down on the shadow's arm simultaneously. The blades did indeed penetrate—tearing through a layer of black echo, making the darkness hiss like boiling pitch.

But the shadow laughed.

A soundless, room-filling laugh that made the mountain tremble.

The darkness at the point of impact thickened, merged, and the arm was whole again.

"You are... little flames... in the storm..." growled the shadow. "And the storm... will extinguish you."

He unleashed a shockwave of pure darkness. It was invisible, but so powerful that it engulfed all the dwarves at once. Darrim was hurled against a pillar, his shield shattering on impact. Aldrik was knocked backward, losing his hammer. Karim was spun around and fell heavily. Kaidra coughed and struggled to her feet, blood streaming from her nose.

Only Borin remained standing.

The hammer glowed. The lightsaber burned. The ancestral mark pulsed with the power of a thousand years.

The shadow growled: "You defy me..."



“I am not defying you,” said Borin. “I am ending you.”

He strode forward.

The shadow shrank everything he was. His arms became spears of cursed stone. Veins shot from his stomach like whips. His skull warped, growing longer, sharper, as if stirred within him by a hunger that could never be satisfied.

Borin ran.

The shadow collided with him.

The first blow—a whipping tentacle—sliced through the air. Borin ducked, rolled beneath the attack, and swung his lightsaber in an upward arc. The blade's silver flame sliced through three of the dark veins, shattering them like thin smoke.

The second attack—a spear of black bone—aimed at his chest. Borin raised his hammer and deflected the blow. The spear splintered against the ancient metal, sending small sparks of black light flying through the hall.

The third attack — the skull itself — raced towards Borin like a projectile.

“NOW!” Borin shouted.

The dwarves answered.

Kaidra leaped forward with a hoarse cry and struck the Shadow's left side. Karim threw one of his axes, which sank deep into the Shadow's right flank. Aldrik, who had gotten to his feet, charged ahead with his shoulder armor and rammed the Shadow to knock him off balance.

The shadow stumbled.

Just one breath.

But it was enough.

Borin jumped higher than he had ever jumped before.

He felt the hammer vibrate, as if an ancient soul had awakened within him. The ancestral mark burned like sunlight on bare skin. The mountain itself seemed to bear the weight of his leap.

“FOR THE THRONE!” Borin roared.

The hammer struck.

Not on the outside. Not in any of the blackish limbs.

But directly into the core.

To that point in the center of the shadow, where all light was swallowed. The source of his power. The shard. The remnant of Graa'thuun's ancient presence.

The impact was...like a mountain breaking.

A scream rang out. A scream that not only echoed but threatened to tear the room apart. The walls trembled. The hall shook. Stones cracked, floor tiles shattered, and the air seemed to flicker within itself.

Black light – thicker than smoke – streamed from the wound as if it were blood. The shadow writhed, grasped, sought purchase, but found none.

“NOOOOO...!” shrieked the voice.

“YOUR TIME IS OVER!” Borin shouted and kept pushing.

The hammer glowed white.

The lightsaber burned silver.

And in a final, all-consuming scream, the shadow body burst in a massive explosion of dark dust and red sparks of light.

The wave hurled Borin back several meters, threw him to the ground, and sent his helmet rolling across the hall. But he got up again. Slowly, breathing heavily.

It was quiet.

It was so quiet that even the dwarves didn't speak immediately.

Then Kaidra stepped forward, blood on her forehead, the hammer still firmly in her hand.

"Is it... over?" she whispered.

Borin slowly raised the king's hammer.

"No," he said. "That was just a splinter."

He looked at the shattered hall, the burned runes, the old building that bled like a wound.

“The real enemy,” Borin murmured, “sleeps deeper.”

And the mountain responded with a deep rumble.

A sign.

A promise.

And a warning.

## The broken banner

The silence after the Shadow's destruction was so profound it seemed almost unnatural. The dust from the explosion still hung in the air like a fine, gray mist, swallowing the light from the few remaining rune torches. The Great Throne Hall resembled a body that had just survived a heart attack: trembling, weakened, but still alive. The dwarves stood scattered, panting, wounded, but on their feet—and the stone giants who had waited in the lower halls were now visible in the archways, their glowing eyes silently fixed on the center of the hall.

Borin was standing there.

With the king's hammer in one hand, the lightsaber in the other. Sweat and dust covered his face, blood dripped from one cheek, a cut above his brow left him half-blind. Yet his posture was upright, his gaze steady. The shadow was defeated—this one splinter of the ancient enemy—but Borin knew this was not a final triumph.

It was a warning.

Aldrik approached him, leaning heavily on his hammer, which bore a large dent from one of the Shadow's blows. "Borin... if that thing was only a splinter... what, in the name of all halls, sleeps even deeper?"

Karim, who had hastily bandaged a shoulder injury with a torn Orkum cloak, sighed. "I don't feel like finding out. But you won't leave us a choice, will you?"

Kaidra limped closer, her hammer dragging on the ground. Half her armor was shattered, but her eyes burned. "We stand with you, Borin. Wherever you go, we'll go. But first... we should check on the survivors. And the throne."

The throne.

Borin slowly turned around.

Although the hall was devastated, it still stood—at least partially. The great, black ore throne was enshrined in the hall's furthest niche, built from a single, massive vein of ore, unearthed and intricately shaped centuries ago. Now, part of the back had chipped away, the armrests were cracked, and the banner that had once hung proudly above it lay torn on the floor. The fabric, once deep red with silver runes, was bloodstained and partially burned.

The Banner of the Deep Realms.

The banner of his ancestors.

Borin approached it slowly. Each step echoed through the ruined hall, and it seemed to him as if the floor beneath him was holding its breath. He picked up the banner, turning it over in his hands. The material was coarse and old, made from the yarn that the first kings had woven from gold threads and dark wool. Now it was torn in two large pieces, the runic structure broken. The symbolism was unmistakable.

The ancestors had lost their throne. And now the orcs had desecrated it once again.

Kaidra looked at him as she wiped the dust from her face. "It... could be repaired."

"You can sew a banner," Borin murmured. "But what it represents... that has to be earned anew."

The runemaster approached, bleeding slightly but standing upright. His gray beard was caked with soot and dust. He placed a hand on Borin's shoulder, the contact as heavy as stone. "The mountain has tested you... and it is not yet finished, Borin. This was only the first wound that must heal."

Borin remained silent. The banner in his hands. His heart heavy as an anvil.

"King...?" Aldrik said cautiously.

Borin turned and looked at the dwarves. Many were injured. Some lay dead. The hall was a mass grave of blood, steel, and shattered memories. And yet... they stood. They had survived.

He took a deep breath.

"We will not throw away the banner," he said quietly. "We will carry it—torn as it is. So that every dwarf, every orc, every creature in the depths and above knows..."

He lifted the two halves of the banner. The shattered legacy. The damaged symbol of a broken empire.

"...that we have fallen." He raised the hammer. The ancestral mark glowed brightly. The flames of the rune lights reflected in his eyes.

"But WE STAND AGAIN!"

A deep, powerful echo rose from the hall. The dwarves roared their war cry, their voices reverberating against the broken walls:

"STAND! STAND! STAND!"

Even the stone giants slightly inclined their heads.

Borin carefully wrapped the two halves of the banner together. "We must secure the gates. Clear the corridors. Treat the wounded. And..." He glanced at the throne. A dark, silent place filled with memories and responsibility. "...we must honor our dead."

Karim nodded. "And then what?"

Borin answered without hesitation:

"Then we'll go deeper."

The Runemaster inhaled sharply. "The enemy sleeps down there, Borin. The ancient realms... the Forgotten Tunnels... no one has been there for centuries."

"That's why we have to leave," said Borin. "Because the enemy is counting on exactly that."

A low rumbling rippled through the stone giants. One of the larger ones moved forward, bent down to Borin, and spoke in his deep, rolling language – a language that sounded like rock forming under pressure.

The rune master translated: “He says... they are going with you. They have smelled the shadow. They know that more is to come.”

Borin looked at the giant and nodded. "Then we'll go together."

But before he could take a step, the mountain trembled again. This time not by an enemy. Not by dark magic.

But through something that awoke deep below.

A dull thud. A second. A third.

Each one stronger than the last.

The runemaster turned pale. "Borin... that's not a shadow. That's... that's something living."

"What is awakening down there?" Kaidra asked tensely.

The floor vibrated. Dust trickled from the ceiling. An ancient rune suddenly began to glow.

Borin gripped the hammer and sword more firmly.

“Something,” he said quietly, “knows that we are coming.”

The tremors did not cease. They came at regular intervals, deep, thunderous, like the beating of a colossal heart—but no heart was so large that its pulse could pierce the stone of an entire mountain. The dwarves paused, the guards looked around uneasily, the wounded held their breath. The halls listened. The mountain listened. And whatever slept in secret down there seemed to writhe from its ancient dream.

Borin felt his fingers tighten around the hammer, as if reacting instinctively to the danger. The ancestral mark on his chest no longer burned hot, but deep and heavy, like glowing embers that refused to go out. The shadow had been destroyed—but the echo of its darkness still vibrated in the stone.

Kaidra stepped beside him, the hammer slung over her shoulder. Her armor was damaged, a shoulder plate dented, blood trickling from a wound on her arm, yet she stood upright. "That... down there," she murmured, "doesn't sound like a troll. Or a shadow."

Aldrik leaned heavily on his hammer, his breastplate half torn to shreds. "If this is another monster... I hope it at least played the decency card and is still tired."

Karim laughed hoarsely. "Or hungry."

The runemaster raised his staff and closed his eyes. Runes on his cloak shimmered as if invisible light were rising within them. He took a deep breath, and an expression of profound

concern settled on his face. "That which awakens down there... is no troll, no orc, no shadow. It is... ancient. Far older than Graa'thuun's Shard. Far older than the Throne itself."

Borin turned to him. "How old?"

The runemaster opened his eyes – and they were moist, glistening, as if he had discovered a truth he would rather have forgotten. "As old as the first halls. Perhaps older. The stories speak of beings who lived in the deepest layers of the mountain before the dwarves even hewn the first stone."

"Myths," Karim murmured.

"No," replied the rune master. "History so old that it has become legend."

Borin thought of the duty that lay before him. Of the torn banner. Of the dead lying everywhere in the halls. He looked at the guards, the survivors, the wounded, leaning against each other but still trying to maintain their composure. They were all looking at him. They were all waiting for him to decide what would happen next.

"We're going deeper," Borin finally said.

A few dwarves audibly recoiled in shock. Others simply nodded, knowing there was no alternative.

"We need to know what's awakening down there," Borin continued. "And we need to stop it before it comes here. We've only just reclaimed Shimmerfels. We won't lose it again."

Kaidra placed a hand on his shoulder. "We'll follow you. But first we need to get the wounded to safety. And we need supplies."

Aldrik pointed towards the north hall. "The forge there is still intact. We can repair weapons and reinforce equipment."

Karim grinned. "And maybe we'll even find a barrel of beer that the orcs didn't get."

The rune master raised his hand. "Before you do anything... listen."

The hall fell silent.

The floor vibrated.

But this time... it was different.

Not just a blow. But a scratch. A scraping. A dull splintering, as if something gigantic were scraping from the other side of a rock face.

"That thing is coming up," Kaidra whispered.

"And fast," Aldrik added.

Borin knew they didn't have much time.

"Kaidra, you take a troop and bring the wounded to the upper level of the East Gallery. The walls are thick there, and the passages are narrow – perfect for defense."

"Understood."

"Aldrik, Karim – bring all usable weapons and tools from the forges here. We're building a second line of defense."

"Will be done."

"Darrim, you take charge of the border guards. Secure the west gate in case something comes from there. Block the narrow passages with barricades."

"Yes indeed!"

The rune master nodded to Borin. "And you?"

Borin swung the hammer over his shoulder. "I'll go first."

The runes on the walls flickered.

The mountain answered.

The next tremor was so violent that it rained dust from the ceiling. The old ore vein in the ground pulsated as if something living flowed within it.

The runemaster pointed tremblingly towards the center of the hall. "Borin... the Deep Halls open."

The floor cracked.

A large, ancient runic gate, sealed for centuries, began to glow. Dust swirled. Ancient mechanisms turned. Huge gears, long since rusted away, moved. Yet they still functioned – as if they had been waiting for this moment.

The tremor intensified.

Kaidra grabbed Borin's arm. "Whatever is down there... do you really want to go towards it? Alone?"

Borin shook his head. "I'm not going alone."

He looked at the stone giant that rose behind him like a living mountain.

The creature nodded slowly.

Then it happened.

With a deafening crash, the gate to the Deep Halls shattered. Dark rock was hurled upwards, a surge of hot, earthy air poured out. A light, deep red like molten stone, flickered in the darkness. And a sound rose up, so deep and ancient that it made the ground tremble:

One breath.

A mighty breath from an ancient being.

Kaidra whispered: "By the ancestors..."

Aldrik: "What... is this?"

The Rune Master: "Something that should never have been allowed to awaken again."

Borin raised a hammer and a sword.

"It has awakened," he said. "And we will send it back."

The runic gate of the Deep Halls trembled as immense forces worked deep within the darkness. Dust trickled from the ceiling, the floor vibrated beneath the dwarves' boots, and the heat radiating from the chasm felt like the breath of an ancient fire that should never have been awakened. Borin stood before it, hammer and luminous blade raised, the tattered banner of the realm draped over his shoulder like a bloodied cloth. His gaze was hard, resolute, but not unwavering. The mountain tested his resolve.

The dwarves behind him regrouped, despite their exhaustion, broken bones, and tattered armor. Kaidra, her face covered in soot and blood, gripped her hammer tightly. Aldrik leaned against a pillar, panting heavily, but standing. Karim looked as scarred as the mountain itself, yet his axes gleamed dangerously. Darrim propped himself up on his half-destroyed shield, looking as if he would rather fall dead than retreat. And above them loomed the stone giants—silent, watchful, immense.

Another jolt ran through the gaping gate. The rock at the edges tore further open, as if an invisible being from within were trying to shatter the walls. Red lines glowed in the stone, like veins of molten lava.

"Borin..." whispered the runemaster, his voice trembling with both fear and awe. "This is no animal. No troll. No shadow. This... is a guardian."

Borin turned briefly to him. "A guard? What kind?"

"Legends call them the Deep Forge. Creatures of stone and fire, created in the earliest days when the ancestors themselves walked through this mountain." The Runemaster lowered his head. "They were left behind to guard the deepest secrets... and to destroy anyone who came too close."

Borin narrowed his eyes. "Or anyone Graa'thuun lures to them..."

The ground shook more violently. Stones rained down. One of the younger dwarves stumbled, then scrambled to his feet. The air was thick with heat and dust.

"They don't awaken without reason," the rune master said darkly. "Something has called them."



Borin knew what. The splinter he had destroyed above was merely an echo. Something deep, ancient, and alien had stirred it. And this something stirred now, sensing that someone was entering the halls with the king's hammer—someone whom the mountain had recognized as the heir to its power.

A final jolt. A thunderclap.

Then the gate finally broke open.

A wave of red light and burning air shot out, throwing dust and rubble into the hall. Dwarves ducked. The stone giants held their arms protectively over their faces. Borin braced himself against the ground and remained standing, even when the initial force nearly knocked him down.

He saw it as the light faded.

From the darkness of the deep chambers, a colossal shadow crept upward. First, two glowing eyes. Then a head of lava rock, shaped like an ancient helmet, pulsating with fire. A chest of layers of stone slabs, with glowing fissures between them where magma flowed. Arms as large as blacksmith's hammers, hands like blocks. The ground melted beneath his steps.

A deep smith.

A being created by the ancestors themselves – long before the time of kings.

It raised its head. And exhaled.

A wave of glowing ash swept across the hall.

“SHIELDS!” Darrim roared.

The dwarves ducked behind their shields. Sparks lashed the metal like a burning storm. Kaidra stood protectively in front of two younger warriors. Karim pressed his shield deep into the ground, his teeth bared with exertion.

Borin stood firm. The hammer vibrated. The sword burned brighter, as if sensing the ancient enemy.

The Deepsmith fully straightened. Now his full size was visible – twice as tall as a stone giant, a walking mountain of fire and stone. He stared down at Borin as if testing him. Then a voice rang out.

It wasn't a sound. It was a rumble. An earthquake that formed words.

"WHO CARRIES... THE OLD KING'S HAMMER?"

Borin stepped forward. "I. Borin, son of Tharim. Heir to the Deep Throne."

The deep-casting smith's eyes flickered.

"THE THRONE IS BROKEN. THE BANNER IS TORN. THE MOUNTAIN IS WOUNDED."

Borin raised the hammer. "That's why I'm here. To heal him."

A deep rumble ran through the being. "THE DEEPS... RECOGNIZE THE CARRIER."

Kaidra whispered: "He... acknowledges you?"

The rune master shook his head. "No. He's testing him."

Borin sensed what was coming.

The blacksmith raised his arm.

The blow hit like a thunderclap.

A red-hot rock fist hurtled towards Borin. Borin raised both weapons, crossing his sword and hammer. The force was so immense that the ground beneath his feet shattered. He was thrown backward, rolled across the stone floor, and landed on a cracked rune pedestal. The air was knocked from his chest.

"BORIN!" Kaidra shouted.

He got up again.

The Deep Forger stepped forward, each movement an earthquake. Lava dripped from his veins and burned itself into the ground.

"SHOW... THAT YOU ARE WORTHY."

Borin raised the hammer. The mountain vibrated within him. The ancestral mark burned. The voices of his ancestors drifted through the hall.

He ran.

The dwarves screamed. The runemaster raised his staff as if he wanted to ask the mountain itself for help.

The deep smith struck again.

Borin jumped.

The blow shattered the ground where he had just been standing. A wave of lava flowed out.

Borin drew his lightsaber. A silver arc sliced through the air, striking one of the glowing cracks on the giant's arm. The Deepsmith roared—a sound like shattering rock.

"Now!" Borin shouted. "Flank him!"

Karim and Aldrik charged forward. Kaidra leaped like a bolt of lightning onto a rocky ledge and from there onto the giant's back. She hammered with all her might on one of the cracks. The stone giants themselves followed, grabbed the Deepsmith's legs, and tried to hold him down.

It wasn't a battle. It was a storm of fire, stone, and steel.

But the deep-casting smith was not malicious.

He checked.

And Borin understood.

If he wanted to survive, he had to use the hammer — not just as a weapon.

But as a symbol.

He ran forward, high above the falling boulders, jumped over a lava field, and finally pushed off from the broken base of an ancient runic shield.

And then – mid-flight – he wielded the hammer in both hands.

"FOR THE DEEP THRONE!"

The hammer crashed onto the chest of the blacksmith.

A light broke forth. Bright as a star, warm as the forge fires of the ancestors.

The deep smith froze.

Then he slowly sank to one knee.

The lava subsided. The rumbling fell silent.

And he spoke – more quietly, more clearly.

"YOU ARE... THE WORTHY HEIR."

Borin was breathing heavily.

The deep smith lowered his head.

"THE WAY... DOWNWARDS... IS OPEN TO YOU."

He pointed to the open deep halls.

A new shadow flickered deep in the darkness.

Not one.

Many.

Borin turned to his companions.

“We are moving on,” he said gruffly. “Now the real war begins.”

## The Path into the Forgotten Tunnels

The air that flowed from the tunnel was unlike anything Borin had ever breathed. It was old. Not just ancient—so old that it tasted of times that existed only as whispers, even in dwarven legends. The heat of the Deepforge gave way here to a cool, almost damp breath. The stone breathed. The ground pulsed slightly, as if currents of energy, no one could decipher anymore, flowed through the mountain's deepest roots.

Borin stood at the entrance to the Forgotten Tunnels, weapons in hand, the tattered banner draped over his shoulder like a dark omen. Kaidra, Karim, Aldrik, and Darrim stood behind him. The stone giants formed a second, formidable line, and even they seemed smaller before the oppressive blackness that stretched out before them.

“This is the place that even the ancestors have not explained,” said the rune master, running his trembling hand over the wall. “The oldest chronicles call it not a tunnel, but an abyss. A place where the mountain itself rests within itself—and dreams.”

Aldrik raised an eyebrow. “If that's the mountain's dream, I hope it falls asleep again soon.”

Karim snorted. “I'd prefer a sleeping mountain to that thing down there trying to wake up.”

Kaidra placed her hand on Borin's shoulder. “We're ready. Just say the word.”

But Borin said nothing. He felt the mountain. Not just the walls, the floor, the air—he felt the mountain within him, like a part of his blood. The ancestral mark burned warmly, not as a warning, but as a reminder. The hammer vibrated gently, as if guiding its wielder. The lightsaber felt heavier than before, as if it bore the weight of all who had ever fought against the darkness.

Then, deep in the tunnel, he heard it:

A whisper.

Not loud. Not threatening.

A whisper like... voices.

The voices under the mountain.

“They are expecting us,” Borin said softly. “The ancestors. Or their echo.”

The Runemaster nodded slowly. “The Forgotten Tunnels are not empty. They never were. They were merely... sealed off. Not for enemies. For us.”

"Why for us?" Kaidra asked cautiously.

"Because some truths must remain buried," replied the runemaster. "And because some horrors only lie dormant as long as no dwarf looks upon them."

Borin raised the hammer. "Now we'll take a look."

He took the first step.

The darkness swallowed the torchlight almost instantly. Only the hammer and lightsaber managed to cast thin lines of silver and gold glow into the tunnel. The ground was smooth, but unworked. No chisel marks. No ancient runes. It was as if the mountain itself had carved this path.

After a few dozen steps, the tunnel opened into a wide, natural hall. Lichens, glowing like shimmering spores, covered the walls. Water dripped from the ceilings, but the dripping echoed strangely distorted, as if the echoes were lost in the stone.

"This is... beautiful," Kaidra murmured.

"And wrong," said the rune master. "No light should exist down here."

Karim knelt and touched the lichen. "What is this? It glows like moonfire."

The rune master did not answer, for at that moment the ground vibrated.

Lightly at first. Then harder.

A dull, distant thud.

Then a second one.

Then a long, deep growl – a sound such as no animal or orc had ever produced.

The stone giants tensed. The largest among them began to move, its eyes glowing in warning.

"It's coming," he said in his grating, stony language.

The rune master translated: "The Guardian of the Deep... not the first. One of many."

Borin exhaled slowly. "Then the mountain will test us again."

But this time it was different.

A gust of wind came out of the darkness. But it wasn't wind—it was... breath. Borin could smell it: cold, dust, ancient dampness, as if a tomb were being opened. Then a shadow formed in the tunnel.

Not big. Not gigantic. But wrong.

A creature crawled out – a gangly thing made of stone segments and twisted bones, its eyes glowing like two white coals. It was not a troll. Not an orc. Not even a known creature.

"A deep-sea scout," gasped the runemaster. "A creature of the deep, created for observation. But when one appears... the others follow."

The scout opened his mouth.

A scream erupted, high-pitched, sharp, unbearable – a cry that ripped through the tunnel like a knife.

Darrim pressed his hands over his ears. "What is he shouting?!"

"He is not calling us," said Borin. "He is calling... what comes behind him."

The scout jumped.

Borin struck.

One single hammer blow – and the spy exploded in a cloud of black dust.

But his reputation remained in stone.

And out of the darkness, something began to answer.

Something heavy. Something enormous. Something that made the tunnels so old that even the mountain wanted to forget them.

The shadows moved.

Several.

Borin raised his weapons.

"Ready," he said. "Everyone."

For now began the true journey into the Forgotten Tunnels.

The Deep-Sighted Man's cry still echoed in the dwarves' bones, even after Borin's hammer had shattered him into dust. The cry had been a cry downwards—deep into those ancient layers of the mountain that neither runes nor legends could fully describe. The air vibrated as if the mountain itself were answering. It was not an echo. It was a reply. A deep, rumbling sound that seemed to rise from the very foundations of the world.

Borin knew there was no turning back now.

The Forgotten Tunnels were awake.

Kaidra stepped beside him, her hammer clutched tightly. Her gaze was intense, yet fearless. The light from the lichen cast a pale greenish glow across her features, making the deep

shadows of her wounds appear like war paint. "Whatever this is," she whispered, "it's getting closer."

"More than one," murmured Karim, raising his axes and scanning the darkness. "Do you hear that? Something big is moving. And faster than I had hoped."

Aldrik spat on the ground. "Big, small, old, new – it's all the same to me. The main thing is that it bleeds when I hit it."

"If it even has blood," Darrim whispered, raising his shield as if it could protect him from things that were not of this world.

The stone giants stood motionless, like living pillars, yet their eyes glowed brightly. The largest of them leaned forward slightly, placed a hand on the ground, and closed his eyes. His entire body vibrated gently, as if listening to the stone itself.

"He says," the rune master translated, "the depths are moving. They are restless. Something ancient is awakening. Something that has slept for a long... a very long time."

Borin stepped a few steps into the darkness, his hammer at his side, his lightsaber ready. He could hear the voices more clearly now. No more whispers—a chorus. A murmur from many throats that no longer existed. Words without language, yet full of meaning.

"The ancestors are speaking," said Borin.

"Or warn us," replied the rune master.

Suddenly the ground trembled violently. The lichen on the walls vanished instantly, as if someone had taken its life. Darkness swallowed the group. Only Borin's weapons still provided light – a silver crown and a golden core that illuminated the tunnel for only a few steps.

"Raise your signs," Borin ordered.

No sooner had he spoken than a sound erupted from the darkness – a scraping, a crashing, a deep, guttural gasp. It was not a single sound, but several, layered on top of each other like the voices of a distorted choir.

A figure emerged.

Then a second one.

Then five.

Then ten.

The Deep Seekers had returned. But these were not like the first creature Borin had slain. These were larger, more massive, their bodies composed of longer segments, with places where magma pulsed through the cracks. Their eyes were gleaming white, and their teeth—if they could be called that—were made of broken slabs of stone.

The dwarves instinctively grabbed the weapons.

The depth sounders didn't come any closer. They just stared.

“Why aren't they attacking?” Kaidra asked.

The runemaster swallowed. “They didn't come to fight. They came to see us.”

“To be seen?” Karim repeated.

“To test,” the runemaster corrected, pale. “They are testing whether we are worthy... or whether they should consider us intruders.”

Aldrik raised a hammer. “I feel tested enough.”

Borin took a step forward. The scouts did not move.

“We are not your enemies,” said Borin. “We are seeking the heart of the deep. We have come to protect the mountain.”

The creatures didn't move—until one of them tilted its head and touched the ground. A crack briefly opened in the wall, as if something was pushing against it from within. A sound followed—deep, old, booming.

The most prominent scout withdrew.

And suddenly the others also began to slowly slide into the darkness.

Not fleeing. Not hostile. They retreated.

“They... are letting us pass,” Kaidra whispered in disbelief.

“No,” said the rune master. “They are warning us. They don't want to stand in the way when what lies behind them awakens.”

Another, much deeper sound vibrated through the tunnel.

“It's coming,” said Borin. “More on.”

They moved deeper inside.

The tunnels changed. The air became denser. The heat gave way to a strange cold that reminded Borin of ancient crypts.

The ground became uneven. In places, ancient symbols could be seen in the stone – not dwarven runes, but spirals, elongated signs and shapes that were neither language nor art, but... instinct.

“These symbols...” murmured the rune master. “The mountain itself formed them. Not with tools. With time.”



Borin suddenly stopped.

In front of them lay a precipice.

A huge, black chasm that opened like a wound in the middle of the mountain.

A single footbridge led across it.

Wide enough for a dwarf.

Not wide enough for a giant stone.

A wind blew from the abyss. A cold, ancient wind.

Borin stepped forward.

"Whatever is down there..." he said, "it wants us to move on."

"Or it wants to devour us," Aldrik growled.

"Maybe both," said Karim.

Kaidra took a deep breath. "Then we'll go."

But before anyone could step onto the footbridge, something rose from the abyss.

A light. A reddish pulsing.

One eye.

A single, enormous eye, as large as a gate, opened in the depths. The pupil was a maw of darkness, the conjunctiva glowed like molten stone.

She saw the creature.

And the mountain held its breath.

Borin raised the hammer. The ancestral mark burned. The lightsaber blazed.

"Now," he said quietly, "the real fight begins."

The eye in the depths stared down at her. No blinking, no flickering, only this uncanny, ancient consciousness, resting like a burning core in the darkness. The reddish glow settled like a veil over the abyss, and the air grew even heavier, denser, as if bearing the weight of something titanic. Borin stood petrified at the edge of the jetty, his hammer glowing dimly, as if sensing the presence of a being from a time when neither dwarves nor orcs nor any creature known to us in the present age had existed.

Kaidra took a step back. "That... is not a guardian. That is... something else."

The rune master, his eyes wide open, seemed younger for a moment—or simply overwhelmed by a realization his mind could scarcely bear. “This is not a being of flesh or stone. This is... consciousness. A spark of the mountain itself. A manifestation of its depths. It sees us.”

"So?" growled Aldrik. "What does it see? A few blood-spattered dwarves with frayed nerves?"

Karim snorted, but forced himself not to look away. "That thing has an eye as big as a hall. If it really is the mountain... then it sees more than we do."

The stone giant behind them made a deep sound, like a broken boulder. His words were heavy and slow, yet full of meaning. The rune master listened and translated:

"He says... the eye is part of the original waking. A fragment of the first consciousness described by the ancestors – 'The Gaze of the Deep Heart'. It has been asleep for eons. And it only wakes up... when the mountain is threatened."

Borin understood.

The mountain itself tested them.

"If it is part of the mountain," Borin said slowly, "then perhaps it is not our enemy."

But as he spoke the sentence, the abyss vibrated again. His eyes narrowed slightly, as if focusing. A gust of wind rose from the darkness—this time cold, but with a strange undertone, as if an ancient voice were drifting wordlessly through the air.

Kaidra moved closer to Borin. "It's... curious. Or angry."

“Both,” murmured the runemaster. “The mountain senses that we are carrying something that shouldn’t exist down here.” His gaze fell upon the hammer. “The king’s power. The ancestral fire. These two forces do not originate from the depths. They were forged by dwarves. The depths do not know them.”

The eye burned more intensely.

The footbridge beneath Borin's feet vibrated.

A voice, deep as the echo of a landslide, whispered in his head – not language, but pure, elemental thoughts.

**Who are you?**

Borin breathed heavily. "I am Borin. Heir to the Deep Throne. Bearer of the King's Hammer. Son of the Deep Realms."

The eye's thought responded immediately:

**You carry fire.**

**You carry light.**

**You wield power that is not mine.**

Borin slowly raised his hand, the hammer aloft, but not threateningly. "I carry it to protect the depths."

A break.

Then came the answer:

**You carry the power of those who betrayed me.  
You carry the embers of the forge that bound me.  
You bear the will of a king whose line...  
...I don't know.**

The ground trembled.

Kaidra shouted: "Borin! That thing doesn't like us!"

But Borin shook his head. "No. It... doesn't recognize us."

The eye widened.

**You are the children of the upper stone.  
You are the ones who divided us.  
They cut.  
They broke.**

The voice became deeper.

**You are the builders.  
And the destroyers.**

The mountain remembered. That was dangerous.

"What does it mean by 'separate'?" asked Aldrik.

The runemaster replied in a trembling voice: "The ancients... the first dwarves... they sealed the deep realms. Perhaps in doing so they... cut something off. Buried something."

The mountain rumbled again.

The eye narrowed to a slit.

Then the deep spoke:

**You are opening what remained closed.  
You are waking up what should be asleep.  
Why?  
Why are you coming?**

Borin knew this was the decisive moment. The mountain didn't ask for power. Not for weapons. Not for strength.

He asked for the truth.

Borin lowered the hammer, the lightsaber, the banner. He stepped forward a few paces, his voice firm yet respectful.

"Because the enemy who betrayed you has awakened again. Because the shadows are returning. Because Graa'thuun is stirring his shards. And because we – the children of the upper stone – cannot defeat him alone."

The eye widened.

The air became warmer.

**Graa'thuun...**

The thought was like an earthquake raging through the bowels of the mountain.

**The Destroyer.**

**The Whisperer.**

**The worm in the stone.**

The abyss trembled.

**Is he stirring again?**

"Yes," said Borin. "His splinters are awake. His servants roam the corridors. And we have recaptured Shimmerfels, but... we can feel it. It's getting worse. He's reaching for the Deep Throne."

A long, oppressive silence followed.

Then came the answer:

**The throne is broken.**

**The line is incomplete.**

**The wound is old.**

**But...**

The eye burned more intensely.

**You.**

**Bearer of the hammer.**

**You carry more than blood.**

Borin felt the ancestral mark burn. Hotter than ever before.

Kaidra gasped. "Borin... you're glowing."

Karim whispered: "The mountain sees him... really."

The eye's thought became clearer, stronger:

**You carry the memory of the stone.  
You bear the burden of kings.  
You carry... hope.**

A breath passed through the abyss, warm and old, not an attack – an affirmation.

**Then you should leave.  
The mountain allows it.  
The path opens up for you.**

The footbridge widened. The abyss calmed. The tunnel beyond became slightly brighter.

But then came the final thought:

**But know this, son of the upper stone:  
What you'll find below...  
...does not wish to be found.**

And the eye closed.

The darkness swallowed the abyss.

The path was open.

Borin raised the hammer.

"Go on," he said quietly.

"Now we are entering the true depths."

## **The Runeforge awakens**

The tunnel beyond the abyss led deeper than any dwarf could ever have imagined. Not because the path was particularly dangerous, but because it felt like descending not simply into the mountain, but into something living. Into something that breathed, whispered, dreamed, and was aware of her footsteps. Borin sensed the same whispers as before: the voices of the ancestors who rested beneath the mountain. But now they were not merely warnings or echoes. Now they seemed... more curious. Expectant, even.

The ground became smoother and crisscrossed with fine veins that glowed faintly in the light of his weapons. Kaidra touched one of the veins with her fingertips and immediately recoiled. "Warm," she murmured. "Like a heartbeat."

Karim nodded. "I can feel it too. It's pulsating. The whole tunnel is pulsating."

The rune master raised his staff, his voice trembling. "This is the energy of the mountain itself. Pure bedrock. The ancestors described it as 'the blood of the stone.' I never thought I would see it."

The path narrowed into a narrow passage. The stone giants had to duck, their massive bodies brushing against the walls, sparks flying from their stony shoulders. But not one giant complained. They walked in silence, as if they knew how sacred this place was.

After a few dozen steps, the tunnel opened again.

And before them lay a room that took their breath away.

A vast hall, larger than any forge ever built by dwarven hands. The floor was a single, gigantic slab of stone, inlaid with runes—runes not of dwarven origin. Ancient symbols, constantly shifting as if reshaping themselves as they were viewed. A network of glowing lines crisscrossed the space like the vascular system of a living organism.

But the most impressive thing was in the middle.

A blacksmith's shop.

But none like the ones above, none with a forge, anvil, and bellows. This was a primeval colossus of ore veins, magma conduits, and rune-encrusted mechanisms that even the runemaster couldn't understand. Flames blazed within, but they weren't red or yellow—they were blue and white, pure as starfire.

The Rune Forge.

The mountain's original smith.

Borin stood frozen in place.

"Among the ancestors..." he whispered. "That is... alive."

And indeed – the forge breathed. It drew in air from one deep tunnel – and expelled it from another, as if it were a gigantic lung made of ore.

The runemaster almost sank to his knees. "This is the place the ancients described. Created before the first dwarves saw the light. Here the first runes were born. Here the people's first weapons were forged. Not by hands. By the mountain itself."

Kaidra cautiously approached. The ground vibrated slightly beneath her steps. "What... is she forging now?"

The rune master did not reply.

Because suddenly something moved.

The flames in the heart of the forge beat higher. A runic circle in the center of the hall began to rotate. First slowly, then faster. The lines around it brightened. A humming sound filled the air, so deep that it made the chests of everyone present vibrate.

"Borin..." Kaidra said. "What's happening?"

The hammer in Borin's hand glowed red-hot.

The ancestral mark burned so brightly that he had to clench his teeth.

The blacksmith responded to him.

"She recognizes the hammer," said the rune master reverently. "She recognizes... the king."

Borin placed one foot in front of the other. The forge pulsed as if drawing him in. But as he drew nearer, the air began to shimmer. Sparks leapt from the floor and floated through the room like tiny stars. The sound of the forge grew louder, deeper, heavier.

Then she began to speak.

Not in words.

In rhythm.

The ground rumbled in a sequence that Borin didn't understand—and yet understood perfectly. The mountain didn't speak with the voice of a god or a demon. It spoke with the sound of a forge. With the song of the rock.

An ancient blacksmith's song.

Blows.

Breaths.

Heat.

Form.

Fire.

A call to the king.

Borin raised the hammer.

And the forge responded with a tremendous burst of blue fire that shot upwards.

Karim and Aldrik backed away.

The stone giants knelt.

Kaidra stayed by Borin's side – but even she trembled.

The Runemaster shouted: "NO! BORIN, WAIT! The Runeforge chooses only once. When you enter, you will be tested. And not everyone who has been tested has... come out again!"

Borin did not look back.

He knew it.

He knew it deep in his bones.

The rune forge was the king's final test. The test of truth.

He thought of his father. Of the shattered banner. Of the desecrated halls. Of the dead brothers. Of the splinter he had defeated. Of the Eye of the Mountain. Of Graa'thuun.

And he knew:

If he hadn't stepped inside, the mountain would have fallen.

"I'm going," Borin said calmly. "For the depths. For the throne. For all of us."

Then he stepped into the rune circle.

The floor glowed.

The forge roared.

And Borin disappeared in a storm of light.

Borin was swallowed by light.

Not fire, not magic, not even something tangible or nameable. It was a light that was simultaneously hot and cold, heavy and light, loud and utterly silent. A light that didn't shine, but shaped. It shaped him, shaped the space, shaped the time around him. His weapons, his armor, his breath—everything briefly dissolved into individual sparks, as if he were being tested not as a body, but as essence.

He saw neither his companions nor the hall. Instead, he stood on an endless expanse of stone, so flat and flawless that it could not possibly be natural rock. The horizon was nonexistent, yet not empty—it was simply...beyond. The sky above him was black abyss, devoid of stars, darkness, and light. And yet, Borin saw everything clearly.

A sound was produced.

A rhythmic beating, slow, heavy and beautiful.

*CHUNG... CHUNG... CHUNG...*

Borin turned around and saw an anvil as large as a fortress wall, upon which rested a hammer that looked like a miniature version of the one in his hand. A forge without walls, without a blacksmith, but with a fire rising directly from a crack in the stone. The fire was blue and white and yet transparent—like a dream trying to become reality.

"Who's there?" Borin called out.

His voice was swallowed by the room, but the mountain answered.

Not with one vote.



But with a figure that slowly emerged from the light.

A dwarf.

Tall. Taller than any dwarf Borin had ever seen. Easily three heads taller than a normal warrior, with armor that looked as if it had been forged from stardust. His beard was silver and reached his knees. His eyes—two glowing lines of pure white.

"Are you...?" Borin hesitated. "An ancestor?"

The figure nodded almost imperceptibly.

But no words were spoken.

Instead, the ancient dwarf raised a hand. The anvil began to tremble. The fire grew higher. The hammer on the anvil rose as if by invisible fingers and floated slowly into the air.

A new sound emerged, deep and vibrant.

That was the song of the ancestors.

*CHUNG...*

The anvil trembled.

*CHUNG...*

The light in the fire grew brighter.

*CHUNG...*

The hammer vibrated like a heart.

The figure stepped closer to Borin and pointed at his own hammer.

The message was clear.

**The exam begins.**

Borin raised the king's hammer. The ancestral mark blazed, so bright it shone through his armor. A warmth crept through his arm, but not as pain. It was like a hand guiding him. Like a father's grip, when Borin, as a child, first touched a blacksmith's hammer.

"What do I have to do?" he whispered.

The ancient dwarf lifted the floating hammer and struck it on the anvil.

A flash of light.

A sound that divided the world.

Borin understood.

He had to answer.

He raised his hammer and struck – not at metal. Not at stone. But at the ground itself, which was like an endless anvil.

The sound echoed across the distance.

The light changed.

The figure nodded.

The ancestral dwarf struck again.

Another sound.

Another challenge.

Borin followed.

Hammer against stone. Fire against fire. Rhythm against rhythm.

It was not a fight.

It was a dialogue.

A conversation between the heir and the ancestors, spoken in beats and sound, in light and heat. With each beat, Borin saw images:

His father, as he led him to the hammer. His mother, who read him the stories of the old people. His brothers, who laughed in the halls long before the war came. The first kings, as they shaped runes. The mountain itself, as it was born from fire and darkness.

Then the song changed.

The blows became heavier.

Darker.

A new figure emerged from the depths.

Not a dwarf.

Not an orc.

A thing of shadow, similar to the shard Borin had destroyed above – but older, purer, more primal. A core of Graa'thuun's power, trapped down here.

The ancestral dwarf raised the hammer.

The shadow creature screamed.

And the world of exams began to falter.

Everything around Borin distorted, as if the room had decided to fall apart. The fire grew darker, the anvil vibrated, the runes on the floor flickered like dying stars.

The shadow formed an arm of darkness and struck.

Borin raised the hammer.

The blow bounced off.

A second attack came – faster.

Borin parried.

A third – stronger.

Borin countered.

But this time it wasn't just the shadow that attacked.

Even the ancestral dwarf struck.

Against Borin.

A test.

No attack.

But seriously.

Borin had to withstand both – his heritage and his enemy. Light and darkness. He understood:

**The king must do more than just defeat the enemy.**

**The king must defeat himself.**

He roared, raised the hammer, and swung it at the shadow in a single turn. The creature screamed and shattered into pieces. He turned and blocked a blow from the ancestral hammer. The impact was so powerful that he almost fell to the ground.

He held his ground.

The ancestral dwarf lowered the hammer.

The shadow creature finally dissolved.

The room became quiet.

A new anvil appeared – smaller, but bright as starlight.

The ancestral dwarf placed Borin's hammer on it.

The hammer began to glow.

To change.

The figure looked at Borin and placed a hand on his shoulder. A thought formed in his mind:

**You are worthy.  
But the real kicker...  
must be reborn.**

The light became brighter.

The hammer melted – not destroyed, but reshaped.

A new hammer was born.

Bigger. Purer. Stronger. With runes Borin didn't know – runes chosen by the mountain itself.

And when Borin took him, he felt it:

**He was no longer just Königshammer.  
He was Tiefenhammer.**

A weapon that had been created to target Graa'thuun itself.

Then the light broke.

The world turned black.

And Borin fell back into the forge.

Borin landed hard on the floor of the Runeforge Hall. A shower of bluish sparks swirled around him, as if light from another world still clung to him. Kaidra immediately ran to him, her hands gripping his shoulders as if she feared he might dissolve back into light.

"Borin! Are you alive?"

He gasped for breath, his chest rising and falling heavily. The ground still vibrated beneath his fingers, as if the runes around him were reacting. His vision was blurred, but he recognized Kaidra's silhouette, the flickering light of the forge behind her, and the enormous shadows of the stone giants kneeling in awe.

Then he saw it.

That's amazing.

The deep hammer.

The tool he had previously carried—the ancient king's hammer—no longer existed in its original form. This was something new. The weapon didn't simply glow. It pulsed like a heart. Runes, which even the runemaster had never seen before, shimmered across the shaft, moving like liquid light across the surface, forming patterns, changing them, and then reverting to an ancient order that only the mountain itself could know.

The ancestral mark on Borin's chest shimmered in the same rhythm.

Kaidra's voice trailed off. "By all the halls... what... were you doing in there?"

Borin closed his eyes for a moment. Images flickered in his mind – the endless stone floor, the cosmic forge fire, the figure of the ancestral dwarf, the shadow core, the war of sounds, the trial. The feeling of dying and being reborn simultaneously.

"I... passed," Borin said quietly. "The blacksmith tested me. And she... gave me something."

He raised the hammer. The entire room fell silent.

The runemaster almost fell backward. "This is... this is not just a hammer. This is a crystallization point of the mountain. A manifestation of the deepest rune. Borin... this is a weapon that did not originate with us."

"She's ours now," said Borin, the light of the hammer reflecting in his eyes. "And we need her."

The forge pulsed again, as if confirming Borin's words.

The tunnel behind them vibrated.

A deep, sick rumble.

That kind of vibration that did not come from the mountain – but from something moving through it.

The dwarves reflexively grabbed their weapons.

Karim growled: "This isn't from the blacksmith. This is... different."

Aldrik spat. "I recognize that sound. That's orc muscle – but bigger. Much bigger."

"No," said the runemaster, his face pale. "This is not orc. This is... transition. This is magic."

Borin felt it first.

A cold gust of wind – but without air, without movement. More like a shadow gliding through the world, trying to suck all the light out of it.

Then came the noise.

A cracking sound.

A crack.

A whisper.

*"He is coming..."*

The voice wasn't clear. It wasn't even sound. More like a memory of sound, like the echo of a nightmare that had lingered in the walls.

Kaidra raised her hammer. "Who?"

The wind did not answer.

The tunnel did it.

Something in the darkness moved towards her – not a step, not a crawl, but a gliding slide. Shadows retreated as if something were devouring the darkness itself.

Borin raised the deep hammer.

And the darkness remained.

Not because it was afraid.

But because it was curious.

A voice came, quieter than a breath, but so piercingly clear that every soul in the hall felt it.

"The heir... carries my brother."

Borin shivered. The hammer's light dimmed.

Kaidra gasped. "What... did it say?"

The rune master gasped. "The hammer. He... he was one of two."

Borin raised his weapon more firmly. "What are you?"

The darkness receded slightly – as if it were smiling.

"I am Graa'thuun's shard. The true one. Not that pathetic shadow you destroyed above. I am the breath between the stones. The poison in the water. The memory of pain."

A deep rumble went through the forge.

The stone giants rose up.

The deep hammer flared up.

"I am the Claw," whispered the voice. "And you carry the Hammer. Let's see if you are worthy to keep it."

The darkness took shape.

Limbs spread out like cracks in reality. A body of pure shadow veins emerged, crisscrossed by red sparks. A skull of blackened stone glowed at its center.

It was stronger than the splinter above.

Stronger than the guard in the tunnel.

Stronger than any opponent Borin had ever faced.

Kaidra shouted: "Borin! We stand with you!"

He shook his head.

"No."

The hammer pulsed.

Light, such as only the mountain itself could produce, enveloped Borin's body.

"This exam is mine."

The darkness screamed, and all the lights went out – except for that of the Deephammer.

Borin rushed forward.

The shadow rushed towards him.

And the true battle for the Runeforge began.

## The Shadows of the Orc Lord

The Runeforge trembled under the blows of two ancient powers. Borin and the true shard of Graa'thuun hurtled toward each other like two stars colliding in the mountain's innermost fire. The Deephammer pulsed in Borin's hand, each flash a heartbeat of the mountain itself. Its light was heavy and piercing, and the hall was filled with a tremendous shockwave as the two forces clashed.

The shadow formed an arm of black lines, a distorted limb like a vein of living rock, streaked with red sparks. He swung it down, a blow that could have split a stone giant. Borin raised the deep-cutting hammer. When the two forces collided, the sound wasn't a crack—but a deep, terrible roar that echoed through the entire mountainside.

The ground cracked beneath Borin's feet, runes flickered and went out. Kaidra, Aldrik, and Karim were thrown back several steps by the shockwave, and even the stone giants had to steady themselves. The runemaster gripped his staff tightly, but his eyes were wide with fear and awe.

"This is no longer just a splinter..." he whispered. "This is a fragment of the true will of the Orc Prince himself."

The shadow shifted, forming a second arm, then a third, all of living darkness. They lashed through the air, leaving marks like burnt lines. Borin dodged, leaped, rolled, the hammer in his hand striking sparks from the air. But the shadow was fast—unnaturally fast. Each of its attacks was not only physical, but carried within it a mental pain, an echo of ancient torture.

When Borin blocked, he heard the voice – not in his ear, but in his bones.

*"You carry the tools of the ancestors... yet you are only a child."*

Borin gritted his teeth, whirled around, and rammed the hammer against one of the black veins. The energy detonated. The shadow was thrown back, slamming into a wall of the forge, which shattered several glowing slabs of rock upon impact.

"A child who will beat you to dust!" Borin roared.

The splinter laughed. A sound like broken stone and poisonous smoke.

*"You are not worthy. You are not a king. Your blood is weak. Your spirit is broken."*

The runes in Borin's chest burned. The ancestral mark pulsed, warning, admonishing – but not weakening. The voices of the ancestors whispered.

*"Stop..."*

*"Remember..."*

*"You're not alone..."*

The shadow stretched into a broad torso. From within it, a face formed – crude, bestial, with long fangs and eyes of pure darkness.

The orc prince. Not physically. Not completely. But his shadow, his will.

"It is not only Graa'thuun..." the runemaster said, his voice trembling. "It is also the spirit of the first Orc warlord who started the war. They... they were connected."

The shadow grinned, a horrifying shattering.

*"I remember your people... their cries. I remembered kings who fell, one by one. I will remember you too... as the last dwarf to fail."*

Borin screamed and leaped forward. The Deephammer blazed, the blow striking the shadow creature squarely in the chest. The runeforge trembled, sparks exploded, the floor collapsed beneath them, and a gigantic chunk of stone plummeted into the depths.

The blacksmith groaned as if she were suffering.

Kaidra shouted: "BORIN! GET BACK!"

"NO!" he roared back. "I have to... I HAVE TO stop this!"



The shadow attacked with several arms at once. Borin blocked one, shattered two more, and leaped over a third. But a fourth sliced across his back, tearing off a piece of his armor. Blood spurted. Borin lunged forward, catching himself at the last moment.

The splinter of the orc prince laughed.

*"YOUR BLOOD TASTES LIKE FEAR."*

Suddenly, silver lines shot through the air. Kaidra, Aldrik, and Karim had regrouped and charged forward with a desperate cry.

Aldrik slashed the shadow's left leg with his hammer. Karim leaped and smashed his axe into its shoulder. Kaidra crashed into one of the shadow's arms with full force, shattering it into pieces.

The darkness collapsed in on itself for a moment.

"BORIN! NOW!" Kaidra shouted.

Borin jumped to his feet, blood on his hands, but the Deephammer glowed hotter than ever before. The runes on its shaft swirled, reforming themselves – and suddenly the hammer began to strike in two rhythms:

The rhythm of the mountain.

And Borin's rhythm.

He felt it.

The hammer was now not just a weapon.

He was part of him.

The shadow reformed, larger, more frightening, wilder.

An orc prince made of shadows, with a gleaming cleft in his skull like a crown opening.

*"IT'S OVER, KID!"*  
the voice boomed.

"Yes," Borin said softly. "For you."

He stormed.

The deep hammer struck.

The light exploded.

The shadow screamed.

And the true will of Graa'thuun shattered for the first time in millennia.

Blackish-grey sparks flew through the hall, consumed by the fire of the forge, as if the mountain had grown weary of this being.

Borin breathed heavily, twitched, staggered – and almost fell.

Kaidra caught him.

Aldrik and Karim supported him.

The rune master approached, trembling. "Is it... done?"

Borin looked into the darkness into which the splinter had disappeared.

And he knew:

“No,” he said.

He looked at the hammer.

"It's only just beginning."

Because if a splinter was that strong...

How strong was Graa'thuun itself?

The battle in the Runeforge still echoed in Borin's bones as the group left the ruined hall. The air vibrated as if the forge itself were exhausted, as if it too had fought against Graa'thuun's shards. Sparks glowed in the cracks of the stone, the flames of the forge having become dormant veins of embers. The entire space felt like a living organism slowly recovering from a wound.

Borin gripped the Deephammer tightly at his side. The weapon had grown heavier, but not physically—it carried a weight he felt in his mind. Each rune on it pulsed as if it were a heartbeat, but not his own. Rather, the hammer seemed to beat in rhythm with the mountain itself.

Kaidra watched him as they entered the next tunnel together. "What did the forge do to you? You seem... different."

“I don't know,” Borin replied. “Or perhaps I know it too well.”

He thought back to the ancestral test. To the battle against the shadow. To the ancient dwarf who had examined him like a blacksmith a freshly cast tool. It had been more than a test. It was a judgment.

The runemaster walked cautiously beside Borin, his staff firmly in hand. "The hammer has not only been reforged. It has awakened. And when it awakens... so too does that which must guide it."

"And that would be?", Aldrik asked with a skeptical look.

The rune master looked at Borin for a long time. "A king."

The tunnel narrowed. The walls arched like the ribs of a gigantic beast, ancient and silent. Light came only from the Deephammer and a few lichens on the walls, which gave off their last sparks. The path led downwards, spiraling, deeper into areas that no dwarf had entered for millennia.

Karim snorted. "If this goes any deeper, we'll eventually end up in the heart of the mountain. Or right at Graa'thuun."

"Perhaps both," Kaidra murmured.

After another bend, the tunnel opened into a wide hall crisscrossed by cobweb-like cracks. The air was colder here, much colder. Fog crept across the floor, but not like normal fog. It was blackish-gray and moved as if it had a will of its own.

Darrim stepped forward, his shield raised. "This is dark magic. There's something... inside."

The runemaster knelt down, not touching the mist, but the stones beneath him. "No... it's worse. This is Graa'thuun's breath."

A shiver ran through the group.

"Does that mean we're already close to him?" Kaidra asked, forcing herself to maintain her composure.

"No," said the rune master in a serious voice. "It is said that he already sees us."

A rumbling echo answered deep inside the tunnel.

No scream. No shout.

One breath.

Warm yet ice-cold. Alive yet dead. Strong yet broken. A breath that didn't belong in this world.

Borin raised the hammer. His light reacted instantly – it became sharper, clearer, like a weapon that knew its enemy was near.

"Get ready," said Borin.

But nobody needed to hear it – everyone was already in fighting mode.

The fog receded... and a creature crawled out of one of the crevices.

It wasn't big. Not enormous. But more terrifying than any troll.

A body like a shriveled orc, but its veins were dark lines that seemed barely to fit into the flesh. Its eyes were streaks of darkness. It had no mouth—only a cleft that stretched up to its ears.

"A shadow orc," Karim whispered. "I thought that was just a legend!"

The runemaster nodded, pale as stone. "These are not orcs. They are what remains when Graa'thuun swallows an orc – bodies without souls, wills without minds, tools."

The creature opened its crevice. No scream escaped.

But hundreds of votes.

Hundreds.

*"He sees you..."*  
*He can smell you...*  
*He wants you...*  
*He is coming..."*

Borin roared and struck. The Deephammer hit the shadow orc with such force that the body didn't simply shatter – it dissolved into a cloud of black dust, which was immediately swallowed by the ground, as if the mountain refused to tolerate the remains.

But more emerged from the darkness.

First three.

Then five.

Then ten.

Then much more.

All from the same column.

Everyone whispering.

All without souls.

Karim shouted: "They're coming!" Aldrik roared: "Finally, something to kill!" Kaidra: "Hold the formation!"

Borin stood at the front. The hammer rose.

And then the shadow orcs met the dwarves in a wave.

The hall filled with chaos.

The creatures were fast. Incredibly fast. They didn't attack like normal orcs, but glided across the ground as if they were smoke. Their arms extended into whip-like shapes, their shadows appearing like additional limbs.

Karim struck one down on the left – the body crumbled like withered paper. Kaidra smashed two more with her hammer. Aldrik grabbed one by the throat and hurled him into a wall, where he disintegrated like ash.

But there were more.

Too many.

Darrim shouted: "We are being overrun!"

"NO!" Borin yelled.

He jumped forward, stood directly in front of the widest crevice – and the deep hammer began to sing.

A sound.

An ancient sound.

The mountain itself vibrated.

The hammer shone like a sun, its runes spun like a wheel.

Borin rammed it into the ground.

A circle of light shot through the hall, bright as daylight. The shadow orcs screamed – their bodies crumbled to dust, as if the hammer had erased them from existence.

A final shadow orc reached Borin and leaped towards him with a distorted sound.

Borin turned and delivered a blow that transformed the creature into pure darkness.

Then it became quiet.

Blackish-grey dust fell to the ground.

Kaidra, out of breath, leaned on her hammer. "That... was just the vanguard."

The runemaster nodded, his voice trembling. "If Graa'thuun is already sending shadow orcs... then he is not far away."

Borin raised the hammer and looked into the depths.

"Then we'll continue."

His voice was calm.

But the runes on the hammer glowed brightly.

And the mountain responded with a deep rumble.

The floor of the deep hall still vibrated from Borin's hammer blow, but the dust of the shadow orcs had already settled into an oppressive silence. It was not the silence of a resting mountain. It was the silence before a storm brewing beyond the darkness, a storm that would consist not of wind or thunder, but of pure, ancient malice.

"We should move on," Kaidra said, wiping the sweat and blood from her face with the back of her glove. "Graa'thuun now knows exactly where we are."

"He knew that anyway," Aldrik growled. "If his shadow orcs are already here, then the bastard smells us to his very bones."

Karim snorted. "Orcs don't have bones that can smell anything."

"Tell that to the thing that just tried to rip my liver out," Aldrik snarled back.

The runemaster raised his hand. "Do not argue. The enemy feeds on discord. The deeper we go, the stronger his influence will become."

The stone giants moved almost silently through the hall, their massive bodies acting like living bulwarks. One of them bent down, gently touching the dust of the fallen shadow orcs.

A dull sound vibrated from his chest.

"What does he say?" asked Borin.

The runemaster listened briefly, then translated: "He says that this dust... will not die. He says he can still sense their will. A kind of... remnant. As if they were only half destroyed."

Borin frowned. "Does that mean they can come back?"

"Not as they were," said the Runemaster. "But their will remains. Graa'thuun does not create servants of flesh. He shapes will. And will cannot die so easily."

The thought made the air feel even colder.

Another tunnel awaited at the end of the hall – a dark abyss radiating a warmth that reminded Borin of the forge's fire, but corrupted, altered. A fire that didn't create, but devoured.

The group moved forward, Borin in the lead, the Deephammer raised. The runes upon it glowed like the eyes of a being that did not fear the darkness.

The tunnel descended steeply. The walls became rougher, sharper, covered with claw or tusk marks. Some were fresh. Others ancient.

"What has that left behind?" Kaidra asked.

The rune master shook his head. "Too many possibilities. The mountain holds things we've never seen."

"Great," murmured Karim. "Something nice could live in there someday. A friendly cavefish or something."

But nobody laughed.

The air became heavier.

The ground turned black. Not simply darker – black like burnt stone, but without ash. As if a fire had raged, burning unseen by mortals.

Aldrik bent down. "This is not a burnt stone... this is stone that has melted from fear."

"Stein is not afraid," Karim snarled.

"This one already."

Another breath vibrated through the tunnel.

This time closer.

The voices of the shadow orcs whispered in Borin's mind:

*"He sees you."*

*"He can smell you."*

*"He is expecting you."*

The tunnel suddenly opened onto a narrow bridge spanning a gigantic chasm. A lava lake bubbled far below, but its glow was unnatural – the light was blackish-red, as if it were not made of fire, but of liquid, hot darkness.

The Runemaster paused. "This... is the Black Forge. The Orc Lord's smithy. Here his first body was formed. Here his first warriors were awakened. This place is older than our chronicles."

Borin felt the trembling in his bones. Not from fear – but from resonance. The hammer vibrated violently, as if it wanted to smash the bridge itself.

"Calm down," Borin murmured, placing his hand on the shaft. "Not now."

The words were no help – the hammer was too alive. But it calmed down a little, enough for Borin to continue.

The bridge was narrow, too narrow for the stone giants. The giants knelt at the edge and stayed behind.

"We'll come later," one of them said in a booming voice. "When the mountain calls."

The rune master nodded gravely. "And he will call."

Borin stepped onto the bridge.

Beneath him, black lava boiled, bubbles burst like rotten hearts and threw sparks of pure darkness into the air.

Kaidra followed closely behind him. Aldrik and Karim formed the rear line. The Runemaster walked in the middle.

But before they had crossed halfway, the tunnel shook.

One blow.

Then a second one.

Then a third one.

And out of the darkness at the other end of the bridge emerged a gigantic figure.

At first, only two glowing eyes were visible. Then a silhouette. A body of stone, metal, and shadow. A warrior, wider than any door, taller than a troll, but with armor plates that looked like the remains of fallen dwarven armor.

An orc.

A massive orc.

But no one lived in it anymore.

It was a container.

A vessel.

The Runemaster whispered: "A Shadow Lord..."

Aldrik snorted. "A what?!"

"An orc lord, reborn in the shadows. Graa'thuun only sends these when he truly wants to kill someone."

The Shadow Lord screamed – a sound that made the stone itself tremble.

Borin raised the hammer.

"You three! Back!" he shouted.

Kaidra shouted back: "Forget it! We're staying!"

"If I fall, you're next!"

"Then we'll fall together!" Karim snarled.

The Shadow Lord charged forward.

The bridge trembled.

Borin tensed up.



The hammer lit up.

And then they collided – king and shadow lord, hammer and darkness – right above the black sea of lava.

The bridge groaned.

The tunnel screamed.

The mountain held its breath.

### A traitor within his own clan

The Shadow Lord plunged back into the darkness of the tunnel as Borin swung the Deephammer in a final, decisive movement. The gigantic shadow body shattered like pitch glass, sparks of black light swirled into the air, and a scream, half beast, half orc, half something inexplicable, echoed through the chasm. An echo followed, deep and vibrating—as if Graa'thuun himself felt the loss.

The bridge beneath Borin's feet trembled as the Shadow Lord's remains plunged into the black lava. Sparks rose like fiery tears and vanished into the darkness. Borin breathed heavily, his arms trembling, but he stood. Kaidra was instantly at his side, her eyes wide with worry.

"Borin! Borin, stand up straight!"

"I'm standing...", he murmured, even though his knees were almost giving way.

Karim and Aldrik dragged themselves towards him, both covered in blood, but alive. The Runemaster was the last to cross the swaying bridge, his staff glowing slightly as if he could still feel the magical tremors of the battle.

"That was no ordinary servant," the runemaster said, panting. "That was a piece of the old orc lord. Graa'thuun sent his shadow through him to stop you."

"He didn't stop me," said Borin, raising the hammer. The runes were still glowing faintly.

The rune master looked at him seriously. "No. But he knows now that he can no longer underestimate you."

The tunnel beyond the bridge opened up again into a wider passage, and the dwarves continued on their way. The air became somewhat clearer, the walls less distorted. The path was old, carved from black stone, but here and there worn by dwarven hands. Ancient symbols appeared on the walls – runic circles signifying tribal loyalty, the hammers of the king's forge, the wolf's head of the Greybeard clan.

"This..." Kaidra said after a while. "This all looks like dwarven work. Really old dwarven work."

The runemaster nodded. "We are deep enough to reach the halls where the first clan leaders built sanctuaries. Mostly to hide from something. Or to bury something."

"Or someone," Karim murmured.

The group followed the black corridor until they reached a door – large, heavy, ancient. Two gigantic stone guardians were carved into the wall to the right and left, each with a runic shield and a hammer.

Borin stepped outside.

She reacted – not immediately, but the stone vibrated. The runes on it flickered, as if the mountain itself had recognized her.

Aldrik was amazed. "I thought these old doors would never open again. Not without a key."

"The hammer is the key," the rune master said reverently. "That's how it's always been in the Elder Realms."

Borin raised the Deephammer. The light of his runes reflected in the door. The halls answered.

The door opened with a deep rumble.

Behind her lay a vast chamber, dominated by a long table of black granite. Ancient chairs stood along the sides, many broken, some overturned. Faded banners of various dwarven clans adorned the walls – Hammerfell, Blackfire, Runestone... and Greybeard.

Kaidra swallowed. "This is... the old council chamber."

"One of the first," said the rune master. "This is where the clan leaders met before there were kings."

"And why is there no dust here?" asked Karim.

Nobody answered.

Suddenly, Borin heard footsteps.

Not many.

A.

Just one.

A heavy one.

Then a figure emerged from the darkness behind the table.

A dwarf.

Tall. Broad-shouldered. With armor that looked like a cross between metalwork and war machinations. His beard was a mix of gray and black, but his eyes... his eyes were bright yellow, like a wolf's.

Karim immediately snapped. "Who are you?"

The dwarf smiled coldly.

"I am Ordrim Greybeard."

Kaidra gasped. "That... is impossible. Ordrim is dead! He died in the war against the orc hordes!"

The dwarf slowly shook his head. "I was dead. And then... he found me."

Aldrik growled: "What do you mean by 'he'?"

Ordrim looked directly at Borin.

"Graa'thuun."

Silence.

Deadly silence.

Borin raised the hammer. "You are... a traitor."

"I am a survivor," Ordrim said calmly. "When our halls fell, I was dying. And in the darkness, he offered me strength. A second chance. A new perspective."

"He has corrupted you," Kaidra spat.

"He freed me," Ordrim corrected. "Freed me from the lies of our people. The ancestors... the kings... all just stories to keep us down."

He walked slowly around the table, each step a cold echo.

"I have seen what sleeps in the heart of the mountain. I have felt how it thinks. And now I know: Your struggle is pointless."

Borin stepped forward. "If it were pointless, you wouldn't be standing here trying to stop us."

Ordrim smiled darkly. "I'm not here to stop you."

He raised a hand.

"I am here to warn you."

The dwarves froze.

Ordrim continued: "Turn around. Return. Drop the throne. Let the depths rest. You do not know what Graa'thuun truly is."

"We know enough," Borin said harshly.

"No," said Ordrim. "You know... nothing."

Suddenly the air in the hall changed. It became heavy. Dark. As if the room itself were collapsing under a new weight.

Ordrim's eyes flickered black.

"He has already awakened."

Borin felt the shift in the air like a knife stab. The traitor's words had changed the hall. The runes on the walls seemed darker, the banners heavier, the floor itself seemed to writhe beneath his feet, as if the room were afraid of what Ordrim had just spoken.

"He has awakened," Ordrim repeated. His voice was calm—too calm. Like the crackling of a burnt tree trunk just before it breaks.

"Graa'thuun cannot have awakened," the runemaster objected. "The ancient runes speak of him being bound, deep beneath the root rock..."

"The ancient runes," Ordrim interrupted mockingly, "are the writings of cowards. Of dwarves who were afraid of the truth of their own mountain. Graa'thuun was never bound. He only slept. And every blow your king's hammer has delivered has awakened him further."

Borin stepped closer to him. The other dwarves crowded protectively behind him, ready to strike down the traitor. But Borin raised his hand – not in peace, but as a warning.

"Why are you telling us this?" he asked. "If you serve him, why should you care if we die?"

Ordrim smiled, a smile like splintering iron. "Because he wants you. Not your death. Not your destruction. He wants... your choice."

Kaidra growled. "What does that mean?"

"It is said," said Ordrim, "that he will make you an offer. An offer no dwarf has ever received before. An offer that could change the mountain. Forever."

Borin raised the Deephammer. The runes upon it glowed, as if sensing the corruption that dripped from Ordrim's words.

"Graa'thuun offers nothing but death."

Ordrim shook his head. "No. He offers power. Freedom. An end to suffering. No more war. No more bloodshed. No throne to decide clans. No ancestors to bind you."

He raised both hands.

“Graa’thuun... offers you a new age. Under its shadow.”

Aldrik spat. "And we're supposed to die for this?"

"Die?" Ordrim's eyes glittered more intensely. "No. You would live like kings. You would rule the depths... at his side."

Borin fell silent.

The air vibrated. The deep-penetrating hammer glowed hotter, like a sun beneath its skin.

“We are not here to negotiate with your master,” Borin said quietly. “We are here to destroy him.”

Ordrim's face contorted in a twitch of anger and mockery. "You understand nothing. You understand NOTHING about what he is."

He took a step back. The ground beneath his feet wrinkled, as if reacting to his corrupt will.

"Graa'thuun is not just an orc lord. Not just a daemon. Not just a shadow. He is... a thought of the mountain."

The dwarves froze.

"What are you talking about?" asked Karim.

"The ancestors spoke of powers before the time of the dwarves. Beings that were not of flesh, not of stone, not of darkness. Thoughts. Will. A kind of spirit of the deepest rock. And one of them—the rebellious, the destructive one—took form when the first orcs came into being. And became Graa'thuun."

The rune master turned white as bones. "A primal will...? That... that would be..."

"Unstoppable," whispered Ordrim.

The silence grew heavier.

Borin raised the hammer.

"Unstoppable?" he repeated calmly. "Then it's a good thing I have no intention of stopping."

A shadow of surprise flickered through Ordrim's eyes.

"You... you want to fight him? Against a being that has existed since before your time? Against the will of the mountain itself?"

“Yes,” said Borin.

The runes on the hammer caught fire.

Kaidra smiled palely. "Then he won't be alone."

Karim growled in agreement. "No shadow lord, no demon, no primal spirit can stop us."

Aldrik turned his hammer. "And you certainly won't."

Ordrim closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, they were black.

"Then...", he said softly, "you are lost."

Suddenly something tore through the hall – a gust of wind, icy cold, devoid of air, like pure shadow. The banners fluttered, the stone crunched, runes flickered.

Ordrim raised his hands – and the shadows in the hall began to move.

Not like a normal shadow.

But like waves of black liquid.

They crawled up the walls, twisted themselves, and seeped out of cracks that had previously been invisible.

"He saw you," said Ordrim. "And now he wants you."

Borin shouted: "Put out your weapons!"

But before the dwarves could form up, the darkness behind Ordrim exploded – forming a gigantic, claw-like hand that shot forward.

Borin jumped. Kaidra pulled the Runemaster back. Aldrik and Karim fell to the side.

Ordrim was seized by a hand – and disappeared into the darkness.

A voice echoed through the hall.

Not the voice of an orc. Not the voice of a dwarf. Not a voice that came from a throat.

A voice that sounded like a broken mountain. Like tangled roots. Like dying fire and smothered light.

*"Comes...  
Deep children...  
Come to me..."*

Borin gripped the hammer tighter.

"We will continue," he said gruffly. "The traitor has chosen his master. Now we will choose ours."

Kaidra nodded. Karim snorted. Aldrik roared. The runemaster kissed the runes on his staff.

And Borin went into the darkness, the Deephammer a light that even Graa'thuun's shadow could not swallow.

Borin and his companions still stood motionless in the old council chamber, while the last vestiges of Ordrim's vanished presence drifted from the air like cold smoke. The traitor was gone—swallowed in shadow—but his echo hung in the stone like a curse. The chamber breathed more heavily, as if the mountain itself now knew the truth it had hidden for centuries.

Kaidra broke the silence. "Borin... if he really did tell the truth... if Graa'thuun is a primal thought of the mountain—"

"Then we'll just fight against a thought," Borin interrupted. "We've never shied away from fighting against the impossible."

The runemaster closed his eyes and let his fingertips glide over the ancient runes on the table. "A thought... yes. But one that has spawned flesh. A body. An army. A will." His voice trailed off. "And now he has a dwarf in his ranks. One who knows our ways."

Aldrik gritted his teeth. "We should chase him down. Kill him before he leads us into a trap deep underground."

"No." Borin raised his hand. "If we follow him now, he'll lead us into a trap. Into the darkness he controls. No. We'll take the path the mountain shows us—not the one a traitor chooses."

The Deephammer vibrated as if confirming Borin's words. The runes on it flickered brightly in the darkness of the hall, and the floor beneath it seemed to warm up.

Karim snorted. "Awakened or not – Graa'thuun has moved. The mountain feels it. The forge feels it. And I feel it too. My veins burn like they did back then, just before the great battle in the ice mine."

The runemaster opened his eyes. "This is not my imagination. The depths are calling louder now. The further we venture, the stronger its presence becomes – and the more it will try to seduce you, break you, or drive you insane."

"Let him try," said Kaidra, adjusting her armor. "A dwarven spirit is tougher than the mountain itself."

"The mountain itself speaks to him," the rune master murmured darkly.

Kaidra paused.

Borin looked toward the end of the hall. Another tunnel awaited there—narrow, dark, riddled with deep cracks from which cold winds poured. A wind that smelled of ancient magic. Of gray blood. Of a darkness that could not die.

"That's where we need to go," said Borin.

Aldrik grimaced. "Looks like the tunnel is about to swallow us whole."

"Then we'll eat first." Karim growled and raised his axes.

The runemaster armed himself and produced a small runic amulet. "This will not help against Graa'thuun. But it will help against his shadows. Stay close together."

They left.

The tunnel descended into a narrow, winding passage. The floor was smooth, as if polished by something that had traversed the same path countless times over the centuries. There was no lichen. No light. No life. Only stone, so old it no longer bore a name.

After a few steps, Borin stopped abruptly.

"What is it?" whispered Kaidra.

"Don't you hear that?"

The others listened.

Silence.

Then – very quietly – a drop.

Water? No.

Not water.

A drop of... blood?

Karim pushed past Borin, placed his hand on the stone floor and murmured: "It's coming from the front. And it's fresh."

"From what?" Aldrik asked suspiciously.

Karim straightened up. "From something that lives. Or from something that is dead and yet still bleeds."

The tunnel suddenly widened into an oval chamber. In the center lay a dwarf. No shadow. No undead.

A real dwarf.

He wore heavy armor of the Shieldbreaker clan, scratched by long claws. His skin was gray, but not deathly gray. His beard was full of dust, his helmet dented.

Kaidra ran to him and carefully turned him onto his back. "By the ancestors... is he alive?"

The dwarf was breathing shallowly, but he was breathing.

"He is alive," said the rune master after a moment.



"That's impossible," Borin murmured. "The Shieldbreaker clan... they were wiped out long before we ventured into these depths."

"Or we are not the first to have come this far," Aldrik said gloomily.

The wounded dwarf suddenly opened his eyes. They were red and veiny, full of fear, full of pain – and full of warning.

He grabbed Borin's arm and whispered hoarsely:

"Don't go any further."

Borin leaned forward. "Why not? What did you see?"

The dwarf gasped. "It... it's not a mountain god. It's... a hole. A hole in the world. A... hunger. He... he created the orcs because he... wanted to eat. And now he... has found us."

The rune master, pale: "A metaphysical hunger... a will that devours reality. This is more than a demon."

The wounded man coughed up blood. "He... he will show you something. Something... beautiful. Something you have longed for. Believe... none of it. Nothing."

He managed one last breath:

"Ordrim... was not the first."

Then he died.

Kaidra closed his eyes. "By the ancestors... what is this down here?"

The tunnel in front of them trembled slightly.

And a voice – gentle, calm, warm – whispered in her thoughts:

*"Come... Children of the Stone..."*  
*You don't have to fight...*  
*You just need to see...*  
*what you can become..."*

Borin grabbed the deep hammer.

"Go on," he said. "And no voice in your head is right except your own."

## The fall into the deepest depths

The voices in the tunnel grew quieter, but not weaker. They were no longer the whisper of an enemy, but the whisper of temptation. A temptation that stirred deep in the dwarves' hearts, like a premonition of what they had lost—or perhaps never had. Borin strode resolutely ahead, the Deepphammer in his hand the only fixed point in a world that seemed increasingly unreal.

The tunnel descended in spiraling layers, and the further they went, the more the stone changed. The walls were no longer smooth or rough. They had...grown. Like dunes of living rock, gently curving and meandering. Borin immediately recognized that this was not the work of a blacksmith.

This came into being. It wasn't built.

"I don't trust this stone," Karim murmured. "It looks like it might start breathing any minute."

The rune master nodded. "He's already doing it. Only... very slowly."

Aldrik stopped. "You're saying the tunnel is ALIVE?"

"Everything down here is alive," the Runemaster said darkly. "This is the realm where Graa'thuun's will passes into the stone. He... shapes it. He changes it. And what we see... are his thoughts."

Kaidra snorted. "His thoughts feel like a nightmare."

Suddenly the earth trembled beneath their feet, and the tunnel tilted slightly to the right. Tiny fragments of stone broke from the wall and trickled to the ground like sand. Then they heard it:

A humming. Deep. Rumbling. Like something immense stirring far below them.

"It comes from below," said Borin. "Very far below."

"Something big is happening," Karim said. "But not near us. Somewhere deeper."

The tunnel ended abruptly.

Or... he didn't.

It opened into a gigantic dome, its edges disappearing into the darkness in the distance. The ceiling was so high that it was invisible. Only occasionally did lights flash up there like distant stars, only to go out again immediately.

But the soil – the soil was a problem.

Because he didn't exist.

There was only one abyss.

A depth so dark that even the depth hammer barely illuminated it. The abyss seemed to move, as if currents of pure darkness swirled beneath. Borin couldn't tell if they were shadows or something else. Something stirring in the depths where no light had ever reached.

A narrow bridge of smooth, black stone spanned the chasm. A single passage, barely wide enough for two dwarves side by side, but sturdier than anything they had seen before.

"This is where it begins," said Borin. "The path to the deepest depths."

But before they could cross the bridge, they heard the humming again.

This time closer. Much closer.

"What is it?" whispered Kaidra.

The stone giant behind them rose to his full height, touched the wall, and spoke in his deep, booming language. The rune master listened, turned pale, and translated:

"He says... something big is moving beneath us. Not under the ground – but in the ground itself."

Borin stepped onto the bridge.

He sensed immediately that this stone was different. It was... heavier. Not in a physical sense. In a spiritual one. A stone full of meaning. A stone that knew where it led.

"Come on," said Borin. "We have to move on."

They stepped onto the bridge.

She was stable. Too stable.

"I don't like this," Karim muttered. "Nothing down here is supposed to be stable."

"Yes," said Borin. "A trap should be stable."

Aldrik nodded. "He's right."

The runemaster raised his hand. "Be careful. This is not a stone. It is... a thought. A part of Graa'thuun's consciousness. We are walking on his memory."

They barely got ten steps.

Then it happened.

The bridge trembled. A thud – like the heartbeat of a titan. A second. A third. Deep vibrations ran through the stone, like a living organism.

"Back!" Kaidra shouted.

But by then it was too late.

Something rose from the depths. Something immense. Something ancient. They saw no form, only movement. A shadow of shadows. A thought seeking flesh. The air grew heavy, as if the abyss itself wanted to pull them down.

Then it appeared.

Not as a body.

But rather as a wave of pure darkness, crashing against the bridge like a storm. The bridge creaked, trembled – and tore.

“JUMP!” Borin yelled.

The stone beneath her feet shattered.

The Runemaster was struck by a boulder and fell. Kaidra grabbed him, losing her own footing. Karim pulled Aldrik towards him, but his foot slipped on the smooth surface.

The abyss called.

Borin turned, threw the Deep Hammer upwards – an arc of light burst forth, saving Kaidra and the Runemaster.

But Borin himself lost ground.

He fell.

Deep.

Deeper.

Into the darkness, which welcomed him with cold tenderness.

And something in the depths was laughing.

A laugh like a stone that breaks.

Like shadows that grow.

Like a thought that finally touches its heir.

*"Welcome, King..."*

The fall seemed endless. Borin didn't fall like a warrior thrown from a cliff, but like someone pulled into a dream—a dream that was also an abyss. The air didn't thin. It thickened. Heavier. As if the darkness itself had weight. His body twisted, yet he felt no wind. The depths were silent, yet filled with voices.

Then – a jolt. A blow. Not onto stone. On something... soft. Elastic. Like the body of a gigantic creature.

Borin bounced off, rolled, and fell a few more meters before finally coming to rest. The ground was warm. Not hot, not alive—but warm like the breath of a creature in deep sleep.

The Deephammer lay a little further on, its runes glowing dimly, as if under a veil.

Borin sat up, breathing heavily, and looked around.

He lay on a plateau of smooth, black surface. Not stone. Not metal. Something alien. A material that seemed as if it could flow if you just looked at it long enough. Beyond it, the abyss plunged further into the bottomless. There was no ceiling above him. Instead: blackness. A blackness that moved. That formed eddies. Shapes. Silhouettes. Sometimes like wings. Sometimes like hands. Sometimes... like eyes.

Something was watching him.

"Borin!"

A voice echoed from the darkness.

Was it Kaidra? Karim? Aldrik? Or was it merely an echo? A thought from the depths, mimicking his own thoughts?

Borin grabbed the hammer and stood up. The warmth of the plateau vanished instantly as he moved, and the cold of the depths seeped into his bones.

A whisper rippled through the darkness.

Not from the front. Not from the back. From everywhere.

*"You have fallen... but you are not lost."*

Borin tensed up. "Show yourself!"

The blackness rippled. And a figure emerged from the depths.

At first vague. Then clearer. It was... a dwarf.

Neither large nor small. With a hammer on his back and the king's mark on his chest.

"Father?" Borin whispered.

The figure nodded gently. "Yes, my son."

The ground trembled. The hammer in Borin's hand grew heavy.

"That can't be...", Borin murmured.

The figure took a step closer. Its face was flawless. Its eyes were warm. Its form was as solid as rock.

"I am here to guide you," she said. "Just as I used to. The way back is hard. But the way forward is impossible without me."

Borin took a step back. "You're dead."

The figure smiled sadly. "That's true. But even dying is just a step into the depths. I'm here because you need me. Because the mountain needs you."

Borin raised the hammer.

The figure waved its hand dismissively. "Not every enemy comes with blades. I'm not here to hurt you. I want to save you."

Borin narrowed his eyes. "You are not my father. My father would never have let me go down into the depths."

The figure twitched slightly. "This abyss is not a place of death. It is a place of choice. You can have... everything, Borin. Peace. Strength. A kingdom without blood. Without sacrifice. Without war."

Borin swallowed hard. "Graa'thuun."

All warmth vanished from the figure. The eyes turned black.  
The skin tore open like old parchment. And beneath it lurked darkness.

A second face appeared – not in place of the old one, but behind it. A face without contours. Without eyes. Without a mouth. And yet full of expression.

Graa'thuun's will spoke:

*"You've seen too much. Lost too much. Your anger is great. Your loneliness is greater. Let me help you."*

Borin raised the hammer. The runes fought – light against darkness. The light flickered.

Graa'thuun continued:

*"You want the throne. I can give it to you. I can make you the greatest king these halls have ever held. You just have to... let go."*

A tremor ran through the room.

Without warning, Kaidra – or a version of her – appeared at Borin's side. Her eyes sparkled. Her gaze was full of affection.

"Borin... let's go home," she said gently. "Let's end this war. You don't have to fight any longer."

Borin inhaled sharply. "You... are not Kaidra."

The figure knelt before him, her voice whispering, warm, enchanting:

"Maybe not. But I can be what you need."

Borin closed his eyes. The voices grew louder. A chorus of silence and temptation.

*"Come...  
Become...  
More..."*

"NO!" Borin yelled.

The deep hammer exploded in light.

Everything collapsed in on itself. The false figures burst like smoke. The depths themselves screamed. The blackness receded as if the mountain itself had banished the illusion.

Borin stood alone. Trembling. Breathless. But free.

*"I choose myself."* he said hoarsely.

The depths thundered a reply – angry, hurt.

But Borin held the hammer. And the hammer held him.

Borin still stood on the black plateau, the abyss around him trembling like an enraged organism. The illusions had crumbled, but their shadows hung in the air like a chill that refused to dissipate. The Deephammer pulsed warmly, as if dispelling the weight of darkness that Graa'thuun had sown in Borin's mind.

But Borin knew: This was only the beginning.

A deep crack opened before him, slowly, with a crunching sound, as if the stone itself were crying out in pain. Black steam crept out, hissing and forming swirling lines that looked like ancient runes, but weren't. They were a reminder of something the mind could only sense, not comprehend.

He heard the voices again.

Not one voice. Many. Hundreds. And yet, a single one.

*"You refused."  
You have chosen.  
Now continue your vote.*

"I don't need your choice," Borin growled, "I only need my own way."

He took a step back, gripping the hammer firmly. The platform beneath his feet began to tremble, as if a massive animal were moving under a thin sheet of ice.

Then huge shapes rose out of the darkness.

First like silhouettes. Then like bodies. But their bodies were not real – they were like imitated memories of dwarves, orcs, humans, animals that the depths had once swallowed.

Distortions. Figures that should never have existed.

Karim appeared as an illusion – but this time Borin immediately recognized that it wasn't his comrade. This illusion had two shadows. Two outlines. A double image that constantly flickered and became more distorted with each passing second.

Then Aldrik – but too tall, too broad, too strong, the proportions wrong. The voice too soft.

Then Kaidra – but with black veins under her skin, as if she were a vessel for something foreign.

*"We are here to help you..."* they whispered in unison.

"You are his tool," said Borin.

He raised the hammer.

The figures floated closer.

But before they reached him, the unexpected happened.

A rumble vibrated through the abyss. A real rumble. One that didn't come from the depths themselves, but from a direction Borin would never have expected.

From above.

A beam of light shot down – hard, bright, like a glowing lightning bolt cutting through the darkness.

"BORIN!"

Kaidra's real voice.

The real one.

The true sound. Hoarse, powerful, full of anger and worry.

Borin looked up.

Up there, at the edge of the broken bridge, he saw her.

Kaidra. Aldrik. Karim. The Runemaster, bleeding, but alive.

And the stone giants who held them fast with their massive arms so they wouldn't fall into the abyss themselves.

"HOLD ON!" Aldrik yelled. "We'll get you out of there!"



"LET THE MOUNTAIN AFRAID OF US IF IT DOESN'T LET YOU OUT!" Karim yelled after him.

Borin could have smiled. But the figures between them continued to distort, their outlines becoming long shadows.

Graa'thuuns Wille laughed – a long, piercing sound.

*"They want to save you."  
But they cannot conquer the depths.  
Only I can hold you.*

"I DON'T NEED YOU!" Borin yelled.

He raised the hammer, its light exploded – a storm of radiant runic flames erupted, tearing the illusions to shreds. The shadows shattered like glass from darkness and vanished as if they had never existed.

The abyss shrieked.

The platform began to sink, a viscous, squelching sound rolling through the depths. As if something below wanted to swallow him.

"BORIN!" Kaidra shouted again. "JUMP!"

The platform tipped over.

It lost altitude.

She sank.

And from the darkness below him rose something immense – too large to see, too large to comprehend. A mass of blackness, of thought, of will. No form. No shape. Only intention.

The will of the orc prince. Graa'thuun in its purest form.

He reached for Borin like a wave of shadows.

"JUMP NOW, YOU FOOL!" shouted Karim.

The platform creaked. The hammer vibrated. Borin roared – and ran.

He ran as the black wave surged behind him, as the blackness tried to hold his feet like cold mud, while voices from the depths gripped his mind.

"FIGHT!" Kaidra shouted.

"FASTER!" yelled Aldrik.

"JUMP BEFORE HE FRI-"

The word fell silent amid the thunder.

Borin pushed himself away.

He jumped.

The depths screamed. Graa'thuun screamed. The abyss itself seemed to hold its breath.

Borin flew.

Arms reached out to him – real arms.

Kaidra seized him first, her hand like a vise. Aldrik and Karim followed suit, the runemaster pressing himself against the rock face to avoid being swept away. The stone giants supported them all with an immovable strength that only beings of pure mountain could possess.

The blackness shot upwards.

A hand of pure shadow. A claw of pure malice.

She missed Borin's boots by only a hand's breadth.

Borin was pulled up – slowly, heavily – but unstoppably.

The depths roared, the dome thundered, the mountain creaked.

Then Borin was on top.

The claw snapped one last time – and sank back into the abyss.

The bridge trembled. The chasm did not close. He waited.

Borin lay on the cold stone, breathing heavily.

"You're crazy," Karim gasped. "Yes," said Borin. "But I'm not alone."

Above them, one could once again hear the deep humming of the depths.

Graa'thuun had seen him. And he would not forget him.

## A respite in the dark forest

The dwarves left the yawning abyss of the broken bridge, one by one, exhausted and scarred by what they had seen—and above all by what had nearly swallowed Borin whole. The path led them through a narrow side tunnel that wound like a living cross-section in the mountain's network of rock faces. With each step, the air grew lighter, less oppressive. The whispers of the depths slowly faded like a nightmare dissolving into mist with the dawn.

But that did not mean the darkness stayed behind them.

She followed them.

Invisible. Heavy. Listening.

The runemaster, barely able to stand, murmured protective incantations incessantly. Some were older than the royal lineages themselves. The stone giants strode behind the group like silent sentinels, ready at any moment to support the mountain with their own chests.

“We need to get out of its sphere of influence,” Kaidra said quietly. “The mountain has been fighting against itself ever since we descended deeper.”

“No,” the runemaster corrected. “Since Borin rejected the shadow.”

The deep hammer vibrated again, a dull, warning pulse, as if it were a heart beating for two bodies: for the dwarf who carries it – and for the mountain that speaks through it.

It took forever for the tunnel to finally change shape.

The walls became lighter. The stone less hostile. Moss appeared – first in small patches, then in dense green carpets.

And then – a miracle none of them had expected – the tunnel opened.

A forest lay before them.

A forest underground.

Emerald-green trees with long, slender crowns, their tips swaying gently in an imperceptible breeze. A somber, blue glow filled the air, as if the forest grew from light rather than water. The leaves shimmered as if made of glass. The ground was covered in soft, dark humus that yielded to footsteps like a carpet of centuries-old silence.

Karim rubbed his eyes. “I... I thought it was just a legend. The Dark Forest. The forest that doesn't grow – but sleeps.”

Aldrik whistled. “Looks damn awake to me.”

The runemaster took a deep breath. “This is no ordinary vegetation. The trees here... possess a will of their own. An ancient one. But not an evil one. Not like the Deep.”

"Why is the forest here?" Kaidra asked.

The rune master smiled weakly. "It is said that the ancestors planted this forest so that the children of the stone would not lose their minds when they had to travel through the darkness on their long treks."

"And does it work?" Karim wanted to know.

"If you suddenly no longer feel like you're being watched – yes."

Borin was silent. He stood at the edge of the forest, his hand on the hammer, and listened.

The voices of the deep had grown quieter. But they had not disappeared.

"We'll stay here for a while," he finally said. "We all need to catch our breath before we move on."

Karim grinned. "I need food before I do anything."

"And sleep," Kaidra added. "And peace. And above all... distance from the depths."

They set up camp at the edge of the forest. The runemaster drew protective runes in a circle around their camp. The stone giants sat down like gigantic boulders, their stone bodies appearing as natural amidst the trees as ancient monoliths.

Aldrik started a small fire that burned blue like the forest itself.

"This is not a real fire," the rune master explained. "It doesn't warm us. But it drives away any remaining shadows that might follow us."

Kaidra sat down next to Borin. "You are very calm."

"I think."

"About what?"

Borin looked up into the treetops.

The silence of the forest was sacred. Profound. A peace that came from a time before war – perhaps even before the first orcs.

"About the depths," he said after a while. "And what they showed me."

Kaidra stared at him with a serious expression. "She sent you illusions. Lies."

"Illusions, perhaps. Lies... not all of them."

Kaidra opened her eyes in surprise.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Borin turned the hammer, the runes glowed like sluggish sparks.

"Graa'thuun showed me what I could have been. What I might wish for. A king without burdens. A people without war. An end to the bloodshed. And a father I will never lose again."

He pressed his lips together.

"And that's exactly why it was dangerous."

Kaidra placed a hand on his shoulder. "Borin... every dwarf longs for peace. For an end to suffering. But when that peace is born of shadows, it is no longer peace – but a cage."

"I know." Borin looked into the darkness between the trees. "But Graa'thuun now also knows what would break my heart most easily."

Kaidra remained silent.

Then she said something that few dwarves would ever have spoken aloud: "Borin... you don't have to carry this alone."

Borin looked at her.

For the first time since falling into the abyss, he felt warmth that did not come from the hammer.

"Maybe not," he said quietly.

The forest rustled. A sound like ancient music. A song that the ancestors once sang when the world was still young.

Then there was a rustling in the bushes.

Aldrik jumped up. "What was that?"

Karim grabbed his axes. "If it's a forest animal, I'll shout with joy. If it's an orc, I'll shout on principle."

But what emerged from the bushes was neither animal nor orc.

It was a dwarf.

Exhausted. At his wit's end. His arm was bloody. His beard was torn. His eyes were wide with fear.

He sank to his knees before Borin.

"Lord... Borin... King's son..." He gasped heavily. "The orcs... they have taken the rocky pass..."

Aldrik shouted: "What??"

The stranger continued before he lost consciousness:

“And... someone was leading them... a... dwarf...”

The rune master froze.

Kaidra whispered: "Ordrim."

Borin stood up.

The hammer was glowing.

"The traitor is ahead of us," he said. "And he leads the orcs."

The injured dwarf sank unconscious into Kaidra's arms, while the others immediately rallied around him. Aldrik tore a piece of his cloak thread to bandage the worst of the wounds. The runemaster knelt beside him, placed two fingers on the stranger's forehead, and whispered a few soft words. A gentle, golden glow spread, not strong enough to heal, but enough to stabilize his pulse.

"He is alive. But only just," the rune master finally said.

"He's made it this far," Karim growled admiringly. "That alone shows me that we're not dealing with a coward."

Borin took a step back and surveyed her surroundings with sharp eyes. The dark forest was quiet, almost unnaturally quiet. The soft rustling of the blue leaves was the only sound that resembled breathing—as if the forest itself were a living being, sleeping and watching over her.

"So Ordrim is leading the orcs," Borin finally said quietly. "And he's leading them through the rocky pass."

"That means," Kaidra added, "he is leading them directly to our halls."

Aldrik snorted. "The traitor didn't just sell our souls—he showed our enemies a path they would never have found on their own."

The runemaster looked troubled. "The Rock Pass is one of the narrowest paths from the outermost dark zone of our realm to the surface. If the orcs hold it, they can overrun not only the outposts, but also the forge shafts and the ancestral halls."

"And then everything we do down here was in vain," Kaidra added.

A heavy shadow fell over the group. But Borin shook his head, raised the Deephammer, and looked up at the glowing leaves above them.

"No. None of this is in vain. The path through the mountain is our only chance to stop Graa'thuun — and without Graa'thuun, the orcs will lose their will. Their master. Their power."

He turned to his companions.

“We won’t reach the pass immediately. But we can send someone ahead. Someone who is fast, strong — and knows the way.”

Aldrik rubbed his beard. "Nothing against my legs, but I'm not built for long runs..."

"Me neither," muttered Karim. "I only run fast if a troll is going to eat me, and even then only for a few meters."

Kaidra looked up. "I'm leaving."

Borin nodded immediately. "I was thinking of you."

Karim protested: “Alone? Do you want to kill her?”

“She’s the fastest of us,” Borin said calmly. “And she knows the upper tunnels better than anyone here. And...” He looked at Kaidra. “You’re the one I’d most trust to outsmart Ordrim. Or kill him, if necessary.”

Kaidra swallowed, but her gaze was firm. "I'll take the message to the border guards. I'll warn them. I'll tell them what Ordrim has done. And I'll hold the passport until you arrive."

Karim snorted. "You're holding the pass? Against a whole horde?"

"I just need to hold him long enough," Kaidra replied calmly. "Long enough for Borin. For the ancestors. For the mountain."

The forest rustled, as if commenting on her decision.

But before Borin could answer, something strange happened.

The trees seemed to lean slightly—not as if in a gust of wind, but as if in greeting. Their blue leaves flickered more intensely, and a narrow path opened between the roots, brightly illuminated by phosphorescent lichens.

The rune master stood up abruptly. "The forest... allows her to go."

“He allows us all to leave,” Borin corrected. “But he shows us who has to leave first.”

Kaidra stepped onto the path. "I'm leaving."

Borin placed a hand on her shoulder. "Take care of yourself."

She placed a hand on his. "You too."

Then she turned away and disappeared into the blue glow of the path, as silently as a shadow that knows where it belongs.

When she disappeared, silence returned to the camp. A silence that was heavy, but not hostile.

The runemaster sat down again and looked at Borin appraisingly. "You know she's one of the last who's so loyal to you."

"Loyalty is not something I demand," said Borin. "It is something one earns."

Karim growled. "Earn it? You've got it good, king's son. We've been chasing after you since halls and trenches, even though you have every opportunity to turn yourself into some rock!"

Borin smiled thinly. "When a rock speaks, it's best to run away."

Aldrik laughed for the first time in days. "I knew there was still a sense of humor in you somewhere."

The stone giant beside them rumbled deeply, as if agreeing with the silence. His voice sounded like rolling boulders in a distant ravine. The rune master listened and translated:

"He says: The forest protects. But the forest also tests. And we are not alone here."

Karim turned around. "What do you mean — not alone?"

But before anyone could answer, the ground shook.

Light. Like a gentle heartbeat. Then again. And again.

The trees recoiled as if startled.

A shadow moved between them.

A massive one.

An ancient one.

Aldrik stood, hammer raised. "What among the ancestors—"

The rune master whispered in horror:

"A forest ranger."

From the shadows emerged a being that was neither animal nor human—a gigantic figure made of wood, stone, and fungal mycelium, with eyes like luminous amber flames. A living colossus, created from the oldest part of the forest itself.

The forest ranger looked down at Borin.

Very long.

Then he lowered his head.

And his voice sounded like thunder underwater:



**"Guardians of the Hammer..."**  
**The depths will follow you.**  
**You bring shadows.**  
**You are bringing war.**  
**But the forest has not rejected you.**  
**Goes.**  
**Rest.**  
**But know this...**  
**"If you fall — the mountain falls."**

The forest guardian still stood motionless before them, like an ancient monolith that had survived the passage of time. His body was composed of intertwined roots, petrified wood, and shimmering fungal veins that glimmered like the veins of a gigantic, sleeping beast. His eyes—two amber beacons—scrutinized Borin with a patience possessed only by beings who experience centuries as mere seconds.

The dwarves felt the gaze like a storm sweeping through their souls. Not hostile, not threatening – but probing. Profoundly probing. As if the forester wanted to read them like a book that had long since been written.

Borin stepped forward, the deep hammer firmly in his hand. "Guardians of the Forest," he said calmly. "We do not come to bring shadows. We come because the shadow haunts us."

The forester inclined his head slightly, and the creaking of old branches filled the clearing. "The shadow follows you... because it wants you," he said in a voice like a mountain speaking in its sleep. "It wants your will. Your heart. And your hammer."

"The hammer," murmured the runemaster. "Of course. The hammer awakens the will of the mountain – and brings Graa'thuun pain."

The forest warden slowly turned his gaze to the rune master, whose small body, in comparison to him, looked like a pebble before a mountain. "The hammer carries the depths. The depths carry the power. And the power carries... danger."

"We know that," said Borin. "We saw it. We saw Graa'thuun's will, his illusions. He tried to break me."

A slight shudder ran through the forest ranger's body. "He has broken many."

A moment of silence followed.

Karim finally broke him. "Why don't you attack us?"

The forest guardian straightened further, his crown of living wood almost completely obscuring his view upwards. "Because you haven't decided yet. Because the roots of destiny are still twisting. Because your hearts are still... fighting."

"Fight?" Aldrik growled. "We fight all day long! Against orcs, against shadows, against traitors!"

"Not this battle," replied the forester. "The battle within yourselves."

The dwarves fell silent, for they knew he was speaking the truth.

The forest warden turned his glowing eyes back to Borin. "Your heart has been tested, son of the stone. The deep has called you. And you have resisted. But the deep calls again. And again. And again."

"I am not afraid of her."

"You do," said the forester calmly. "But that's a good thing. Because those who aren't afraid fall more easily."

A soft murmur went through the forest, as if the entire forest were a single breathing being listening to the words of the guardian.

"Why are we here?" Kaidra finally asked. "Why is the forest letting us rest?"

The forester lowered his gaze like an oak tree bowing in the wind. "The forest protects you... because you are still becoming. Because your path is still being shaped. Because your steps could change the mountain."

Karim snorted. "Change the mountain? We're just a few dwarves!"

"Great shadows are formed from small sparks." The guardian slowly raised one of his enormous hands.

A flower grew out of the ground, small as a dwarf's whiskers, but glowing like starlight.

"From the smallest thing comes change. From change comes a storm. And in the storm... fate is decided."

He dropped the flower. It shattered into a dozen blue sparks that circled Borin before being extinguished in the forest sky.

The runemaster stepped forward. "Tell us, guardians... will the forest abandon us if we move on?"

"The forest never abandons anyone," replied the guardian. "Yet many abandon the forest."

A sentence that was heavier than any boulder.

The guardian turned to the side, stepped back into the shadows between the ancient trunks, and with each step seemed to merge further into the fabric of the forest.

Before he completely disappeared, he spoke:

"Rest, children of stone. For your path will not become easier. And the shadow waits no longer."

Then he was gone.

The dwarves stood there silently for a long time.

Aldrik finally sat down beside the fire of blue flames. "I've seen a lot of things. Giant spiders. Troll witches. Even a mountain worm that swallowed an entire tunnel. But this..."

Karim collapsed like a sack of ore. "...was the most impressive thing since Borin decided to stop drinking beer in battle."

Borin remained serious. His eyes were fixed on the spot where the forest ranger had disappeared.

"He knows more," said Borin. "Much more. But he can't tell us."

The runemaster nodded. "Forest guardians rarely speak directly. They speak in terms of the future. In terms of possibilities. In terms of roots."

"In roots?" Karim asked.

"Roots determine where a tree grows... or where it falls."

Borin placed a hand on the deep hammer. "We'll rest. And then we'll continue."

"Where to?" asked Aldrik.

"Follow the traitor," Borin said harshly. "Ordrim leads the orcs. He knows us. He knows the depths. He knows the paths. And he knows how to weaken us."

Kaidra looked up at him. "He knows you."

Borin nodded. "Then he will see me again."

The dark forest rustled. Perhaps as a warning. Perhaps as a blessing.

But to Borin it sounded like an old war song whispering to him:

*Onward. Without fear. Without shadows in the heart.*

## The return of the border guards

The Dark Forest lay silent behind them now, a pale glow in the distance, like the afterglow of a dream. The dwarves marched deeper into the upper tunnels, which again resembled true halls—hewn walls, broad passageways, crafted by ancient dwarven hands. The air grew clearer. The stone felt more familiar. The eerie pulsing of the depths, which Borin had felt in the very core of his being, gave way to a steady, soothing beat.

The mountain itself breathed calmly here. But its calm was deceptive.

Karim stopped and listened. "Do you hear that?"

Aldrik held the axe ready. "If you say 'orcs', I'll scream."

"No. It sounds... like footsteps. Many. And heavy."

The runemaster frowned, placed his hand against the wall, and closed his eyes. "Not orcs," he finally said. "Dwarves."

Kaidra's eyes widened. "That must be the border guard."

The thought stirred a mixture of hope and fear. The border guard—that tough troop of hardy, battle-hardened dwarven warriors who usually protected the northern passes and the approaches to the highlands—was famous for never abandoning a post as long as a dwarf remained.

If they returned...then something monstrous must have happened.

The echo of the march drew nearer, becoming clearer. Torchlight appeared in the tunnel, flickering and unsteady, as if held by hands barely strong with exhaustion. Borin stepped forward, the Deep Hammer at the ready, but without threat.

Then he saw her.

Twenty dwarfs. Perhaps fifty formerly, but only twenty remained.

Their armor was dented, their helmets cracked, their beards caked with dust, blood, and sweat. They looked as if they had fought an entire orc army single-handedly—and perhaps they had.

At the head of the procession walked Captain Dravok Ironfist, a mountain of a dwarf. Even he looked shrunken, aged, as if the last few days had torn years from his soul.

When he saw Borin, he stopped abruptly.

"By the stone...," Dravok breathed, "the king's son lives."

The border guards fell into a kneeling position. Borin immediately stepped forward.

"Stand up. Every one of you. A dwarf does not kneel in times of war."

Dravok stood up, unsteady on his feet. "We came to get help... for the Rocky Pass."

"We know about Ordrim," Kaidra said in a harsh voice. "He leads the orcs."

A groan went through the border guards, as if this sentence confirmed all the terrible things they already suspected.

Dravok closed his eyes. "So it's true... treason. A brother against brothers." He opened his eyes again, and in them lay a rage that burned like molten ore. "He opened the gates. He let them through. The first of them came like shadows—we thought they were scouts. But then..."

He paused.

The rune master stepped forward. "Speak on. The mountain must know."

Dravok's voice became hoarse, rough, full of broken memories.

"They came in waves. Not like before. Not like wild rabble. They came like... like soldiers. Orderly. Disciplined. As if they knew where our weaknesses lay."

Borin clenched his fist. Of course they knew that. Ordrim knew it.

"We held the pass for three days and three nights. The second night... was the worst. Something came, a shaman, or a shadow of a shaman. He... spoke to us, without a mouth. He made the rocks themselves slam against us."

Aldrik snarled. "A shaman? Graa'thuun's brood!"

"Yes," confirmed Dravok. "We lost a dozen men in seconds. Rocks shattered. Halls collapsed. And the worst part..."

He broke off.

Karim placed a hand on his shoulder. "Speech."

Dravok looked at Borin as if only he could bear the truth.

"You saw banners. Not orcish ones. Dwarven ones." The border guards bowed their heads. Dravok continued: "Ordrim carries the broken banner of the Silvershield clan."

An icy silence followed.

The banner of the Silver Shield—a clan extinct for centuries, living only in halls of memory. A banner of loyalty. Of honor.

And Ordrim had desecrated it.

Borin felt the hammer vibrate, as if he could feel the betrayal himself.

"Where is the passport now?" Borin asked quietly.

"Lost," said Dravok. "We abandoned him. The last order was to retreat and deliver the warning. We carried it out... but many of our brothers remained there."

He lowered his gaze. Anger was written on his face like runes in stone.

"If the pass falls, the upper fortress will fall too," the rune master said gloomily.

"And if the upper fortress falls," Kaidra added, "the entire mountain will burn."

The border guards were exhausted, but in their eyes still glowed the spark of a fire that never completely goes out — the fire of the dwarves, the fire that outlasts war and darkness.

Borin took a deep breath.

"We will reclaim the Rocky Pass," he said calmly.

The border guards looked up. A murmur went through the group.

“Alone?” Dravok asked.

“No,” replied Borin. “Not alone. With every dwarf who is still standing. With every stone that protects us. And with every light that glimmers in the darkness.”

He raised the hammer.

The runes ignited in golden fire, as if the ancestors themselves had laid their hands upon them.

“We are not going to war,” said Borin.

"We are taking back what belongs to us."

The captain's words still echoed as the dwarves of the border guard collapsed, exhausted, at the edge of the path. Some rested their foreheads on the handles of their axes, others sat silently, staring into the darkness of the tunnels as if they could still see the shadows of the orcs who had pursued them. But they had shaken off the enemy—or escaped, like a spark leaping from a dying fire before the embers die down.

Borin stood at the center of the narrow stone path that wound gently down into the depths, his hammer firmly in his hand. The rune master stepped beside him and spoke softly. "They will die if they do not rest. And we will die if we do not continue."

Borin nodded. "I know."

"The depths are calling you," murmured the rune master. "You feel it. We all feel it. It knows you will move on."

“Graa’thuun knows it too,” said Borin. “The shadows follow the traitor like dogs follow the scent of blood. And as long as Ordrim lives, he will lead them. I will confront him. One way or another.”

Karim approached, his steps heavy, but his eyes burning with fire. "If you confront Ordrim, I'll stand beside him. And if I split his skull open first, I won't regret it at all."

Aldrik, who had been crouching, now laboriously raised his head. "If we fight Ordrim, we fight the orcs. And if we fight the orcs, we have to reclaim the pass. And if we reclaim the pass... then we have to fight the shaman who hurls the rocks at us." He grimaced. "Sounds like just another day."

Karim laughed briefly, bitterly. "If we had a normal day, I would immediately become suspicious again."

The atmosphere relaxed slightly – just slightly. Then Dravok stepped forward again. He stood unsteadily, but his gaze had cleared.

“Prince,” he began, breathing heavily. “We will not rest.”

Borin turned to him. "You and your men are finished. You will die if you continue."

Dravok shook his head. "We are the border guard. Our oath is to hold what others give up on. We cannot rest while the passport falls."

"You have fulfilled your oath," said Kaidra, stepping out of the shadows. "You warned us. You survived. And that is enough."

"No," Dravok said firmly. "It's not enough. Not in these times."

Borin knew he was talking to a brick wall. Border guards never abandoned their posts. Not in war, not in peace. Not even in the face of death.

"We'll go with you," said Dravok. "No matter where."

Borin looked into the exhausted faces of the border guards. There was courage. There was pain. There was fear. There was anger. And above all: duty.

He couldn't stop her. And he wasn't allowed to.

"Okay," Borin finally said. "Then we'll go together."

A collective inhalation, a flickering of torchlight – hope in the smallest flame.

The forest ranger had warned them. The depth had tested them. And now the next step was imminent.

"We're marching to the northern wall," Borin explained. "From there we can reach the upper gallery of the rocky pass. If we hold it, we can attack the orcs from the rear."

The rune master swallowed. "This is a dangerous path. The upper galleries are old. Very old. Some sections... are alive."

"Then let them live," Karim grumbled. "As long as they don't eat us."

"Some people do exactly that," Aldrik added.

Borin remained calm. "We're going. Together. And we won't fall."

The march began.

The tunnels widened, and the green glow of the dark forest faded behind them. The air grew drier, the ground harder. The halls became larger, wider, more imposing—like ancient temples that had once radiated splendor and power. Now they were covered only in dust, silent and deserted.

The border guards marched in two lines, supporting each other, yet their posture remained upright. Borin walked at the head, the glowing light of the Deephammer illuminating the darkness and banishing the last vestiges of the forest from her mind.

But the peace did not last long.

After half an hour, Karim stopped abruptly. "Borin... do you hear that?"

Borin listened. At first he only heard the steady march of the steel-toed boots. Then – a quiet sound, barely perceptible.

A soft scratching. A scraping. A metallic whisper that seemed to come from the walls.

The rune master turned pale. "The upper galleries... they are awakening."

"What is it?" asked Dravok.

The runemaster raised his staff. "The stone. It has voices. And some... are old. Very old. Even older than the dwarven kingdoms."

Aldrik tensed his muscles. "If they're older than us, they're definitely not going to be friendly."

Karim growled. "That's a scraping noise, as if stones were trying to move themselves."

"They are doing it," Borin said calmly. "Getting ready."

The dwarves huddled together. Torches were held higher. Weapons were raised.

The halls trembled slightly. A gust of wind blew, although there was no wind in the depths.

Then they heard it.

One voice. No – not just one. Many.

Whispers seeping from the walls like water from a porous stone.

*"They are coming... shadow children... deep wanderers..."*  
*They come... to the pass... to betrayal..."*

Karim cursed loudly. "The mountain is talking!"

The rune master corrected: "These are not runes. And not the spirits of our ancestors. This is something that was here... before we were."

Aldrik shook his shoulders. "I don't care what it is. If it gets hostile, I'll hit it."

Borin raised the hammer. The light blazed brighter, and the voices fell silent.

"We will continue," said Borin.

And they left.

Until the hall ended. And the gallery began.

A narrow, winding path ran along a gigantic precipice. The northern wall was not far away – but between them and their goal lay a passage where a single misstep meant death.



Dravok stepped next to him. "This is the gallery of death."

"No," Borin replied. "This is our way."

The first step onto the Gallery of Death was like stepping out of the dwarven world and into something not meant for mortal feet. The narrow path wound along a precipice so deep that even the Deephammer's light couldn't reach its bottom. A cold, stagnant breeze rose from the abyss, and every breath tasted of ancient dust that had never seen the sun.

Borin stepped forward, his eyes bright, his hammer a golden flame in the darkness. "Slowly. One at a time. Always stay close to the rock face."

The border guards nodded. Even they, accustomed to the mountain's most dangerous heights and deepest ravines, moved here with cautious reverence. Not out of fear—dwarves fear no abyss—but because the Death Gallery was not merely a path, but a place where the mountain itself decided who was worthy to proceed.

Karim grumbled behind Borin. "I swear on my beard, if this path gets any narrower, I'll have to walk sideways."

Aldrik laughed softly. "Sideways is better than downwards."

"Getting down," Karim growled, "means dying."

"Perhaps," said the rune master, walking quietly along the wall with his staff. "Perhaps it also means hitting something that sleeps beneath us. And that would be worse than dying."

A murmur rippled through the border guards. Dravok glared at the runemaster. "We need courage, not gloomy prophecies."

"This is not a prophecy," replied the rune master. "It is a memory. An ancient one. One that our ancestors left us."

Borin nodded. "The mountain forgets nothing."

The path stretched before them like a stone serpent, seemingly endless. Sometimes narrow, sometimes wide, then again almost invisibly thin. In some places, they had to squeeze sideways along the wall. In others, the path spanned gaping chasms – ancient cracks that looked as if a gigantic claw had ripped the stone itself open.

Karim stopped at one such crack. "By the stone... that doesn't look like erosion."

"It isn't," said the rune master. "These tracks were made a long, long time ago. In a war whose scars the mountain still bears."

"Who cuts holes in a mountain?" asked Aldrik.

The runemaster looked at him. "Something bigger than dwarves. And older."

Silence fell. Everyone knew what they were talking about. The indigenous peoples of the mountain. Those who slept. Or pretended to sleep.

The path continued, and the tension grew with every step.

Then – a noise.

A faint clinking. A distant, metallic scratching. Like steel being dragged across stone.

Borin raised his hand. Everyone froze instantly.

"What is it?" whispered Kaidra.

The runemaster closed his eyes. "A voice. Not a dwarven one. Not an orcish one. Something... different."

"Where from?" asked Dravok.

"Hard to say... it echoes..." The rune master abruptly opened his eyes. "Above us!"

Borin raised the hammer – and at the same moment a huge shadow broke loose from above.

A body made of stone. A sprawling something of rock, root, and dark metal. Not a stone giant – too small. But not an ordinary being either.

"A gallery guard!" shouted the rune master.

The border guards raised their shields as the guardian crashed onto the path. The impact shook the entire gallery. Dust billowed up, stone splintered. Two dwarves lost their footing – but Dravok and Aldrik grabbed them in time.

The guard straightened up.

It was shaped like a massive hollow stone with four arms, in whose hands sharp-edged rocky crescents had formed. The eyes consisted of fissures in which pale blue light glowed.

"He is not an enemy!" cried the rune master.

The guard raised one of his sickles. The blue light flickered.

"Then he won't look like that," Karim growled, raising both axes.

"He is a guardian," the runemaster said quickly. "He only attacks if—"

The guard let out a thunderous roar that went right through you. The path vibrated. Dust detached itself from the ceiling.

"—when the path is in danger," the rune master finished with a cold expression.

"What does that mean?" Kaidra asked.

"That HE senses something that we cannot see."

Borin stepped forward. "Guardians of the mountain! We are not here to destroy the path. We are here to save the kingdom."

The guard stared at him. Not like an animal. Not like an enemy. Like a judge.

The hammer reacted.

A golden beam shot out of him – not harsh, not violent, but like a warm fire chasing away the cold. It struck the guard directly in the chest.

A moment later, the blue light in his eyes faded. His stony shoulders sank. His arms relaxed.

He spoke.

A deep, geological voice, as if the mountain itself were speaking through him:

**"The king's son..."**  
**the Chosen One of the Deep Hammer...**  
**the bearer of fire...**  
**"Does not fail."**

The dwarves froze.

The guard knelt down on one knee – the whole path vibrated, but not dangerously – and then he pointed forward with one of his sickles.

**"The enemy awaits you."**  
**The traitor leads him.**  
**"The passport is on fire."**

Borin stood still. The words struck him like a blade.

"Then we will take this war to them," he said quietly.

The guard bowed his head low.

**"Goes.**  
**"The mountain will keep you moving."**

He rose again, turned away, and merged with the wall as if he had never been there.

A deep breath went through the group.

Karim broke the silence. "I hate ghosts made of stone."

Aldrik grinned. "Not me. They're keeping me from falling."

"Forward," Borin commanded.

And they continued walking.

The path became narrower. Darker. More dangerous.

A red shimmer appeared in the distance. At first pale. Then stronger.

As if flames were blazing. Or a war were raging.

Borin knew without anyone having to tell him:

**That was the rocky pass.**

And a traitor was waiting there.

A brother.

An enemy.

### The rocky pass is burning

The red glow grew with every step Borin and his companions took through the narrow gallery of death. At first, it was only a flicker at the edge of their vision, a distant glow that faintly touched the walls like the last light of a dying fire. But the closer they came, the hotter the air became, the sharper the acrid smell that filled the darkness. The halls vibrated, not from earthquakes, but from the echo of a war raging in the distance.

Karim wiped the sweat from his forehead. "This is fire. A lot of fire."

Aldrik nodded grimly. "And not our fire."

The runemaster stopped, raised his staff, and set the runes on it aglow. "Orc fire. But not ordinary. This is ancient war fire, which only the shamans of the Blackhand tribes can ignite."

Dravok spat on the ground. "I never thought I'd see that damned light again in my life."

"Then you'll see it again today," said Borin, and continued walking. "And today it's burning for all of us."

When the gallery of death finally ended, the group stood in a place that took their breath away—not from fear, but from sheer scale. The rocky pass lay before them like an open, ancient maw of the mountain. A vast gorge, wide enough for two armies to march side by side. High stone walls rose up, crisscrossed by natural columns of black lava, melted and solidified in ages past.

And now the pass was on fire.

Orc fire shot up the walls in great jets of flame, as if the flames themselves were reaching for the heavens. Black smoke billowed from deeper caverns, mingling with the screams of dying orcs and the metallic screech of dwarven steel blades. Sparks flew like glowing insects, frantically swarming against the rock walls.

Karim muttered: "By the First Blacksmith's beard... this is worse than we imagined."

In fact, it was worse.

Dozens of orcs surged through the lower part of the pass, led by shamans who danced wildly, brandishing staves covered in bone and black runes. Some orcs even climbed the walls like spiders driven by bloodlust.

And at the very top — on the edge of a cliff — stood a dwarven figure.

Borin recognized him immediately.

Ordrim.

His once proud beard was disheveled, crisscrossed with dark veins like rotting roots. A yellowish gleam glowed in his eyes, not that of a living being, but that of a servant. He wore the banner of the Silvershield clan over his shoulder—but it was torn, defiled, desecrated. A black crack ran through the symbol like a cursed mark.

"Traitor," Aldrik growled.

Borin said nothing.

He only looked.

And Ordrim looked back.

A smile — not a happy one, not an angry one. A knowing one.

Then Ordrim raised a hand.

The orcs paused. The shamans fell silent.

A single command was given — not by words, but by will.

The orcs charged.

"Get into position!" Borin yelled.

The border guards immediately formed up, shields in the first rank, spears in the second. The dwarven chains clicked as they closed ranks—like a machine of flesh and steel.

Then the first orc collided with Aldrik's shield and was thrown back with a single blow. The battle broke out, raw and brutal. Blades clashed with bone, shields shattered skulls, blood flowed like hot metal across the ground.

A shaman raised his staff and hurled a wave of black fire that flew directly towards Borin.

Borin raised the deep hammer.

RUNE LIGHT.

A golden flash pierced the black flame as if it were smoke. The shaman cried out and staggered backward, his bones glowing red before he collapsed.

"Second attack!" shouted Dravok.

The second wave of orcs came, faster, more brutal, many with jagged spears and rusty shields. One horde let out an ancient war cry that made the walls of the pass tremble.

But the dwarves held their ground.

Again and again, the murderous bodies of the orcs clashed with the unwavering ranks of the border guard. Karim and Aldrik fought like roaring beasts, their axes flying like scythes through corn. Kaidra blocked a blow, ducked, and plunged her dagger into her opponent's throat.

The runemaster spoke words Borin did not understand. Words that came from a time when stone and magic were inseparable. A circle of golden light appeared around the rear line, pushing back the orcish magic.

But all this was just the beginning.

At the top of the cliff, Ordrim raised both hands — and the rocky pass itself answered.

The walls trembled. Stones splintered. Boulders crashed to the ground and broke into a thousand fiery splinters.

"He's calling the mountain against us!" shouted the Runemaster. "He has learned to channel Graa'thuun's power!"

Borin knew it.

He felt it.

And he opposed it.

"ORDRIM!" he roared over the noise of war.

The traitor remained motionless.

Just a moment.

But it was enough.

"COME DOWN AND FACE ME!"

Ordrim smiled.

A cold, distorted smile.

*"Soon, Borin. Soon."*

And then it happened.

The ground shook so violently that even the dwarves stumbled.

Something erupted from the middle of the pass.

A shadow.

A ghost.

Something that was half orc, half stone, half nightmare.

A creature of the shaman. Or of the traitor. Or — worse — a gift of the deep.

Karim shouted: “BY THE GODS... WHAT IS THIS!?”

The runemaster trembled. "A shadow warrior. A servant of primal fear. We have no more time!"

Borin swung the hammer.

"Then he will die today."

And he ran ahead.

Straight towards the monster.

The shadow warrior rose to his full height, a monstrosity of rock, flesh, and black magic, as if a nightmare had attempted to mold a body from the earth itself. His body was massive as a boulder, crisscrossed with veins of sinister energy that pulsed and glowed like embers beneath a suffocating layer of ash. His arms ended not in hands, but in razor-sharp, stone blades, each as long as a two-handed sword and twice as deadly. The creature's eyes were two narrow, white slits from which blazed the pure, undiluted fury of the abyss.

"Back!" shouted Dravok, but Borin did not hear him.

Borin ran.

The shadow warrior emitted a dull roar, simultaneously higher and lower than any natural throat could produce. Stone splintered. Rocks trembled. The ground itself threatened to collapse. The orcs retreated, not in fear, but in respect—this was not their creature. This was a gift from their master. A weapon of destruction.

The shadow warrior jumped.

A being of this size should never have been allowed to jump; it defied all nature, all logic. Yet he did, and the leap was faster than a dwarf could follow with his eyes. In a single instant, he bridged the distance between himself and Borin, raised his two bladed arms, and slammed them down.

The rune master shouted: "BORIN!"

But Borin was already in the light.

The Deephammer glowed—no, it burned—and Borin rammed it upwards against the descending blades. The force of the impact shattered the rock beneath his feet, as if a mountain had tried to rise from the ground. The shock coursed through his arms, made his shoulders vibrate, his bones creak.

But he held firm.

The creature roared, a sound that seemed to come from a world beyond the stone. The hammer glittered, golden runic marks crisscrossing Borin's forearms and chest, as if the mountain itself had amplified them in its fury.

"Back, creature of the deep!" Borin roared.

The bladed arms rebounded, leaving deep gashes in the steel of Borin's handguard. The shadow warrior staggered back a step. But then came the second attack—a horizontal blow that could have torn the dwarf in two had Borin not reacted quickly enough to slide under the blow.

The stone splintered where the blow landed. The warrior screamed again.

And now Borin arrived.

He swung the deep-hammer in a wide arc that sliced through air and dust, striking the creature's chest with a force that would have pulverized any ordinary orc or troll. But the shadow warrior did not retreat. His body vibrated, the rock cracked into fine fissures—but he stood firm.

He held his ground.

And Borin immediately saw why.

Something was glowing inside his body — deep within the stony flesh.

Something black. Something round. Something alive.

A core.

The source of power.

The runemaster recognized it as well. "A heart shard! Borin, he carries a shard of the deep within him! Destroy the core!"

But the shadow warrior responded to the words and once again threw himself upon the dwarves with wild, otherworldly power. Karim roared and threw himself into the battle, Aldrik behind him, the border guards forming up and establishing a second line behind Borin.

The battle in the rocky pass raged on, but the fight against the monster was a war within a war.



Karim leaped onto the creature's back and slashed at its neck with both axes, but its bladed arms swept him sideways, tossing him to the ground like a lump of ore. Aldrik rammed a spearhead deep into the monster's hip. The creature didn't even react. It seemed to know no pain.

"He's too strong!" shouted Dravok.

"No!" Borin yelled. "He's just standing still!"

And then Borin did something that no dwarf would ever have done.

He arranged to meet him.

He deliberately took a step too late. The stone edge struck his shoulder, cutting through leather, chain, and fur, igniting a burning pain that raced through his body like fire. Borin cried out, was thrown backward, and slid several meters across the ground.

"BORIN!" Kaidra shouted.

But Borin straightened up, the hammer gripping him tighter than ever before. Blood ran down his arm. His breathing was labored, and his eyes burned.

"Now I know how low he hits..." he muttered. "Then he'll see how low I hit."

The shadow warrior now ran towards him, an avalanche of flesh and rock, his footsteps an earthquake, his rage a hurricane.

Borin did the only thing he could:

He ran towards him.

The impact was like the clash of two worlds. The hammer struck the creature's chest, its core glowing even darker. An explosion of light and shadow engulfed both combatants, causing the dwarves to retreat, the orcs to scream, and the flames to flicker.

The shadow warrior lost his footing. For the first time.

And Borin joined in.

"FOR THE MOUNTAIN!"

The hammer crashed down on the same spot again.

"FOR MY PEOPLE!"

A crack opened in the stone ribcage.

"FOR WHAT HE DOES TO US!"

The core became visible — a pulsating sphere of black light that vibrated like a heart.

Borin raised the hammer for the final blow.

"AND FOR ALL THOSE HE TAKED!"

The gavel fell.

The core burst.

A scream like death itself filled the pass. Black energy shot into the sky, the flames of the orcs were sucked in, and the shadow warrior crumbled to dust, which swept across the ground in a single gust of wind.

A moment of complete silence followed.

Then all hell broke loose again.

The orcs screamed. The shamans fell to their knees. The border guards roared in triumphant fury.

But Borin saw only one.

Ordrim.

Above.

Silently.

Observing.

And smiling.

Not out of fear. Not out of anger.

But as if that's exactly what he wanted.

The dust of the crumbling shadow warrior still hung in the air, as if the creature had merely reduced to ash that the mountain refused to accept. The flames of the orc fire flickered restlessly, as if they had lost their master, and in the glaring glare of battle, for a moment nothing could be heard but the heavy panting of the dwarves and the distant crash of collapsing boulders. The rocky pass itself seemed to listen, shaken by what had just transpired.

But this breaking point did not last.

A single shout cut through the silence like an axe blade:

"THEY ARE COMING!"

Dravok's voice.

A second army of orcs stormed out of the shadows of the lower tunnels. Larger. Angrier. More bestial. Some wore armor made of patched-together bone plates, others brandished club-like weapons that looked as if carved from the ribs of a giant beast. And behind them—the shamans. Three of them. Their staves burned with dark energy that distorted the air.

"They seek revenge for the Core!" cried the Runemaster. "The Shadow Warrior was not merely a tool—he was one of their sacred guardians!"

"Holy?" Karim snarled. "Then we'll bury their holy one too!"

Borin felt his blood throb, the wound on his shoulder throb, the hammer pulse in his hand. But his gaze went upwards, to the spot where Ordrim had stood.

The traitor had disappeared.

Naturally.

Because his game was not yet over.

"Form the lines!" Borin roared. "First rank: shield wall! Second rank: spears! Third rank: hammers and axes – on my signal!"

The border guards reacted instantly. Despite their exhaustion, they straightened up, as if their weariness were being blown away by the mountain's own breath. Dravok stood beside Borin, his eyes burning with battle-hungry rage.

"Prince," he said gasping, "I thought we would never again have a real reason to jump into battle."

"Then jump twice today," Borin replied, grinning crookedly.

The orcs charged.

Their footsteps made the earth tremble. The bone weapons rattled, the screams echoed, and the heat of the fire behind them intensified, as if the flames themselves wanted to become part of the battle.

"SHIELD WALL!" Borin yelled.

The dwarves raised their shields. The impact was a tremor.

The first line of orcs crashed against the wall like a wave against rocks. Some were thrown back, others got stuck and tried to hack their way through the gaps with brutal blows. But the dwarves stood firm, immobile as a living wall.

"SPEARS!"

The second rank advanced. Orcs fell, howling, spitting, dying.

The battle was wild, chaotic, close-quarters. But amidst this chaos, Borin was a storm in the form of a dwarf. The Deephammer burned in his hands, each blow a tremor, each strike a ray

of light. A wave of orcs fell beneath his fury, and his cry filled the pass like an echo of kings past.

"FOR THE DEEP!"

The border guards responded with a shout that shook the rocks.

Aldrik leaped forward, knocking one orc off his feet, then a second. He blocked a blade with his shield and smashed the shield's edge into his opponent's face with full force. Karim stood beside him, swinging his double axes like a whirlwind of steel and fury. Kaidra ducked beneath an orc spear, slashed the attacker's legs, and plunged her dagger into his throat.

But then the air began to shimmer.

The first shaman raised his staff.

"B, cover yourselves!" shouted the rune master.

Too late.

A wave of black energy washed over the dwarves, grabbing them like a storm of shadows and hurling several of them to the ground. Some groaned, some screamed, but none surrendered. The second shamanic wave followed immediately—this time a beam of burning, putrid power that shattered the rocks.

Borin raised the hammer.

The rune light answered.

A shield of golden fire enveloped the first line of dwarves, weakening the spell, but the pressure was so great that Borin was almost brought to his knees.

"HOLD ON, BORIN!" Kaidra roared.

"I'M HOLDING ON!" he shouted back, bracing himself against the force as if against a raging storm.

The protective circuit exploded in a shower of sparks.

Borin staggered – but he was standing.

"NOW!" thundered the rune master. "ATTACK THE SHAMANS!"

Karim and Aldrik immediately charged forward. Kaidra followed. Three dwarves against three shamans – an unequal battle, but a necessary one.

The runemaster murmured ancient words, and from his staff rose a golden rune that began to float in the air, weakening the orc magic.

Borin saw his chance.

He raised the hammer and ran directly into the gap that the shaman's spell had created.

Orcs threw themselves at him – he drove them away. Stone shattered – he didn't care. Screams howled – he barely heard them. Everything blurred.

Everything except a goal.

The first shaman saw Borin coming, raised his staff – but then Kaidra's blade sliced through his arm. The scream echoed, the magic dissipated.

The second shaman hurled flames – Aldrik blocked them with his shield.

Karim leaped out of the smoke and rammed his axe deep into the chest of the third shaman.

But the fourth...

The fourth shaman was nowhere to be seen.

Borin stopped abruptly and felt it:

A presence. A power. A glance.

From above.

He slowly raised his head.

And there he stood.

Right at the top. At the edge of the cliff. The flames behind him like wings of fire.

**Ordrim.**

The traitor raised his staff.

And the rocks began to break.

The entire pass vibrated. Stone cracked open. The very ceiling of the halls seemed to collapse.

Ordrim's voice echoed like mockery:

*"You wanted to confront me, Borin."  
Then come...  
and die up there –  
where kings fall."*

## The siege begins

The rocky pass trembled to its foundations as Ordrim's voice thundered through the vast halls. The treacherous dwarf stood on the highest cliff, a dark shadow against the burning red of the orcish fires, and beneath his feet the mountain itself writhed with the dark power he unleashed. Boulders ripped from the walls, shattering like glass and crashing thunderously into the ravine below. Dust billowed up, obscuring the battle like a gray veil.

Borin stared upwards, his eyes fixed on the traitor. The tremors of the pass made it difficult to stand upright, but the Deephammer burned hot in his hand, as if it were reaching for Ordrim himself. A scream rose in Borin's chest, raw and unfiltered—the scream of a dwarf whose heart had been shattered by betrayal and war.

But he didn't shout it out. Not now. Not here, where every breath decided the next battle.

"RETRAIN TO THE HIGH-RISE GALLERY!" Dravok shouted over the roar. "THE PASS IS COLLAPSING!"

A massive crack ran through the ground, like a gaping scar that spread in seconds. Several orcs were swept down, their screams swallowed by the yawning abyss. Two border guards also lost their footing, but Aldrik and Karim grabbed them and threw them back to safety as the ground crumbled behind them.

"We can't stay!" cried Kaidra. "Ordrim wants to bury us here!"

The runemaster rammed his staff into the ground, the runes glowing. "He has touched the veins of the rock! He is manipulating the heart of the pass! We must go higher! Now!"

Borin hesitated. Every fiber of his being wanted to rush upwards, to tear the traitor down with his own hands. But duty – the mountain itself – spoke louder.

"PULL BACK!" he finally yelled. "ROW BY ROW! COVER EACH OTHER!"

The border guards reacted immediately. The shield wall didn't crumble in panic, but in practiced steps, as they slowly made their way to the northern high gallery. Meanwhile, the orcs pressed forward, once again spurred on by the voices of two surviving shamans, who brandished their staffs and poured hot, green light over their hordes.

"They're gathering!" shouted Kaidra, running down the flank. "They're trying to catch us in the corridor!"

"Then let them come!" roared Karim, his axe already dripping. "They have no room to dance in the corridor!"

Borin cut down one last orc whose blade had passed just a hand's breadth from his face, then he turned and followed his comrades into the narrow, high tunnels that had not been entered for centuries.

The upper gallery was narrow – an old defensive structure into which the last defenders had retreated during times of great siege. Holes in the walls and arrow slits crisscrossed the tunnel, a dwarven fortress of narrow bottlenecks.

"Quick! The orcs are behind us!" shouted Dravok.

Kaidra and two border guards tipped heavy boulders in front of the entrance, just in time, because the next moment a horde of orcs crashed into them. The tunnel shook, rocks splintered, but the makeshift wall held.

Still.

"That won't stop them for long," Aldrik gasped. "They're bringing battering rams!"

Indeed, amidst the thunder of the pass, one could now hear the dull, rhythmic thumping of wood and metal. Heavy footsteps. Shouts. Orcish war drums.

"They want to storm the gallery," murmured the rune master. "That's how every siege begins."

Borin stepped into the center of the gallery, hammer raised. The light of the runes illuminated the ancient wall reliefs: depictions of old dwarven wars, great battles, and the first kings. And in these reliefs was now reflected the burning rage of a living dwarf.

"Then let them try," he said quietly.

Dravok stepped beside him. "King's son—there are many of them. More than we can count. And Ordrim leads them."

Borin nodded. "He knows these tunnels. He knows our tactics. He knows every breath we take."

"Then we're lost?" asked Aldrik, half mockingly, half seriously.

Borin shook his head. And suddenly, despite all the darkness, despite the heat of the burning pass, despite the danger that surrounded them, his voice seemed clear and unwavering.

"No. Because he has forgotten who we are."

The border guards straightened up, the words like a hammer blow to their hearts.

"He forgot that we are dwarves of the mountain," Borin continued. "That we stand where others flee. That we fight when others die."

He raised the hammer.

The runic light illuminated the entire gallery.

"He forgot that the mountain is on our side."

A thunderous crash resounded—the first battering ram struck the barricade. The stone groaned.

Karim grinned broadly. "Then we'll show them what a siege FEELS like!"

Kaidra drew her blades. "To the very end!"

"To the very last!" the border guards repeated.

"No," Borin said quietly. "Until victory."

The next blow of the battering ram made the rocks tremble. Cracks ran through the blockade.

The battle for the upper gallery began.

The battering ram crashed against the blockade again, this time so hard that even the old gallery trembled. Rock dust trickled from the ceiling, and a deep, menacing tone vibrated in the walls, as if the mountain itself were witnessing what was happening—and testing who was worthy of it. Borin held his breath as the crack in the blockade widened, opening like a gaping mouth about to scream out the orcs' fury.

"They're hitting with full force!" Dravok gasped. "Two more blows, maybe three!"

Karim laughed, a rough, confident laugh. "Then perhaps we should make some room—for our axes!"

"Hold your ranks!" Borin commanded. His voice was firm, rocky as the halls of the mountain itself. "They shall not break through us. Not here. Not today."

The border guards drew closer together, their shields forming an impenetrable wall of steel. Behind them, their blades glowed, sharp as the words of ancient oaths. Kaidra positioned herself to the side, where the rock offered natural protection and where the attack would most likely be concentrated.

Then came the third blow.

A monstrous crash, accompanied by a shriek from the orc horde. The boulders shattered. Shards flew through the air, missing Borin's face by mere centimeters. A concentrated wave of foul-smelling orc breath poured through the gap.

"THEY'RE COMING!" shouted Aldrik.

And they came.

The first orc charged through the gap, a broad-shouldered berserker wielding a double-bladed bone club. He was barely squeezed through the opening when Borin struck him down as he passed through—a sharp impact that shattered his sternum. Kaidra slid past him and stabbed the second orc, who was trying to squeeze through, deep in the ribs.

But that was just the beginning.

Amid a roaring storm of war cries, orcs burst through the gap, one after another, wild, insatiable, blinded by bloodlust. But the dwarves of the pass were no leaf in the wind. They were the rock. They were the resistance.



"SPEARS FORWARD!" Borin roared.

The second rank of dwarven lances advanced in a mighty thrust, simultaneously, coordinated, as a single entity. The first wave of orcs crashed against it like waves against cliffs. Bloody. Chaotic. Final.

But then came the second wave — and it was stronger.

A heavy orc, larger than the others, pushed his way through the narrow passage. His skin was dark green and covered with burn scars, his eyes red as glowing coals. A warlord. In his hand he held a massive dagger, its blade covered with rune-like symbols.

"Back!" warned Dravok. "He's one of the damned!"

The Damned — orcs who had voluntarily merged with the powers of the shamans. A terrible act that gave them unnatural strength, but gnawed away at their minds like rotten wood.

The damned one stormed.

Aldrik raised the shield — the orc chopped it in two.

Dravok leaped forward, thrusting his axe into the monster's arm — the orc roared, struck back, and hurled Dravok against the rock face.

"DRAVOK!" Kaidra shouted, wanting to go to him — but two orcs blocked her way.

Borin shouted: "STAY IN THE LINE! I'VE GOT HIM!"

The Deephammer now glowed with a light that outshone even the flames of the orcs. Borin stepped forward, his heart burning with the same blaze. The damned one turned to him, as if sensing the violence emanating from the hammer.

The two raced towards each other.

The orc swung his runic dagger down from above. Borin parried with a brutal movement, the blow tearing sparks from the metal of the hammer. The orc pressed on, pressing down on the blade, his strength a black weight that made Borin's arms tremble.

"DIE, DWARV!" roared the damned one, his voice an echo of malevolent magic.

"YOU FIRST!" replied Borin.

He eased the pressure, retreated with lightning speed, and swung the hammer in a wide arc. The blow struck the orc on the side of his skull. Bones splintered. The damned man staggered, but he did not fall.

Not yet.

Karim rushed forward and rammed both axes into the monster's throat. Aldrik, also back on his feet, struck the remaining arm with the spare blade.

The orc fell. Blind with rage. In his last gasp, he lashed out once more.

Borin positioned the hammer — aimed. And rammed it right into the damned man's face.

The skull exploded into stone, bone, and green ash.

A scream went through the orcs — a scream of true fear.

The dwarves responded with a battle cry that made the tunnel tremble:

"FOR THE DEEP THRONE!"

But the battle was still far from over.

“THEY ARE BACKING!” Kaidra shouted.

“No,” corrected the rune master. “They are gathering.”

The orcs regrouped before the narrow passage. Dense ranks. New shamans. And behind them —

A gigantic shadow. A silhouette. Something multi-armed, moving like a living nightmare.

Aldrik whispered: "By the ore of the ancestors... what is this now?"

Borin slowly raised the hammer.

"The second part of the siege."

A bang sounded in the distance. A horn. Then a second.

Ordrim's Horn.

The siege had begun.

The rocky pass trembled beneath the footsteps of the advancing orcs, but in the narrow upper gallery, the dwarven warriors stood like a living wall. Smoke from the burning lower halls rose slowly, filling the air with a pungent odor—ash, blood, and old, dark fire. It was the scent of a siege beginning. A siege that would test not only the body but also the mind.

Borin stood at the forefront, the Deephammer clutched tightly, its runic glow flickering in the gallery's shadows. The narrow opening through which the orcs intended to invade was the only way up. And that was precisely why this was where the battle would be decided. Not in the open flames of the tunnels below. Not in the vast halls of the ancestors. But in this narrow maw of stone, where courage and steel mattered more than numbers.

The battering ram struck the makeshift barricade again. Dust billowed up. The stones groaned under the weight of the blow. But they held.

Still.

"Do you hear that?" Kaidra tilted her head slightly. And indeed – beneath the orcs' shrieks and stamping, a new sound could now be heard. A soft, crawling scraping. As if many tiny claws were running along the stone.

"What among the ancient runes is this?" Aldrik raised his axe.

The runemaster turned pale. "Something we don't need up here. They're sending spider vanguard."

"Spiders!" growled Karim. "Wonderful. Now all we need are rats in armor and the day will be perfect."

"These are no ordinary spiders," the runemaster explained. "They are brood spiders, bred by the shamans. Small, but fast. And they carry venom that can burn even dwarven blood."

As if the mountain had heard his words, the first creatures appeared in the opening. Unnaturally large spiders with black chitinous exoskeletons and poison-green eyes crawled through the cracks in the rock face. Some as big as a helmet. Others large enough to carry a small child.

And then more came.

Dozens.

Hundreds.

They filled the crevices like a crawling, living carpet.

"Fight them back!" Borin shouted.

The dwarves did what they did best. Steel sang. Boots pounded. Sparks flew as blades and boots crushed the creepy-crawlies. Kaidra twirled her two blades, slicing several spiders in a single sweep. Aldrik squashed two beneath his boot, while Karim worked with both axes as if splitting firewood.

But there were so many.

"They just want to create an opening!" shouted Dravok. "As soon as the wall falls, the orcs will overrun us!"

"Then the wall must not fall!" Borin roared.

He raised the hammer. Runes flickered, casting golden light into the narrow tunnel. A shot of pure energy erupted from the hammer, shattering an entire swarm of spiders at once. The force of the explosion even made the orcs behind it stagger.

A moment of calm followed – brief, but enough to breathe.

But then came the next blow.

And this blow was different. Heavier. Deeper. Darker.

The stone itself twitched. The ground trembled as if a huge animal had run into the rock.

"What... was that?" Kaidra moved closer to Borin.

The rune master did not answer. He only stared ahead, his face pale as ash.

"That wasn't a battering ram," he whispered.

The orcs behind the barricade suddenly cheered – a loud, furious, ominous howl.

Another blow.

This time, the first stone of the barricade broke free and was hurled into the gallery.

Then something pushed its way through the opening.

No orc hand. No battering shovel.

A massive clawed hand made of grey, rocky flesh.

The wall behind the barrier cracked a little further, and then they saw it – an eye as big as a blacksmith's hammer, yellowish, pale and full of ancient, dormant rage.

"By the ancestors..." Aldrik took a step back. "A rock ogre!"

"No," corrected the rune master. "Worse."

The creature forced its way a short way through the opening. The stones groaned under its weight. Its claws dug deep into the rock as if it were soft wood.

A rumble filled the air.

"A cave titan," the rune master spoke tonelessly. "A guardian of primeval times. He has been awakened."

"Ordrim..." Borin gritted his teeth. "He plays with things that even kings fear."

The cave titan roared – an infernal, deep, vibrating sound, like the echo of a long-extinct monster. The gallery trembled more violently than before. Dust trickled from the cracks in the ceiling.

"HOLD THE LINE!" Borin yelled. "WE ARE THE MOUNTAIN!"

Karim stood at the edge of the quarry and dug his feet into the ground. "Then we'll stand like a rock!"

Aldrik came up beside him. "Until he crushes us, you mean."

Kaidra and the border guards formed a semicircle. Everyone knew: if this thing penetrated, the gallery was lost.

The cave titan continued through the opening. Its massive head became visible – with tusks of solid stone and a forehead protected by natural armor plates.

Dravok grabbed Borin by the arm. "We can't hold this! He's too big!"

Borin shook him off. "We'll hold on until we can't stand anymore."

The Titan swung his arm – with one arm as heavy as an entire block of anvil.

The blow came.

And Borin swung the hammer against it.

A burst of light filled the gallery. A crash like the shattering of two mountains reverberated through the tunnel. The Titan was pushed back – not by much, but enough.

Borin trembled. His legs quaked. But he stood.

“ONCE AGAIN!” he shouted at the Titan, as if he were a cursed animal that had to obey.

The orcs on the other side of the breach howled with furious rage. They pushed. They screamed. They called out Ordrim's name.

And above it all came a voice, throaty, clanging with madness.

*"Break them, Titan."  
Break them for me."*

Ordrim.

The traitor.

He personally led the attack.

The Titan raised his arm again.

And the gallery trembled like a leaf in a storm.

“BORIN!” Kaidra cried in horror. “WE ARE FALLING—”

But Borin shouted:

"NO! NOT IF THE MOUNTAIN CARRIES US!"

The hammer burned. The runes glowed. And Borin leaped towards the Titan.

The battle for the upper gallery roared – and the siege of the Deep Realms had finally begun.

## The stone giants of the ancients

The Cave Titan's blow echoed through the gallery like a mountain breaking, and Borin was thrown back several steps. His back slammed against the rock wall, a cry of pain escaping him, but the Deephammer remained firmly in his hand. Dust trickled from the ceiling, stone fragments danced through the air like deadly snowflakes. Behind the Titan, the orcs roared, their voices a chorus of madness and bloodlust.

“BORIN!” Kaidra shouted, but the king’s son had already raised his hammer again.

The Titan swung again, his massive stone fist raised like a jagged rock about to shatter the sky. Borin leaped aside. The fist slammed into the wall, raining down a layer of loose rock. The gallery groaned under the onslaught, as if it were about to crumble apart.

“WE WON’T HOLD LONG OUT!” roared Aldrik, who, along with Karim, was trying to secure the opening as spiders and orcs pushed their way through the cracks.

But Borin barely heard him. His gaze was fixed on the Titan—and beyond, on something that lay deeper within the stone. Something he could feel. A presence. An ancient power slumbering within the mountain itself, now seemingly awakening.

The Titan roared again, a deep, trembling voice that sounded like the echo of lost ages. His eyes—two glowing points in a face of stone—fixed Borin with an unbridled, instinctive rage.

“Come here, you rock beast,” Borin muttered, gritting his teeth. “I want to talk to you.”

The Titan charged forward. The earth trembled. The orcs cheered.

But before the Titan reached Borin, something happened that no one expected.

An earthquake—deeper, older, more powerful than the Titan's pounding—rolled through the mountain. The rock itself seemed to inhale. A sound like breaking stone filled the air, but this sound was not the Titan's work.

It was a call. An awakening. An ancient sound that vibrated in the bones of the dwarves.

The Titan paused. The orcs fell silent. Even the dust seemed to float.

"What was that...?" whispered Kaidra.

The runemaster stepped forward slowly, his eyes wide with fear—and hope. “That... was no orc. And no titan. That was the mountain.”

Another blow deep beneath them, like the heart of the mountain itself. And then —

A crack in the wall to the right of the gallery. First small, then larger, then bursting open like the shell of an ancient egg.

The Titan turned, his massive head full of restlessness.

And out of the crack emerged... a hand.

A hand made of grey stone. Ten times larger than that of a dwarf, but shaped as if a master sculptor had created it.

Karim stared. "Among the ancestors... that is..."

The rune master whispered the word that no one dared to speak:

"A stone giant."

The cave titan roared angrily, as if sensing the arrival of his ancient adversary.

The rock face continued to break open, enormous boulders fell into the gallery, and slowly, step by thunderous step, the figure of the stone giant rose from its millennia-old captivity in the rock.

He was massive, even larger than Titan, made of the same rock as the mountain itself. Runes glowed on his chest, in a language older than any ancestral hall. His eyes were two deep, serene lights, like molten gold.

The orcs screamed. Some ran away. Others fell to their knees, unable to comprehend what they were seeing.

The Titan turned, raised his fists, and roared at the stone giant.

The giant fully straightened, his head almost touching the ceiling of the gallery. A deep breath filled the cavern, as if the mountain itself were breathing for the first time in eons.

Then the giant spoke.

His voice was an earthquake. A rumble. An echo from the depths of creation.

**"Son of the rock... you call us."**

Borin took a step back. "I—I didn't shout anything."

The giant gazed at the Deepphammer. The runes on it glowed brighter than ever before.

**"The hammer calls. The mountain answers."**

Kaidra whispered: "He is one of the Ancients. A living guardian."

"Not alive," the rune master corrected reverently. "He is part of the mountain itself."

The Titan roared again and struck. His fist crashed into the stone giant's chest.

And bounced off as if she had hit a cliff.

The giant barely moved. He turned his head slowly, as if looking at a bothersome animal.

Then he raised his hand.

A single, massive, rocky hand.

And struck.

The Titan was hurled against the wall as if it were made of clay. The entire gallery shook. Orcs were buried under falling stones. The Titan tumbled dazed back into the tunnel.

The border guards roared with shocked fear — and new hope.

“We have... a giant on our side...” murmured Aldrik.

Borin stepped forward, the hammer still glowing.

"Old Man... will you help us against the orcs? Against the traitor?"

The giant lowered his head. A deep shadow fell over Borin.

**"We awaken when the mountain weeps."  
And the mountain weeps.**

He saw the tunnel where the Titan lay.

**“We will fight with you, Prince of the King.”**

And then he raised his other hand — a hand so large that it filled half the gallery —

**"Call the others."**

The runemaster froze. "Others...? How many...?"

The giant did not reply with words.

But with a blow to the ground.

A blow that echoed through the veins of the mountain. A blow that penetrated far beyond the pass. A blow that shattered the ancient silence of the deep realms.

And in the distance — very deep — voices of stone answered.

The answer from the depths echoed like distant thunder over ancient stones, and Borin felt the tremor not only beneath his feet but in his own chest, as if his heart beat in unison with the mountain. The surrounding walls shimmered with a dull, golden light, as if the runes deep within the tunnels had awakened. The air vibrated slightly—barely perceptible to ordinary ears, but unmistakable to those who knew the language of the rock.

And at that moment something strange happened: A silence fell over the orc horde before the gallery. No panting. No cursing. No scraping of armor against stone. Even the cave titan — struggling to his feet again — was silent for a blink of an eye, as if he understood that a power greater than his own rage had awakened.



The stone giant raised his head and listened. The runes on his chest glowed more intensely.

"They are coming," murmured the rune master, his voice trembling. "The ancients are gathering..."

Karim sighed. "If that means we're getting more of these giants, then let them keep collecting. I'll take any boulder that'd rather smash our orcs than us."

Aldrik patted Karim on the shoulder. "Just be careful none of them mistake you for a pebble."

"Ha!" Karim was about to retort when suddenly a soft buzzing sound shot through the air.

An arrow.

Not an orcish one.

It was too clean. Too elegant. Too bright.

He hit the tunnel floor just in front of the orc front, and the shaft glowed faintly, as if moonlight were trapped inside.

The dwarves froze. So did the orcs.

"That wasn't a dwarf arrow," Kaidra said quietly.

"No," murmured the runemaster. "That was elven steel."

Borin turned in surprise towards the side passage. He could have sworn he hadn't heard anyone coming. But there, in a barely noticed gap between two old buttresses, stood a figure, as motionless as a shadow—and yet as clear as a torch flame.

An Elbe.

Tall, slender, his skin pale as dawn, his hair dark as wet silver. He wore a long, simple coat of dark green fabric that seemed to whisper like leaves in the wind, even though there was no wind. The bow in his hand was so finely crafted that it hardly looked like a weapon, but rather like an artfully crafted branch.

Karim whispered: "So it is... Elves in the mountain."

Aldrik rubbed his beard. "I thought the long-eared ones preferred to stay near their stars."

The elf stepped forward a few steps, and his voice was calm as still snow: "The forest trembled. Even the roots of the oldest trees whisper your pain."

Borin took a step forward, a little suspicious, a little irritated—yet respectful. "You are... far off your paths, rangers."

The Elbe River tilted its head slightly. "Some paths choose us, not the other way around."

He looked at the stone giant, then at the orc horde. His gaze lingered on Borin.

"The mountain is not the only one that is awakening."

A hint. A clue, and yet a warning.

Then he raised the bow again, drew it back effortlessly — and shot.

The arrow pierced the skull of an orc who was positioning himself in front of the Titan's gaping maw. Then the elf disappeared back into the shadows of the side passage as if he had never been there.

"He's just... gone!" Kaidra murmured.

"Typical Elb," Karim grumbled. "Come in, mutter esoteric riddles, shoot an elegant arrow, and disappear again. The further away from our beer, the happier they are."

But Borin smiled.

"His arrow was both a warning and a greeting. And more: the Elves know what is happening here."

The runemaster nodded. "They have their ways. They see war from afar... and up close, if need be."

"And they will see him again," said Borin. "Because this will not be the last time."

The mountain rumbled again, this time deeper. The stone giant straightened up.

**"The elders are awakening,"** He said it in a tone that made even orcs tremble.

**"Do not turn around — look ahead. For what awakens behind you is destined for the enemy."**

The next moment it became clear: The ground vibrated again. Footsteps. Slow, heavy, enormous footsteps in the distance.

Not that of a Titan. Not that of an Orc. Not that of a Dwarf.

Several giant stones. Many.

They came from the tunnels, from the forgotten shafts, from the deepest wounds of the mountain. They followed the call of the Tiefenhammer.

Borin sensed the power that filled the rock. A power that silenced even the orcs. A power that the traitor Ordrim must have felt—wherever he stood.

"Get ready!" Borin shouted.

Karim raised the axes. "For the mountain!"

Aldrik: "For the king's son!"

Kaidra: "For the Under Realms!"

The stone giant turned towards the Titan, who laboriously got back to his feet.

And when the second generation of elders emerged from the shadows, like living bastions of ore and rock, Borin knew:

**The battle was no longer just dwarves against orcs.**

**It was Berg against betrayal.**

**Earth versus Chaos.**

**Stone against darkness.**

And the mountain had finally awakened.

The ground now trembled so violently that even the oldest beams of the upper gallery creaked under the pressure like ship planks in a storm. Borin felt the vibrations through the soles of his boots, right down to his very core. It wasn't the trembling of a collapsing tunnel—it was rhythmic. Deliberate. Alive.

The steps of our ancestors.

The orcs were the first to understand. A silence, as unnatural as a stopped heartbeat, fell over their ranks. Even the shamans paused, as if an invisible hand were choking them. The cave titan, who had just moments before charged at the gallery in a furious rage, now turned with a sound that was half growl, half ancient fear.

"He knows what's coming," murmured the rune master. "He has felt this power before... a very, very long time ago."

The tunnel opening suddenly glowed with an earthy, golden hue. Not light—but the pure radiance of ancient power. Then the first ancestor broke through the shadows.

He was smaller than the one they had seen before, yet still twice the size of a cave titan. His skin was like layered granite, crisscrossed with gently pulsating lines of liquid gold. His face was serene, dignified, like that of an ancient stone king.

But he was not alone.

Behind him, two more stone giants emerged, each a mountain of ore and rock in its own right, each bearing different runes, different patterns, different symbols of power. One had crystalline veins running across its chest and arms, resembling frozen lightning. The other appeared older, more rounded, as if he were hewn less from raw stone and more from solid rock.

Karim whispered: "By all the forges in the north... we have an army."

Aldrik scratched his beard. "I suddenly feel very small."

"So are you," Kaidra said, grinning.

Borin did not smile. He stood frozen, his gaze fixed on the three gigantic figures that now positioned themselves between him and the orc horde.

The oldest elder spoke. His voice filled the gallery not with volume, but with weight.

**"King's son."  
The depths called.  
We have come.**

Borin stepped forward. He lowered neither his hammer nor his eyes.

"I did not call your name, venerable giants."

The giant inclined his head. A greeting. Or an acknowledgment.

**"Not you. That's amazing."  
The mountain hears him.  
The mountain knows him.  
The mountain obeys him."**

A murmur went through the dwarves.

The Runemaster whispered: "The Deephammer... it is not merely an heirloom. It is a key. A command. A core element of the ancients."

Borin understood. Not with his head — but in his gut, in his bones, in the mountain blood that shaped every dwarf.

He raised the hammer.

And the runes responded, bright and warm.

**"Ancestors,"** he said. "We face treason and darkness. The Rocky Pass is falling, the orcs are burning our halls, and a son of our people has turned against us. We need your strength."

The stone giants looked at each other.

Then the eldest stepped forward.

**"We are not fighting for you, Prince of the King."  
We fight... with you."**

The next moment, the giants thundered towards the orc horde.

The first elder swung an arm—and three orcs flew through the air like toys. The second giant slammed both hands into the ground, and a jolt of pure earthwalking sent a whole line of shamans flying. The third giant bent down, seized the cave titan like a child a wild animal, lifted it up, and hurled it against the rock face, where it shattered with a deafening crash.

The orcs broke out.

Some ran. Some screamed. Some fell to their knees.

But it was no use — the stone giants were unstoppable.

"FORWARD!" Borin yelled. "NOW!"

The dwarf front stormed out of the gallery, the border guards in the wedge, their shouts like blacksmith's hammers.

Karim leaped onto the back of an orc and drove both axes into its skull. Aldrik struck with such force that his blade sent sparks flying from the rock face. Kaidra glided like a shadow between the enemies, her daggers sending blood spraying in fine arcs.

The rune master cast a banishing light that drove back the last spiders and blinded the shamans.

And Borin...

Borin was a storm of light.

The deep hammer was no longer a tool. It was alive. It was singing.

His light merged with the pulse of the ancestors. His runes glowed like the hearts of giants. Every blow was a judgment. Every hit was a victory.

Then, amidst the chaos, Borin heard a voice.

Not loud. Not close.

But of course.

*"Good, Borin."*

*Very good.*

*"Come closer."*

He froze.

That was Ordrim.

He was everywhere — and nowhere. A voice that slipped through stone like a whisper.

The traitor was alive. He was watching. He was waiting.

And Borin suddenly knew something that sent a chill down his spine:

**This was not the battle.**

**This was just the gateway.**

The ancients had awakened...

...but Ordrim was ready.

And he had set even more in motion.

## Battle in the heart of the mountain

The ground still trembled beneath the footsteps of the ancients, and the rocky pass lay in chaos, a tangle of dust, shards, and the cries of fleeing orcs. The Cave Titan was destroyed, the shamans scattered, and the stone giants carved a path of sheer force through the enemy ranks. Yet, as overwhelming as this power was, a dark feeling still filled Borin:

This was too easy. Too fast. Too... deliberate.

Ordrim had waited. Ordrim had watched. Ordrim had planned.

And something in the depths answered his call.

Borin first felt it as a chill on the back of his neck. A touch that couldn't have come from the wind. For here, in the depths, there was no wind – only the mountain's breath. But this was something different. Something alien.

"Can you feel it?" Kaidra murmured.

Karim snorted. "What? I only sense orcs running too fast."

"No," Aldrik said quietly. "There is... something. Something that is not stone."

The runemaster had gone pale. His fingers trembled as they slid over the runes of his staff.

"It's... ancient magic. Not orcish. Not dwarven. Something in between. Something we haven't seen in a long time."

Borin looked around. Nothing.

But then – a flicker. A delicate shimmer, barely more than a distortion in the air.

The stone giant paused.

**"He is coming."**

The giant did not speak aloud. He spoke as stone speaks: in the roar between the beats of the world.

And then a ray of light broke through the shadows.

A swirl of silver sparks formed, spiraling as if the dust of the stars were dancing inside the mountain. The swirl expanded, condensed – and suddenly, amidst the chaos of battle, a man stood.

Not big. Not small. A mortal at first glance.

But everything about him was... wrong. Or rather: too right.

His cloak shimmered like woven moonlight. His staff was a gnarled branch that pulsed at the ends like glowing coals. His hair was white as the first snow – yet his face was young.

Borin felt as if a piece of moonlight had materialized in the gallery.

The magician raised his head and looked directly into Borin's eyes.

"You wield the hammer of the deep. And you awaken what has long slumbered." His voice was calm, clear, but permeated with ancient echoes – as if not only a man were speaking, but also the memory of the world itself.

Karim whispered: "A... magician? Under the mountain? By the stone..."

Aldrik growled: "I thought they only existed in legends!"

The magician smiled – not warmly, not coldly, but knowingly.

"There is often more truth in legends than in stone. And more stone than in reality."

The rune master stepped forward, head bowed, almost reverently. "Masters of Transformation... we believed you had vanished centuries ago."

"Not disappeared," said the magician. "I was only far away. For the world wished to be silent." His gaze sharpened. "But now it screams."

Borin tensed. "Who are you?"

The magician inclined his head as if sensing Borin's mistrust – or as if respecting it.

"I have been called many names. In the east wind I was Valmir. In the south Nanthar. And in the north..."

He smiled faintly.

"... 'the stranger who does not age'."

"Not a name I like," Karim grumbled.

"Me neither," said Valmir. "So just call me Valmir. Because that's who I am – right now."

The orcs had gathered, forming a new line – one that trembled but no longer fled. Behind them, something darker was taking shape. Shadows that moved. Shadows that had eyes.

The wizard studied her and lowered his gaze. "Ordrim summoned her. But he didn't just summon her."

The stone giant thundered:

**"He calls forth what lies beneath the shadows."**

**The Unborn of the Deep.**

**"The starving people."**

Valmir nodded. "He has touched forces that even the Elves avoid. Forces that should never have awakened."

At the mention of Elves, Borin raised an eyebrow. "You know the ranger who helped us?"

Valmir looked at Borin with a long, scrutinizing gaze. "An elf knows a wizard. But a wizard doesn't know every elf." A small smile. "Yet I know what he saw: a flame that can grow great. Or burn everything down."

"What do you think?" asked Borin.

The magician raised his hand and pointed at the hammer.

"The Deepphammer burns again. And where it burns, the old war awakens. Not just dwarves. Not just orcs. The mountain itself marches its armies."

An earthquake. A second giant arrived. Then a third.

"You have awakened the ancients," said Valmir. "Nobody would have thought that possible anymore."

Borin raised his chin. "Is that good or bad?"

Valmir's eyes turned serious. Almost sad.

"That depends on whether you're willing to pay the price."

Before Borin could answer, a scream erupted from the orcs.

Not human. Not orcish.

A scream from worms and darkness. Something came out of the shadows.

Valmir twirled his staff.

"It begins."

He drove the stick into the ground.

A ring of silver light exploded like a star in a tunnel. The orcs screamed. The shadows howled. And Borin knew:

**This magician had not come to watch.  
He had come because the war had become too big.  
Too dark.  
Too old.**

And now they stood side by side:

Dwarfs. Stone giants. A wizard. And the heart of the mountain itself.

The battle in the heart of the mountain had begun.



The silver circle of light that Valmir had summoned devoured the first line of shadow creatures like burning cold. The creatures didn't scream—not a sound, only the tearing apart of something unnatural that should never have existed. The wave of magic rolled across the rocky ground like a luminous wind, slicing the darkness into thin shreds that vanished the very next moment.

But the attack was only the beginning.

From the depths of the pass rose a gurgling howl, neither orc nor beast. A sound that rippled through the air, a whisper of hunger and pain—and promise. Something answered Ordrim's call. Something that did not come from this side of the mountain.

Borin felt the deep-penetrating hammer vibrate in his hand. Not out of fear, but as a warning.

“Valmir,” he called, as the dwarves lined up, “what’s coming?”

The magician gazed into the darkness, and his face changed. Not with panic – but with realization. And with worry.

“A shadowbound one,” Valmir said. “A being that arises when a shaman compels the depths instead of asking for their permission.”

Karim cursed. "That doesn't sound like something we need today."

"It's nothing that ANYONE needs," Valmir said dryly.

A massive shadow emerged from the darkness. First an arm. Then a second. Then a body that looked like a walking blob of black embers. The creature had no fixed form – it wavered like shimmering heat, and yet it was clearly physical enough to kill.

The orcs retreated. Even the remnants of the shamans withdrew, some even crawling away on all fours. The stone giants stood their ground, but even they bowed their heads slightly—not in fear, but in recognition of a power that was ancient... and misguided.

"It's coming towards us!" Kaidra shouted. "And fast!"

Valmir narrowed his eyes. "You must wait. Don't attack yet. It's searching... it's testing..."

"What does it test?" Borin asked.

"The greatest spark of life nearby."

Borin followed up: “And who—”

The shadow rushed towards her.

"-Oh."

Borin raised the Deepphammer, Valmir raised the staff, the dwarves formed shields – but none of it was fast enough.

The creature was suddenly there, right in front of Borin, just a few steps away. A hand – or something that looked like a hand – shot out of liquid darkness and grabbed the hammer as if it were a burning core.

A shrill sound filled the gallery. The hammer glowed white. The shadow almost swallowed him up – but at the same time, it burned itself.

"HE WANTS THE HAMMER!" cried the rune master in horror.

"Then he won't get it!" Borin yelled.

He struck.

The blow was no ordinary blow. The hammer cut through the creature as if through water – but instead of remaining ineffective, the water exploded into glowing shards of shadow. The creature screamed – this time audibly – a sound like shattering metal.

The shadow struck back, and Borin was thrown several meters. He crashed into a wall, almost losing consciousness, but Valmir was there instantly, one hand on his chest, the other holding the staff in the air.

"By Earth and star," Valmir murmured, "the hammer killed you almost as much as it killed him."

Borin stood up unsteadily. "Then let me be faster than the hammer."

"Tough competition," Valmir commented dryly.

The Shadowbound One rose again and turned his full attention to the wizard.

A mistake.

"Revert to what you were before," Valmir said quietly. "A warning."

He struck the staff on the ground.

A circle of light shot upwards, and the shadow was drawn together like a sheet crumpled in a fist. He trembled, squirmed, struggled – but Valmir held the spell, his eyes like burning silver.

"Borin!" he shouted. "NOW!"

The deep hammer flew through the air like a comet.

The blow struck the shadow core.

A scream tore the world apart.

Then – silence.

The darkness dissolved, dripping to the ground like liquefied smoke and disappearing.

Valmir sank to one knee. "With the three options... that was too close."

Borin breathed heavily. "That was... a taste of what's to come."

"A greeting from Ordrim," said Valmir. "He wanted to show you that he now commands not only orcs, but forces that no one should control."

A stone giant stepped forward. His voice was thunder in his sleep.

**"More are coming."**

**More hunger.**

**More shadows.**

"He is right," said the rune master. "This was only a messenger."

"No," Valmir objected, as he rose again.

"This was a threat."

Borin raised the hammer. It now glowed deeper than before – like the first embers of a forge fire that would forge something great.

"Then we will go to where this threat originated."

He looked into the black tunnels.

"We're getting to the heart of the matter."

Valmir nodded slowly. "Into the heart of the mountain. And into Ordrim's realm."

The stone giant spoke again:

**"Depth versus darkness."**

**Berg against betrayal.**

**Now the real fight begins.**

Borin looked at his companions. Aldrik, his armor battered, blood in his beard. Karim, his eyes gleaming with battle lust. Kaidra, his blades drawn, ready as ever. The Runemaster, exhausted but burning with inner fire. And Valmir, the strange sorcerer, who had come because the world had begun to scream.

He raised the hammer.

"For the deep realms," he said.

"FOR THE DEEP!" the choir replied.

And then they marched deeper.

To a place where even the ancients are silent.

To where Ordrim was waiting.

To the place where the mountain decided who was allowed to live – and who was not.

The passage leading deeper into the mountains resembled the maw of an ancient beast, waiting to devour its prey. The walls were no longer hewn stone, but natural, wild rock that looked as if it had melted eons ago and then solidified in fury. The further Borin and his companions ventured, the more the dwarven world gave way to a zone that seemed unsuited for mortals.

Valmir, the sorcerer, now walked beside her. He didn't lean heavily on his staff, but Borin noticed that his breathing had become a little shorter. Not from exhaustion—out of caution. Out of respect. The sorcerer wasn't the type to show fear like an ordinary man; instead, only the slight tension in his body betrayed that even he didn't underestimate the depths.

"How far does this empire extend?" Kaidra asked softly.

"Depth is not a place," Valmir replied without turning around. "Depth is a state."

Karim grimaced. "I hate wizard-like sentences."

"Don't worry," said Aldrik. "He probably hates us just as much."

Valmir smiled weakly. "You're wrong. I like dwarves. Their stubbornness reminds me of rock. And I love rock."

"That's the first thing I've heard that I like about you," Karim grumbled.

Borin smirked – but his smile died when the air suddenly became heavy. Not like heat. Not like cold. Like weight.

The walls shimmered faintly. Shadows moved across them, even though no torch flickered. The ground beneath them took on a darker color, as if something were growing beneath the surface.

The stone giant that had accompanied them stopped abruptly.

**"No further."**

His voice was deeper than before. Duller. Heavier.

"Why?" asked Borin.

The giant lowered his head. "We are part of the mountain. But what lies before you... is not part of the world."

Valmir took a deep breath. "He means the core. The ancient core. The place where the lines of depth become thin. Where Ordrim touched the skin of the world."

The giant straightened up again and pointed down the corridor with a massive arm.

**"You will go there alone."  
Rock must not accompany you.  
"Because there rock dies."**

That wasn't a threat. It was a fact.

Borin nodded heavily. "Then we thank you, ancestors. You have carried us this far."

The giant responded with a slow nod and stepped back. Behind him, the rock moved – not like a mass, but like a living being – and in a few moments merged back into the wall.

He was gone. Like a dream that dissolved into dust.

They were now alone.

"Go on," said Borin.

But no sooner had they taken five steps than the world changed again.

A hissing sound filled the air. A scratching. A whisper.

Borin raised the hammer.

"SHADOW-!"

But they were not shadow creatures.

They were runes.

Runes of light unfolded in the air like glowing, floating characters. They circled the group, turned, hovered, formed a circle – and created a kind of archway of pure, ancient power.

Valmir stopped immediately. "Do not touch."

"Why?" asked Kaidra.

"Because this is... a seal."

"A seal?" Karim snorted. "Against what?"

Valmir looked at Borin.

"Against him."

Borin understood. Orderrim.

But suddenly the runes began to flicker.

A crack – a wafer-thin cut of shadow – ran through the circle.

Aldrik raised the axe. "What's happening?"

Valmir raised the staff and clenched his teeth. "He cuts it. He breaks the seal from the inside."

Darkness gathered in the center of the circle, as if someone were violently tearing it through the air itself. Small at first. Then wider. Then a figure that stepped through the darkness.

A dwarf.

A dwarf with a long black beard, tattered armor remnants, and eyes that blazed like green coals.

Ordrim.

Borin froze. The world around him disappeared.

There he stood. His blood. His brother.

But no more.

"Borin," said Ordrim in a calm voice that echoed through the darkness. "So you have managed to descend deeper than even the ancients dared to go."

Karim roared: "You traitor! I'll smash your skull—"

"SILENCE!" thundered Borin.

The silence that followed was piercingly sharp.

Ordrim took two steps forward. The runes hissed and burned against his skin like sparks on oily rags.

"You have grown strong," said Ordrim. "The hammer has accepted you." A smile full of toxic affection. "As it was once supposed to accept me."

Valmir took a half step forward. "He NEVER accepted you, Ordrim. The hammer decides. And it rejected you."

Ordrim's gaze cut to Valmir. A look of hatred that could have melted even stone.

"You... wandering star singer. You should have let me be silent back then. But you intervened. As always, magicians intervene when they understand nothing."

Valmir lowered his staff slightly. Not as a threat. As a warning.

Borin raised the hammer. His heart was burning.

"We are not here to talk, Ordrim."

Ordrim laughed. Not loudly. Not madly. A quiet, tired laugh that shook Borin to his core.

"I know, brother. I'm here to kill you. But before that..."

He raised his hands.

The floor cracked open.

Darkness crept out of it like a living fog.

“...you should see what I have become.”

Behind Ordrim a second figure rose. Then a third. Then ten. Then twenty.

Dark dwarves. Mountain-born whom he has corrupted. Shadowbearers.

The first steps of the army of treason.

Ordrim spread his arms.

"Welcome to the heart of the mountain, brother."

Borin raised the hammer.

"Then we will fight."

Valmir whispered: "The first blow marks the beginning of the end."

And Borin replied:

"Then it begins now."

## The Last Orc Shaman

The tunnel before Borin opened like the maw of a colossal beast, one that must have come from ancient times. Dark veins ran through the walls, converging like the scarred veins of a vast, living being. The air was heavier than before, thicker, darker. And in the midst of this oppressive blackness, the dwarves sensed something that should never have awakened.

A pulse. A heartbeat. Not of the mountain — but of something foreign.

Karim gripped his axe tighter. "I swear, Borin... if I die here, it will only be because the stench is driving me insane. Can you smell that?"

Aldrik growled. "All I smell is orc sweat and old anger."

“No,” said Kaidra. “That... is something else. Something is burning. Something... is alive.”

Valmir stopped abruptly. The silvery sheen of his cloak illuminated the rock walls like pale moonlight. "That's not a flame. What you smell is power." The sorcerer placed a hand against the wall and closed his eyes. "He is here. The last orc shaman. The most powerful of them."

Borin felt the deep-penetrating hammer pulsing in his hand, as if sounding a warning. "Now of all times? And why alone? Weren't shamans bred in packs?"

Valmir nodded. "They were always trained in groups. But this one... outlived all the others. He absorbed the magic of the fallen, drank from their runes, devoured their spirits." His gaze hardened. "He is the source of the darkness that Ordrim unleashed."

The air vibrated. A low, malevolent whisper filled the tunnel.

Words are not enough.

Will.

Kaidra drew her blades. "That's him."

As they reached the next bend, the tunnel opened into a hall. Not a dwarf hall. Not orcish architecture. But something organic. Something ancient. A cauldron of black rocks that glistened like congealed tears.

And there he stood.

The last orc shaman.

His body was gaunt, bony, with skin so thin the green veins beneath pulsatingly visible. His back was curved, but not weak—like an animal preparing to pounce. Behind him hovered a knot of shadow, slowly rotating like a black planet. In his hands he held a staff of withered wood, its tip a petrified claw that glowed like a dead star.

His eyes were white. Completely white. Empty. And yet Borin saw an ancient malice burning within them.

As he spoke, the ground trembled.

"Deeeep... sons..." he hissed, each word a drop of doom. "You are disturbing... the awakening core... of the mountain..."

Karim raised an axe. "You have no idea who you're bothering here, you ugly—"

"Quiet," Borin commanded.

The shaman spread his arms. The shadow behind him stretched, grew, formed the outlines of screaming faces. Lost shaman souls. The victims of his overwhelming power.

"The traitor... Ordrim... called me deep... into the wounds of the stone..." The shaman chuckled, a dry, crunching sound. "I will... break through the core... I will... devour the root... drink the vein... and shatter the world!"

Valmir raised his staff. "Not as long as we live."

The shaman bared his teeth. "You will... not live..."



The shadow behind him shot forward like a spear.

Valmir hurled a silver protective wave against it. The shadow crashed into it. The circle of light flickered. Rooted. Held.

Borin yelled: "ATTACK!"

The dwarves charged forward. Aldrik reached the shaman first. He swung his blade — but the shaman didn't move.

The shadow moved.

A tentacle-like arm of dark, undulating magic grabbed Aldrik and hurled him across the hall. He crashed against a wall and lay gasping for breath.

Karim jumped after him, both axes in motion. The shaman raised his hand — and the axes melted into black dust in the air.

"At the blacksmiths'...!" Karim gasped. "That was my favorite axe!"

Kaidra rushed in from the side, crouching, deadly.

The shaman only turned his head slightly.

Her shadow moved first.

Kaidra froze. Her own shadow seemed to pin her to the ground. She writhed in pain.

"He controls them—" Valmir shouted. "CUT HIS CONNECTION! BORIN, THE AWESOME!"

"With pleasure!"

Borin leaped forward, feeling the mountain's pulse in his arm, feeling the ancestors' wrath. The hammer's runes glowed like a second sun. The shaman's eyes widened, and the shadow behind him shrieked like a thousand torn throats.

The hammer struck the floor. A burst of pure, golden light erupted. The shadow tore. The hall trembled. The shaman screamed – this time in genuine pain.

Valmir shouted: "ONE MORE TIME!"

Borin raised the hammer. The shaman straightened and stretched out both arms. The room distorted. The shadow grew denser again. Darker. More powerful.

Borin roared: "THE MOUNTAIN IS WITH ME!"

He jumped. The hammer came down like the will of the world itself.

The blow split the shaman in a flash of light and darkness.

A scream like the end of the world filled the hall.

Then -

Silence.

The shadow behind the shaman swelled as if it were about to explode — but Valmir drove his staff into the ground.

A circle of silver runes contained the explosion. Enclosed it. Squeezed it together.

The darkness imploded.

And the shaman fell. Dead. Decayed into dust, which covered the ground like a black snowfall.

Borin was breathing heavily. "Is he... dead?"

Valmir nodded slowly. "The last orc shaman has fallen." He looked at Borin. "Now the real war begins."

"Because only Ordrim itself remains," said Borin.

Valmir did not reply.

He didn't have to.

Everyone knew it.

They had crossed a threshold. The mountain had demanded its price. And now they would go where even stone giants are silent.

To where Ordrim was waiting.

The dust of the destroyed shaman settled slowly to the ground, like black snow poisoning the air. Every breath tasted of burnt earth and the bitter aftertaste of a power that should never have been created. Borin wiped his mouth, but the taste lingered. Kaidra sat up with difficulty, her gaze clear but exhausted. Karim growled something unintelligible as he examined one of the charred axe stumps and tossed it aside with a shake of his head.

"That was... a shaman?" asked Aldrik, rubbing his shoulder after the shadow had thrown him against the wall.

Valmir didn't answer immediately. He walked slowly past the shaman's dark remains, as if still listening to the last vestiges of that sinister magic. Then he knelt down, carefully touched the ground with his fingertip, and quickly withdrew it as if he had touched red-hot iron.

"He was a vessel," Valmir said finally. "A weak being filled with a much greater power. Ordrim shaped him. Twisted him. Hollowed him out." He looked at Borin. "That wasn't his full power. Only his tool."

Borin took a deep breath. The hammer in his hand continued to pulse slightly, as if it wasn't quite ready to calm down. "And it's a good thing we destroyed the tool. Now all we need is the blacksmith."

Valmir straightened up. His gaze hardened. "And it's deeper. Much deeper."

A murmur ran through the corridor behind them. Not like footsteps. Not like wind. An echo. A breath.

The stone giant had returned.

His gigantic form detached itself from the rock, as if the mountain itself were stretching out an arm. Dust trickled as it took shape, and his golden eyes glowed like molten metal veins.

**"The shaman has fallen."**

"Yes," said Borin. "And the path is open."

The giant gazed into the tunnel that led out through the hall and further into the depths. This passage was different—narrower, but vibrant. Like a vein. Like a conduit for something that pulsed within the mountain itself.

**"Now you will no longer enter any corridor,"**said the giant.

**"You are entering the wound."**

Karim snorted. "Well, wonderful. First mountains collapse, then we fight against shadows, and now we march into a wound. All that's missing is for the mountain to bleed."

Valmir raised an eyebrow. "He's already bleeding. It just doesn't look like blood."

The runemaster bent down, examining the black cracks in the ground. They pulsed slightly, as if breathing. "This... is a direct connection to the deep veins of the world. The shamans have tried to break them open. And Ordrim—"

"—has finished it," said Borin. "We cannot let him run free. If he splits the heart of the mountain, then everything will fall."

"Not just the mountain," Valmir replied. "The forests. The valleys. Everything connected with this mountain range." A brief, silent glance. "And the Elven realms in the north."

Borin frowned. "The Elves have helped us before." He thought of the ranger with the moon arrow. "They know what's coming."

"Not all of them," said Valmir, "but the right ones."

The giant slowly stepped back, his body almost merging with the wall once more. But before he left, he bent down slightly until his voice, like rolling thunder, resonated directly above them.

**"We cannot go any deeper."  
This is the way of the living.  
Not the way of the mountains."**

"Then we'll continue on our own," said Borin.

**"Not alone."  
The giant's eyes glowed.  
"The mountain hears you."  
He sees you.  
And he will test you."**

Then he disappeared back into the stone, leaving only the echo of his words behind.

The dwarves and Valmir were now truly alone.

"Forward," Borin said quietly.

The corridor narrowed. Darker. The air vibrated—not from heat, not from cold, but from energy. Valmir's staff glowed like muted starlight, casting a pale light on the walls.

Suddenly Kaidra stopped. "Wait."

Borin raised the hammer. "What is it?"

Kaidra knelt down and ran her fingers over fresh, deep scratches in the stone.

"This is new," she said. "Very new. Maybe just a few hours ago."

"What kind of scratches?" Aldrik asked.

"By dwarves," Kaidra said. She sounded confident. "But not ordinary..."

Valmir stepped forward, looked at the tracks, and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, his gaze was as cold as a winter morning.

"Those are scratch marks from Ordrim's Blacks."

Karim's voice hardened. "The what?"

"To the Dark Dwarves," Valmir said. "Those he formed. From those dwarves who were captured, cursed, broken. They are neither dead nor alive. Neither mountain nor shadow. They serve only one will: Ordrim's."

Borin clenched his free hand into a fist.

"Then they will now pay for everyone they have taken."

Valmir looked at him for a long time. "They will. But not before we reach the end of the wound."

The wizard moved on. The dwarves followed.

And suddenly...

...a voice rang out.

Not loud. Not close. But unmistakable.

A hiss. A speech. A voice like cold iron.

*"Borin..."*  
*You're getting closer.*  
*I feel it.*

Ordrim.

The walls themselves seemed to speak.

Kaidra hissed. "He's watching us."

Valmir simply replied: "He feels you. He needs your presence, Borin. He draws you in like a thread."

He looked at Borin. "You are the key — and his adversary."

"Then I'll find him," Borin said quietly. His grip on the hammer turned white. "And I'll end this."

The slope now descended more steeply. The pulsing intensified. The mountain seemed to breathe.

They were close.

Very close.

On the threshold...on the border...at the door to Ordrim's rule.

And behind that door awaited the next battle.

The tunnel wound deeper into the mountain's interior, and with each step, the world grew narrower, darker, and older. Borin felt the rawness of the rock, its hardness, but also its fear. The mountain itself seemed to tremble before whatever was gathering beneath its stony veins. It wasn't a sensation like an earthquake—it was a whisper. A quake from within. As if the mountain were trying to warn her.

Valmir raised a hand to stop the group. "From here on, we must be vigilant. Ordrim isn't just somewhere up ahead. He IS the way."

Karim looked at the magician as if he had just claimed that Stein could sing. "How can a dwarf be a way?"

Valmir didn't answer immediately. Instead, he gently tapped the rock face with his staff. It responded with a vibration—one that felt like a heartbeat. Dun-dun. Dun-dun. Slow, heavy, ominous.

“He connected with the depths,” the magician finally explained. “He tore a wound in the rock—and now he is part of it. Part of the mountain. Or rather... part of what lies beneath the mountain.”

The rune master swallowed. “We are walking through his power?”

“No.” Valmir's gaze was clear and dangerous. “You are walking through his body.”

A heavy silence fell over the group.

Aldrik scratched his beard. “So... if we go too deep...?”

“Then we'll run right into his stomach,” Karim added drily. “I hope he has indigestion.”

Kaidra snorted. “He certainly won't like digesting either of you. Too much beard.”

But the humor was hardly enough to bear the burden of the words.

The tunnel ahead of them slowly changed. Less stone, more... something else. The rock took on a strange, smooth texture. Black veins crisscrossed the walls like pitchy root veins. The air vibrated in irregular pulses.

“He is getting stronger,” Valmir said. “And he knows we are coming.”

Just as Borin was about to go ahead, they heard it.

A noise. A scraping. A scratching.

Karim raised the axe. “What was—”

A dwarf broke out of a side opening. Or what had once been one.

His eyes were empty sockets filled with green-black embers. His skin was gray, parchment-like, as if dried out under the influence of dark magic. His mouth was a distorted, silently screaming hole.

A dark dwarf.

He jumped towards Borin – silently, but with distorted, inhuman speed.

Borin rammed the hammer into his chest. The undead's body shattered as if it were made of dry clay.

But as he fell, something crawled out of his interior – a ball of shadow, pulsating, like a heart of darkness.

Kaidra cut it before it could grow.

"He's creating new creatures," Valmir said darkly. "And there are more of them the closer we get."

"Then we'll kill them," Aldrik growled.

"They are not the problem," said the rune master. "They are... a distraction."

Valmir nodded. "Ordrim won't let you come alone. He's toying with your time. He's testing your nerves. And while you fight, he draws power from the depths." A hard look at Borin. "He's preparing something."

Borin stood still. The hammer vibrated slightly in his hand, as if to say: Hurry up.

"Go on," Borin commanded quietly. "We're not wasting any more time."

The tunnel now became steep. They had to hold onto the walls. The floor was slippery – not wet, but covered with fine dust that smelled like burnt hair.

And suddenly – a light.

A faint, red glow in the distance.

"What is it?" asked Kaidra.

Valmir immediately replied: "That is not light. That is energy."

As they drew nearer, the tunnel opened again—to a chamber as vast as the forge of a lost age. The walls pulsed as if they were breathing. The veins glowed red, as if a heart were pumping lava through them.

And in the middle...

...a portal.

A rift of shadow and fire, flickering at the edges like an open wound. A hole in the world. A chasm through which something dark wanted to penetrate.

A single figure stood before the portal. An orc. Tall, old, thin, and almost transparent. His staff was longer than he was, with a skull at the top and bands of black skin.

"A shaman?" Karim asked, startled. "But the last—"

"That's no longer an orc shaman," Valmir said tonelessly. "That's his spirit."

The spirit of the shaman they had killed had flowed here, reborn like a shadow.

He slowly turned around.

His face was mist. His eyes were empty. His voice was a whisper from two worlds.

"You destroyed... the body. But not... me."

Borin stepped forward. "Then we'll kill you again."

The ghost smiled, a distorted, slimy smile that didn't suit any face.

"Kill me...as often as you like...but Ordrim...rises...itself."

The portal crackled behind the ghost. An arm of pure darkness reached outwards.

Valmir yelled: "HE'S GETTING SOMETHING OUT! DESTROY THE PORTAL!"

Borin charged forward. The ghost screamed. The hammer glowed. The chamber trembled.

And the battle for the core of the mountain began.

## The secrets of the primal rune

The ground still vibrated from the aftershocks of the shattered Shadow Portal as Borin, Valmir, and the others stepped deeper into the chamber. Dust from the shattered rock veins still hung in the air, and in the flickering afterglow of the collapsing fissure, something was visible on the floor that no one had noticed—until now.

A symbol.

No rune. No dwarven mark. Something much older.

Valmir froze before the others saw it. His eyes widened as he fell to the ground and held his hand over the lines without touching them.

"The primal rune..." he whispered, as if he had uttered a forbidden word. "By all the stars... I had hoped it was a legend."

Karim put his hands on his hips. "I hope you mean 'harmless' by that."

"No," said Valmir. "I mean 'more dangerous than anything you've ever seen.'"

Borin also knelt down. The primal rune was large—almost a step wide—and consisted of intertwined lines that stretched across the stone like liquid metal. It seemed to move, as if alive, even though Borin's fingers felt only cold stone.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

Valmir did not answer immediately. He contemplated the symbol as if searching the memories of an ancient age. When he spoke, his voice sounded like that of a man revealing a secret that can never return to the darkness.

"This rune comes from a time before the dwarves. Before the orcs. Before the elves. It was not learned... but discovered. The first beings to walk beneath the mountains—the ancient ancestors of the ancients—branded it into the world. It is the origin of all rune magic."



The runemaster stepped closer and involuntarily folded his hands before his chest, as if instinctively begging for forgiveness. "Then she is older than the master smiths... older even than the earth heralds."

"Yes," said Valmir. "Much older."

Borin finally touched the rune, cautiously—and a shock ran through him. Not painful, but like a torrent of knowledge rushing through his blood. His eyes widened. Images danced before him—mountains rising as if alive; veins of fire flowing through the deepest layers of the earth; and beings of stone, larger than stone giants, walking through the darkness.

He gasped and jerked his hand back.

"Borin!" Kaidra grabbed him. "Are you all right?"

He breathed heavily, his words labored. "I... saw... how the mountain was born."

Valmir nodded. "The primal rune shows what was—and what can be. It is the key to the deepest form of power that exists. Ordrim discovered it. Or found it. Perhaps she found him."

Karim snorted. "Then we'll knock them out, break them, and carry on."

"No!" Valmir whirled around. "You mustn't destroy it! If the primal rune breaks, it won't just tear the ground beneath us—it will tear the soul of the mountain apart. The entire mountain ridge would fall."

"So touching is forbidden, destroying is forbidden, standing around is forbidden," Aldrik muttered. "What are we supposed to do then?"

Borin looked at the rune again. And suddenly he knew:

"Ordrim uses them."

Valmir nodded slowly. "Yes. He has bent her power. Not controlled it—but bent it. He's trying to redirect it. Toward himself. Toward his wound."

The rune master stroked his beard. "And that means...?"

Valmir looked at him. Heavy. Meaningful.

"Ordrim is trying to be the first to be served by the primal rune."

Borin felt the hammer getting warm. "Then we have to stop him."

"You must do more than that," Valmir said. "You must... rebind them."

"How?" asked Kaidra.

The magician turned to Borin.

"The Deep Hammer carries a splinter of the primal rune. It is the only counterpoint. The only one that can realign it."

Borin raised the hammer — and the primal rune glowed faintly, as if it recognized him.

"Then show me how it's done," said Borin.

Valmir closed his eyes. A deep breath. A touch of awe.

"I hope you are ready, Borin, son of Darnak. For the primordial rune only accepts those who are willing to pay a price."

"What price?"

"Any one."

Borin lifted the hammer higher.

"Then she should vote."

The mountain trembled. The primal rune glowed. And somewhere in the depths, Ordrim laughed.

The primal rune lay before them like a sleeping heart beating out of rhythm. The stone beneath it still vibrated slightly, as if something pulsed beneath it—not with the mountain's power, but with the might of a foreign, fractured will. Borin felt it in his hammer, in his bones, in every muscle of his body: the rune had not been created to be contemplated by dwarves. It was a tool of the world itself. A language only the mountain understood—and one that Ordrim had tried to corrupt.

Valmir circled the symbol slowly, each movement cautious, as if balancing on a thin branch over a precipice. The other dwarves kept their distance. Even Karim, usually seeking unconditional confrontation, stood with his arms folded, looking unusually serious.

"Borin," Valmir said softly, "don't put the hammer on that rune for even a heartbeat before I tell you. One wrong contact, and the mountain itself could collapse."

Borin nodded, but the hammer in his hand burned. Not hot—but yearning. As if a second presence were pulling at its handle. He felt its power. Something ancient. Something awakening. Something remembering.

"The primal rune reacts to the hammer," the rune master observed. "Why?"

Valmir paused. "Because the Deep Hammer isn't simply a weapon. It's a fragment."

Aldrik frowned. "A fragment? Of what?"

The wizard looked at him. "Of the same power that created this rune. The hammer is not the work of the smith alone. It carries within it a piece of the original formula – like a spark of a star."

A silence fell over the group.

Karim broke it – of course, he did. “Good. So we have a sacred hammer that can speak with an ancient rune. So let it talk, Valmir, so we can beat the crap out of Ordrim.”

Valmir breathed heavily. "If only it were that simple. The primal rune is a nexus point. It connects the mountain's energy lines. If we want to re-bind it, we have to align the hammer with it."

The rune master shook his head. "And how do we do that?"

Valmir raised the staff. Its light changed – from silvery to violet, then to a deep, glowing blue.

"With a song."

Karim grimaced. "You're kidding me. You want us to sing about a rune?"

“Not her,” Valmir corrected. “He.”

He pointed at Borin.

"The hammer bears the original formula. Borin carries the king's blood. Only he can retune the rune. Only he can free it from Ordrim's influence."

Borin swallowed. For the first time since the start of the campaign, he felt something like fear. Not of death. Not of Ordrim. Of responsibility.

"What exactly do I have to sing?" asked Borin. "I don't know any magic songs."

Valmir lowered his head. "It's not a song made of words. It's a song of will. Of identity. Of your connection to the mountain."

"So... think? Feel?"

Valmir smiled weakly. "Dwarves call it 'smith's breath,' don't they?"

The runemaster nodded slowly. "The pure intention of a smith flows into his work. The soul shapes the steel."

“Exactly,” said Valmir. “You must carry your intention into the rune.”

Borin moved closer to the symbol.

The air grew heavy. The stone crackled. The veins of the mountain shimmered red beneath the surface.

He knelt down and placed one hand on the ground beside the rune. The hammer vibrated in his other hand as if it were breathing. Borin closed his eyes.

And he listened.

Not with his ears. With his soul.

A muffled echo, far away, like the breath of a sleeping giant. Then voices. Not clear. Not human. The voices of the ancestors. The mountain itself, speaking through time and rock.

Valmir whispered: "Now, Borin. Let the hammer find the first note."

Borin raised the hammer. The runes on it glowed. A sound, like the blow of an anvil, filled the chamber – but not through movement, but through pure energy.

The hammer fell.

Just a finger's width above the rune.

And then it began.

A roar. A rumble. The rune awoke again, this time not dark, but golden. Borin sensed images – memories that were not his: mountains being born; seas of rock; veins of fire; stone giants wandering through glowing canyons.

Kaidra exclaimed: "The walls... they are moving!"

Karim instinctively raised the axe, but the movement was not an attack – the rock was breathing. It was organizing itself. It was taking shape.

"Borin!" Valmir shouted. "You're almost there!"

Borin felt the hammer grow heavier. Much heavier. As if the mountain itself wanted to pull him down.

A voice broke into his mind.

*"You are not worthy."*

Borin growled. "Shut up."

*"You are not a king."*

"Not yet."

*"You are a prodigal son."*

"Might be."

*"You are weak."*

Borin raised his head. His eyes burned.

"But the mountain stands with me."

He rammed the hammer onto the rune.

A flash of light filled the chamber. The floor trembled. A scream – not from Borin, but from deep below, from a terrible depth – echoed like thunder.

The rune glowed GOLD.

Pure. Unspoiled. Bound.

Valmir gasped: “He... did it...”

Borin staggered. Kaidra caught him. Karim patted him on the back, causing dust to fly from his armor.

But the rune master did not look at Borin.

He looked at the wall. His face turned pale.

“Valmir...”

The magician turned around – and he too froze.

The wall... opened.

Not like stone.

But like a mouth.

A dark tunnel beyond. Alive. Hot. Breathless.

Valmir whispered: "Ordrim heard us."

A voice filled the depths.

*"Brother...  
come to me."*

The tunnel that had opened before them was no longer an ordinary passage. It was not part of the natural rock, not a layer of old mine workings or forgotten forges. It was a chasm. A living fissure that moved like the throat of a colossal creature. Every breath Borin and the others took seemed to echo in the walls—as if the mountain itself were listening to their footsteps.

But it wasn't the mountain. It was Ordrim.

Borin felt it immediately. A presence. A cold grip around his heart, a whisper in the back of his mind that grew louder with every step.

The hammer in his hand still glowed golden – the final resonance of the newly bound primal rune. But now it vibrated not with power, but with warning.

Kaidra stepped into the chasm next. Her eyes were as sharp as the blades she wore, but she too turned around. "The rock... feels wrong."

Valmir nodded. His face was tense, his staff shimmered in a muted blue.

"That's not a rock," said the wizard. "That's Ordrim's influence. He manipulates the depths around him. He shapes them according to his will. We're not going into the mountain right now..."

"...but into him," Aldrik finished in a hoarse voice.

A shiver ran down everyone's spine.

The tunnel narrowed, but also... softer. In places, the stone seemed smooth, almost molten. Thin veins of dark red pulsed along the walls. Sometimes Borin thought he could hear a muffled heartbeat in the distance – but when he stopped, there was nothing to hear.

After a long, silent minute, Valmir stopped and raised his staff.

"Here," he whispered. "Do you hear that?"

They stood still.

And listened.

One voice.

Dull. Angry. Confusingly close and yet infinitely far away.

*"Brother... you're getting... closer and closer..."*

Karim raised the axe. "If that bastard whispers any closer to my ear, I'll chop off his throat, no matter how far down he is."

"Stay vigilant," Valmir warned. "He's trying to influence you."

The tunnel suddenly widened, opening into a vast cavern where the echo of their footsteps was lost. The floor was uneven, crisscrossed with bizarre rock formations that arched like distorted rib cages. A faint light flickered in the distance.

And then they saw it.

A gigantic wall of pure ebony, smooth as a mirror – but not reflective. It looked like a black heart enclosed in the rock.

Something grew from its center. Something that looked like a gateway. A door of darkness, crisscrossed by pulsating red lines.

Borin approached.

"What is it?" he asked quietly.

Valmir replied in a heavy voice: "Ordrim's chamber. This is his sanctuary. His sanctuary. His heart." A breath. "This is the place where he broke himself."

Aldrik snorted. "Looks like he broke the mountain instead."

"He did both," Valmir said.

Suddenly the room shook. Quietly. Then more intensely.

A thin line opened in the black wall – first a crack, then wider. Like an eye. A gigantic, vertical, black eye.

And then the voice came.

Not as a whisper. Not as an echo. As thunder.

*"BORIN!"*

The walls trembled. The floor vibrated.

A shadow emerged from the crack.

It was a dwarf. Or what had once been a dwarf.

Ordrim.

But his form was distorted—as if a body had been immersed in dark magic, waiting for reality itself to give up. His skin was gray, crisscrossed with glowing red cracks. His eyes burned like two small hells. His beard was tattered, with remnants of rune pendants embedded in it, now dark and useless.

But the worst part was what hung behind him.

A shadowy body that moved like a second skin. A living cloak of liquefied darkness. It breathed. It took shape. It mirrored Ordrim's form – like a dark version of himself.

Ordrim smiled.

"Borin," he said in a hoarse, echoing voice. "You've finally come."

Borin stepped forward and raised the hammer. "I have come to stop you."

Ordrim laughed softly – a laugh that hurt the stones.

"Stop it?" The traitor spread his arms wide. "Brother, look what I have become! The mountain is within me. The depths obey me. I am the wound—and soon I will be the core."

Valmir raised his staff. "You are sick, Ordrim. Corrupted. You bear the primal wound like a burst vein."

Ordrim snarled: "Shut your tongue, Starwalker! You are nothing but a lost torch in the river of time!"

He turned back to Borin.

"You see, brother? The sorcerer steals your birth. He takes away your strength. But I offer you the truth."

The shadow behind him grew, taking shape as arms, as horns, as something unspeakable.

"Come to me," Ordrim said gently. "Or die with them."

Borin took a deep breath.

"I'm not dying," he said. "Not today. And not because of you."

The hammer was glowing.

Ordrim screamed.

The ground cracked.

And the fight began.

## The steel ring of the dwarves

The ground beneath Borin's feet trembled as Ordrim's scream shook the chamber. Dark energy pulsed through the air like the breath of a vast, unholy being. The treacherous dwarf stepped from the gaping opening of his shadow lair, and the walls responded to him like living flesh welcoming its master. Every step Ordrim took made the walls pulse as if they were part of his own body.

The dwarves' steel ring closed instinctively. Aldrik stepped to Borin's left, Kaidra to his right, and Karim twirled his axe so that the blades glowed in the dim light. The runemaster stood behind them, his hands poised to brand the ancestral symbols into the air. Valmir raised his staff, which now emitted a clear, sharp light, hovering like a single star in the darkness.

Ordrim stopped ten paces away. He didn't look at them like enemies. He looked at them... like memories.

"The steel ring," Ordrim said wistfully. "Like back then, when we brothers stood shoulder to shoulder. It's hard to believe how easily you let yourselves be broken by lies you call 'honor'."

Karim shouted back immediately: "The only lie here walks on two crooked legs and stinks of rot!"

The shadow behind Ordrim suddenly moved like a second being. It detached itself from the ground, rose like a gigantic cloak, and formed grotesque arms of darkness that encircled the dwarf's body. The worst part was: the shadow had its own consciousness. Borin saw it in its movements—it breathed differently than Ordrim, it tensed up, it took on forms that belonged not to a body, but to something unborn.



Valmir spoke in a low, urgent voice: "The shadow is not just magic. It is part of the primal wound. A living fragment. When it breaks free, it will go its own way... and no power in the world can stop it."

Ordrim smiled broadly, proudly, almost triumphantly. "I bear the wound, brother. Not as a curse, but as a crown."

Borin raised the hammer. The golden runes glowed and began to turn like glowing gears. "You carry nothing," he said calmly. "You are carried. By something that is devouring you."

Ordrim's face contorted, his eyes glowing even redder for a moment. The shadow behind him twitched like an angry animal on a chain.

"Food?" hissed Ordrim. "I AM hunger."

Then he lunged forward.

It began.

Ordrim moved faster than any dwarf could ever move. Years of darkness had given him a speed visible only in the distorted flicker of his shadow. The ground cracked open behind him as if his footsteps were shattering the very rock.

Borin raised the hammer and caught the first blow.

The impact was like the end of the world.

Borin was thrown back two steps, his boots slipping on the dusty ground, and a shower of snow-white sparks flew through the air. But he stood his ground. The hammer vibrated hard in his hand, now glowing not golden, but white.

Ordrim laughed. "Good! At least ONE dwarf among you remembers strength."

Aldrik charged in from the side and struck with a force that could split stone slabs. Ordrim caught the blade with his bare hand. His fingers closed around the metal, and the axe began to glow—not red, but black.

"Scrap metal," hissed Ordrim, and with a jerk, he threw Aldrik to the ground.

Kaidra was already in motion. As agile as a shadowcat, she leaped toward Ordrim, her two blades swirling like silver lightning. But the shadow behind Ordrim reacted faster than he did. A black arm-like form shot forward, blocked her blades, and hurled them through the air. She landed hard, but rolled and growled.

"That thing is moving like a second fighter!" she snarled.

Valmir shouted: "Because it IS! The Shadow is a separate entity that feeds Ordrim! Strike them separately!"

Karim shouted: "One on the left, one on the right – cut off that bastard's wings!"

The dwarves formed up. A circle within a circle. A living shield wall, interlocking like gears.

The steel ring.

That was what they were. And what they had always been.

Ordrim laughed again. But this time there was no mockery in it. More like anticipation.

“Yes... YES! This is how I loved you, brothers! This is how I wanted to receive you in the depths! Strong! Resolute!” His laughter turned. Rotten. Became a growl. “But you chose the wrong one.”

He threw his arms apart, and the shadow exploded in four directions – like arms trying to cut through space.

Valmir shouted: "NOW!"

Borin leaped forward, the others followed in perfect rhythm.

The rune master burned three golden symbols into the air – they shot like missiles into the shadows.

Kaidra severed one of the shadow arms – it burst in a cloud of agony.

Karim felled a second one, his axe sounding like thunder.

And Borin met Ordrim.

The hammer struck Ordrim's chest.

A scream – raw, ancient, not of this world – echoed.

The ground shook. The whole room almost collapsed. The shadow behind Ordrim receded as if it were about to tear.

Ordrim staggered back.

For the first time.

"You..." he gasped. "You dare... to meet me?"

Borin raised the hammer again.

“I DARE not.”

His eyes were burning.

"I MUST."

Ordrim roared.

The shadow rushed towards him.

And the next phase of the fight began.

The shadow rushed forward like a black storm front, and the ground vibrated as if trembling under the weight of an unseen giant. Borin felt the air crackle with dark energy, every hair in his beard stood on end, and the hammer in his hand glowed hot, as if trying to break free. Ordrim's second, distorted self drew nearer—and it had grown larger. More powerful. Deeper. The previous blow had wounded it, but not weakened it.

On the contrary, it had made him angry.

“RING FORMATION!” Borin yelled.

The dwarves reacted instantly. Karim and Aldrik dropped to their knees, shields raised, blades at the ready. Kaidra leaped into the rear, her blades like silver sparks. The runemaster stood in the center, his hands already covered in glowing symbols. And Valmir... Valmir raised his staff, which now burned as brightly as a lone star deep beneath the earth.

The shadow collided with the line of dwarves like a ghostly avalanche.

Karim yelled against the pressure. "THIS THING IS STRIKING LIKE A ROCK!"

"STOP!" Borin shouted, though every muscle in his body screamed. The shadow tried to break through them, and everywhere it touched the armor, it turned cold, frosty, as if the darkness were suffocating the metal.

The rune master uttered a word older than language itself, and three golden runes tore themselves from his hands, circling the group like burning sparks and forming a shimmering barrier.

The shadow struck it like a wave of black fire.

A shriek filled the chamber. A horrific, split-sounding noise.

“WE WON’T LAST LONG!” shouted Kaidra, fighting with her daggers against a figure made of pure nothingness.

Valmir replied, his voice tense like a drawn bow: "Then we must fight for a shorter time! Borin! AGAIN!"

Borin struck the hammer into the air. Not against stone, not against shadow – but into the “place” in between. And the mountain answered.

A golden jolt erupted from the tip of the hammer. Not broad, not like a wave, but like a single, narrow beam, cutting through the shadow like a chisel. A line of light as thin as a spider's thread, but sharper than any metalwork.

The shadow tore open.

A piercing scream ripped through the chamber, and the thing—this living fragment of the primal wound—was torn back. Not destroyed, but separated, like a piece of burning fabric breaking away from the rest and falling flickering to the floor.

Ordrim screamed in turn – this time in pain. His body contorted as if the shadow were pulling at him, as if a piece of his own flesh had been ripped out.

"YOU...!!!" he roared, his voice five-part, distorted and cutting. "YOU DARING TO TOUCH MY CORE!?"

"I DON'T DARE!" Borin shouted back. "I WILL DO IT!"

The traitor raced forward again, and this time he was faster. Much faster.

Borin raised the hammer – but Ordrim was already upon him.

The first blow hit Borin with the force of a rockfall.

He was thrown through the air. He crashed into a wall. Breath shot out of his lungs.

Kaidra called his name. Aldrik roared. Karim charged at Ordrim like a raging bull.

But Ordrim let Karim miss. The shadow behind him formed, wrapped itself around Karim's legs, and pulled him to the ground before he even realized what had happened.

"STAND UP, BORIN!!" Valmir roared as he engaged in a magical duel with the shadow.

Borin tried it.

The hammer lay beside him. His ribs ached. His ears throbbed. The chamber vibrated. Ordrim's laughter echoed through the depths.

*"Look at you... you weak remnant."  
And you believe you can carry MY legacy?"*

Borin closed his eyes.

He inhaled.

He heard...the mountain.The rhythm.The pulse.The voice of the primal rune.

And he stood up.

Slowly. But inexorably.

He grabbed the hammer. He raised it. The golden runes began to glow again.

"I... am... Borin... son of Darnak..." he gasped.

Ordrim turned around. His eyes widened.

“...and I stand... WITH THE MOUNTAIN!”

He rammed the hammer into the ground.

A tremor ran through the chamber.

Not like an earthquake. Like a wake-up call.

The walls answered. The veins answered. The floor answered.

A golden circle spread around Borin. It grew. It continued to grow. Valmir was the first to notice.

"The steel ring!" he cried triumphantly. "HE HAS AWAKENED HIM!"

The dwarves rose again. In formation. Like the gears of a divine machine.

Karim broke free. Kaidra jumped back to Borin's side. Aldrik raised his axe.

The rune master sang a deep, vibrating note.

And Valmir raised the staff, its tip pulsating like a star.

Borin raised the hammer.

“ORDRIM!” he shouted.

The traitor staggered – just one step, but enough.

“THIS IS NOT A RING OF SERVANTS—”

The hammer glowed white.

—BUT THE RING OF THE FREE!

They stormed forward.

And the next blow would tear the depths themselves apart.

The next blow didn't come from Ordrim. It came from the mountain.

It was a deep, rumbling tremor—not a collapse, not a fracture, but something like an ancient call. An answer. The golden energy that Borin had awakened now pulsed through the chamber, through the veins of stone, through the walls, through the floor. It sang. A song of metal and rock, a song that had been silent for ten thousand years.

Ordrim felt it too. He whirled around, his eyes wide with shock – real, raw shock.

"NO!" he roared. "THIS IS NOT YOUR POWER! NO! NO!"

The shadow behind him lashed out like a rampaging dragon and charged at Borin. But this time, Borin was no longer the man who allowed himself to be carved into the rock. He raised the hammer, and the golden energy rushed past him like a storm. It formed behind him like an invisible dome, a shield of pure will.

The shadow rebounded – and melted back like a piece of tar in a fire.

"He is weaker!" cried the rune master. "The mountain is against him!"

Valmir nodded as he traced circles in the air with his magic arm, leaving trails of blue light. "The steel ring has awakened—the depths recognize their rightful son!"

Karim charged forward, roaring, two axes gleaming like anger itself. "NOW, BROTHER! BEAT HIM!"

Aldrik followed him, his heavy axe raised. Kaidra swept across the ground like a shadow, swift and deadly. The Steel Ring—a war formation used by dwarves only in their darkest hours—now closed around Ordrim.

And the traitor retreated.

The first time. The very first time.

"HOLD HIM TIGHT!" Borin shouted.

Valmir hurled a star of pure light at the shadow. The shadow screamed, writhed, and tore into two pieces that desperately tried to reunite. But Kaidra cut one of the pieces off, and when it touched her, it dissolved into nothing—only a wisp of burnt air remained.

Ordrim raised his arms, attempting to unleash a wave of darkness – but the Runemaster roared a word that tore through the air. A seal ignited.

The dark wave fizzled out.

"YOUR MAGIC IS USELESS!" shouted the Rune Master. "YOU STAND IN THE MOUNTAIN LIGHT!"

Ordrim staggered.

His gaze fell on Borin. And something in his face broke. Not anger. Not madness.

Loss.

"Borin..." he said suddenly, quietly. Too quietly to suit the monster he had become. "Why did you come...? You could have been king. By my side. We could have ruled the deep... together."

Borin stepped forward.

No fear. No hesitation. No pain.

"I came," he said calmly, "because you were my brother."

Ordrim froze.

The words hung in the air like heavy stones.

Then Borin raised the hammer.

"And because you are no longer you."

Ordrim roared. It was not the cry of a dwarf. It was the cry of a wounded god, a broken king, a being that had devoured the deep and now realized that the deep was biting back.

The shadow behind him exploded in all directions. Veins of darkness shot through the chamber. The floor heaved. The walls bent. Everyone screamed.

Valmir: "BORIN! NOW! FINALLY!"

Borin felt it.

The moment.

The blow.

The last spark of the mountain in his blood.

He wound up.

The hammer glowed white.

Not golden. White.

Pure as the first blow of a blacksmith forging the world.

Ordrim leaped forward, his shadow swirling around him, his arms outstretched like the wings of a fallen angel.

The hammer struck.

Not Ordrim's chest. Not his head.

His heart.

His true heart – the dark vein deep in his chest, pulsating like a foreign life.

A light burst from the blow. A scream that thundered through the depths. The shadow tore. The wall behind Ordrim cracked open. The ground trembled. A storm of stone and light erupted.

Ordrim screamed – and fell backward – and into the darkness behind him.

Not dead. Not yet.

But broken.

The shadow burned.

His body disappeared into the depths he himself had created.

Borin sank to one knee, trembling and panting.

Valmir held him tight. "It's over."

But Borin shook his head.

"No..." he gasped. "It's not over yet..."

They all saw it.

Where Ordrim had fallen, a huge, pulsating rift opened. A wound. As vast as an abyss.

And from deep within this wound...something rose up.

### The decision in the fire pits

The heat came first. Not a gust of wind, not a burst of fire—but a slow, all-consuming breath from the depths. As if somewhere far below them, a gigantic heart had awakened, its beats pulsing through the rock in blazing heat. Borin felt the ground vibrate beneath his boots, the heat seep through the soles and set his blood boiling. The hammer in his hand still glowed white, but the darkness he had just shattered crept into the shadows of the room like poisonous smoke.

Valmir stared into the abyss into which Ordrim had fallen – but the crack was not closed. It was growing.

A crevice opened like a burning maw, the rock pulsating red. The runemaster took two steps back, his eyes wide with horror.

"For the ancients... this is no longer a wound," he whispered. "This is a tear in the veins of fire."

Karim growled and wiped the sweat from his beard. "I hate to say it, but that doesn't look healthy."

Kaidra knelt at the edge, even though the ground there was glowing. She craned her eyes down into the darkness. Something stirred.

"There's movement down there," she said tensely. "He's still alive."



Aldrik spat on the ground. "Of course the bastard is still alive. He eats shadows, drinks magic, and falls into burning holes like into a warm bed."

Valmir finally tore his gaze away and turned to Borin.

"Borin... listen. What happens next will decide everything. This rift leads directly into the fire pits. Deeper than any mine. Deeper than any shaft. Deeper than any empire."

Borin stood there breathing heavily, the hammer still vibrating in his hand.

"How deep?"

"All the way to the origin," Valmir said. "To where the fire was born."

The runemaster nodded slowly, as if wrestling with the truth of his words. "The fire pits are older than any dwarven tribe. Older than the first ore blades. It is said that whoever falls there falls into the maw of the world."

Karim snorted. "Then we'll just get him out of there and hit him in again."

But Kaidra shook her head. "That won't be enough. Look at the rift."

The crevice began to distort. The rocks swelled. Black veins stretched across the walls, like the veins of a dying heart.

No. Not while dying.

In progress.

"He is drawing the veins of fire to himself," said Valmir. "Ordrim is trying to devour the fire of the deep. When he rises... he will be unstoppable."

Borin felt something cold shoot through his chest. A sensation like a nail penetrating his heart. Not fear. Determination.

"What do we have to do?" he asked.

Valmir closed his eyes and placed a hand on Borin's shoulder. "You must follow him."

Karim's eyes widened. "ARE YOU CRAZY!? The place down there is boiling!"

"I know," Valmir said calmly. "But Borin bears the primal rune. He wields the Deep Hammer. Only HE can turn the veins of fire against Ordrim. Only HE can bind him for good. Or destroy him."

Kaidra placed a hand on Borin's forearm. "You'll die if you climb down there."

"Maybe," said Borin. "Maybe not."

Aldrik gritted his teeth. "I'll go with you."

“NO,” Valmir said sharply. “Only one. The original rune only responds to him.”

Karim growled: "Then let's at least do something!"

Valmir pointed at the walls. "Yes. You're keeping the rift stable. If it collapses too soon, Borin will be crushed before he reaches Ordrim."

Kaidra drew her daggers, even though the air was so hot it vibrated. "Then we'll fight the mountain, if we have to."

Borin stepped to the edge of the crack. The heat hit his face. Below, fire churned, red-gold streams lapped against the walls. And deep, deep below...

...he saw him.

Ordrim. His silhouette glowed. His shadow had grown again. And he raised his head.

"BORIN..." boomed the voice. "COME... AND SEE... WHAT I WILL BE."

Borin raised the hammer.

"I'm coming."

Kaidra grabbed his arm. She said nothing. But her eyes spoke volumes.

Borin nodded to her. Then he looked at his companions: Karim, Aldrik, the Runemaster, and Valmir.

All ready. All determined. All with him in spirit.

But only he could leave.

“If I fall—” Borin began.

Valmir interrupted him: "Then the mountain will fall. So don't fall."

A thin, crooked hint of a smile rose on Borin's lips.

Then he climbed over the edge.

And sank down into the fire pits.

The fall lasted longer than Borin had expected. Not because it was deep—it was infinitely deep—but because time flowed differently in this wound of the mountain. The heat that met his gaze seemed to be composed not only of fire, but of memory, rage, and ancient creative force. He slid past the rock walls, which looked like the ripped veins of a titanic body, and felt his hammer vibrate as if he were sensing the heartbeat of the abyss itself. Flames licked past his body, but they did not burn him, for the hammer enveloped him in a veil of golden energy—thin, but strong enough to keep the worst at bay.

Beneath him came light. Beneath him came fire. Beneath him came Ordrim.

The traitor had just raised his head when Borin hit the fiery chasm—not hard, but like a weight that fit into the world. The rock beneath his feet trembled, sparks shot up, and the flames recoiled as if afraid of the hammer. Borin stood in a cavern of pure, seething molten rock. Streams of magma flowed like liquid blood through deep channels, and the air pulsed like a living creature.

Ordrim stood at the other end of the pit, his body now half stone, half shadow, half fire. Beneath his skin, veins of molten ore glowed. His eyes no longer burned merely red—they were two small suns, unbelievably bright, cruel, and utterly mindless.

"Borin..." Ordrim breathed, and the air vibrated. "So you did follow. I knew... I knew you'd come."

Borin raised the hammer. "I'm not here to talk to you."

"Oh yes..." Ordrim smiled and stepped closer, the fire behind him receding like a beaten dog. "Oh yes, brother. You always came to talk. As children. As men. As heirs to the throne. You always wanted to understand. You always wanted to save."

The shadow behind Ordrim had grown into a half-formed creature, an unborn daemon from the pure depths. Its outline was flickering, incomplete, as if fighting against its own existence. Borin sensed that this was the "true" enemy—the core of the primal wound, attempting to force solidification through Ordrim.

Ordrim stretched out his arms, and the shadow followed suit. "Do you see what I will become? Not a dwarf. Not a shadow. Not fire. I will become the depths themselves!"

Borin took a step forward. The ground trembled. The fiery veins contracted. He felt the mountain's pain. Felt its anger. Felt its fear—not his own, but that of the mountain, which might die if this battle was lost.

"You'll never amount to anything," Borin said calmly. "You'll... end."

Ordrim screamed, and the shadow rushed forward. It came like a storm of darkness, fire, and shattered magic. The ground ripped open beneath it, magma spurted upward and fell like burning rain. Borin raised the hammer, the light burning like a star above him, and the two forces clashed.

The impact made the entire pit tremble. Fire exploded. Black smoke whipped through the air. The shadow briefly shattered into a thousand particles, but immediately regrouped.

Ordrim was already attacking from behind the shadow. His fists were no longer of flesh, but of molten ore that hardened into metal as soon as it struck. He hit Borin with a force that would have shattered even a stone giant. But Borin stood firm. The hammer devoured Ordrim's power and spat it back as sparks.

"You... are... STRONGER!" Ordrim roared in surprise.

"No," said Borin. "I am... connected!"

The hammer sang – a sound like the blow of an anvil at the heart of a star. The primal rune glowed, and down in the fiery pit, world energy awoke once more. A golden wave surged through the ground, striking Ordrim, striking the shadow, striking the rocks – and they all screamed.

Ordrim staggered backward. The shadow tore itself away from him – only for a moment. That moment was enough.

Borin charged forward and struck the shadow core. The blow exploded like a small sun. The shadow screamed, this time not like a monster, but like something that should never have existed. It burst, shattered, tried to reassemble itself, but Borin swung again, struck again, hammering the thing back into the nothingness from which it had crawled.

Ordrim watched – not angry. Lost. Broken.

“Borin... let me... I... I wanted to... become whole again...”

"Completely?" Borin raised the hammer one last time, his arm heavy as rock. "What you wanted would have destroyed us all."

Ordrim sank to his knees. A red glow poured from his chest like liquid grief. The shadow behind him breathed its last.

"Brother..." whispered Ordrim. "I... wanted... to be king..."

“A king protects,” said Borin. “He does not destroy.”

The hammer struck.

Ordrim's heart shattered. Light burst forth. The fire pit screamed. The shadow dissolved. The traitor fell.

And the depths burned.

Borin sank back, gasping, the hammer heavy as a mountain in his hand. He looked up—the crack was slowly closing. He had done it. He had finished Ordrim. But would he escape?

The ground beneath him began to crack.

The fiery veins erupted. A fountain of lava rose. The mountain roared.

Borin stood alone in the fire, the hammer glowing white, and a single question cut through his heart:

**"How do I get out of here?"**

The ground beneath Borin's feet melted. What had just been solid rock transformed into a seething web of magma veins, writhing like living snakes. Heat lashed through the pit, and with each passing second the space grew narrower, hotter, wilder. The mountain screamed—not loudly, inaudibly, but Borin felt it in his bones. A mixture of pain and relief, as if the mountain itself had sweated out a festering wound.

He had defeated Ordrim. But the price was now beginning to reveal itself.

Valmir's words echoed in Borin's mind:

*"The fire pits are older than anything. When they rupture, the mountain itself falls."*

Borin stared upwards, where the crack was beginning to widen slowly but inexorably. The structure couldn't hold. Without Ordrim's influence, the false chamber collapsed in on itself—and the fire beneath surged upwards like a hungry god.

"By the ancestors..." Borin gasped. "I have to get out of here."

But the way up was almost vertical. The walls were glowing, brittle, constantly washed by lava. No dwarf could have climbed it. No creature of flesh and blood.

But Borin wasn't alone. He had the hammer.

The deep hammer vibrated. The primal rune on it glowed.  
And Borin heard something. A whisper. Not from Ordrim. Not from the mountain itself.

It was... a call. An ancient, venerable sound. A tremendous echo.

The depths spoke.

*"RISE UP, BORIN SON OF DARNAK."*

*"IT'S NOT OVER."*

Borin sat up, though his legs trembled and his beard was singed by the fire. The heat was unbearable, but the hammer protected him, a gossamer veil of golden energy keeping him alive.

"How... am I supposed to get up there?" he murmurs.

The hammer answered.

A golden spark leaped from the weapon into the ground. The stone froze in one spot. A small mound formed. A footprint.

Borin stared at it. Then he raised the hammer. Another blow. Another spark. Another bump.

"A path...?"

Yes. The hammer could shape a path. One out of the chaos of the fire. Not a real staircase, but enough to climb.

Borin began to rise.

Each blow to the rock created a small piece of path. Each piece of path lasted only a few heartbeats before it melted away again.

He had to be quick.

Borin hammered, climbed, hammered, climbed. Sweat dripped from his beard. The air burned in his lungs like glowing coals. The lava beneath him boiled like an angry dragon.

He looked up. The entrance was wide. Much too wide.

"I can't do it..."

A thunderous roar behind him. A collapse.

He needed to go faster. Much faster.

"MOVE, BORIN!" he yelled at himself.

Punch. Kick. Climb. Punch. Kick. Climb.

A rhythm. A forging beat. Like in Greybeard's Great Forge.

He heard the voices of his ancestors. Those of his companions. His own heart.

And eventually – after an eternity of fire and pain – he saw movement at the top edge of the crack.

"BORIIIN!!"

Karim's voice. Wild. Panic. Hope.

"THERE! I SEE HIM!"

Aldrik: "HANG IN THERE, BROTHER!"

Kaidra: "HE CAN DO IT! I KNOW IT!"

Valmir: "Borin! Ten more steps! ONLY TEN!"

Ten.

A small number. An impossible number.

Borin hammered. His arm was numb. His body like a burning wreck. But he hammered.

The last few meters were like a single heartbeat.

The rock beneath him melted. The lava rose. The mountain trembled.

He jumped.

He missed.

His hand slipped. The edge was too high. His strength was too weak.

He fell.

"BORIN!!!"

But Kaidra was faster than gravity. She threw herself flat to the ground, stretching out her full reach, her fingers extended like those of a huntress on her last breath.

Her hand grabbed Borin's wrist.

And it held.

Sparks of fire danced on his armor as he hung between lava and life.

"Pull... me... up...!!!"

Karim and Aldrik were there immediately, grabbed Borin under the arms, and with a scream that filled the entire tunnel, pulled him over the edge.

Borin rolled onto his back and gasped. The heat escaped him like steam. He was alive.

Karim fell next to him. "By all the fucking gods, Borin... you stink of barbecue."

Aldrik laughed. Kaidra wiped the fiery sparks from her hair. Valmir smiled – a genuine, rare smile.

But the mountain trembled again.

Valmir's expression turned serious.

"Get out of here. Now. The mountain is beginning to close – and to heal."

Borin stood up. The hammer glowed faintly. His heart was racing.

"Then we'll take him home," he said.

And they ran. Together. Out of the fire pit. Out of the depths. Up... to the final chapter of their war.

## The Battle of the Crown Hall

The ascent from the fire pits felt endless. Behind them, the mountain trembled as if burning away the last vestiges of Ordrim's corruption deep within. Magma bolts ripped through the ground, rocks thundered into the abyss, and the stench of molten iron and dying darkness burned Borin's nostrils. Yet he and his companions climbed higher—step by step, breath by breath, ever farther away from the burning hell from which Borin had returned.

The runemaster led the group through a side shaft, its walls covered in ancient, almost forgotten symbols. Golden sparks danced among them, as if the runes themselves sensed the presence of the rightful wielder of the hammer. Valmir paused briefly, touched one of the lines, and nodded silently.

“The mountain is indeed healing,” he said softly. “The depths are accepting what has happened.”

“Then we should hurry,” Karim grumbled, “before he decides to wall us in, because he also accepts us.”

Aldrik laughed briefly, but everyone heard the trembling within him. No one forgot the heat that had just almost consumed them.

After a while, the shaft ended in a tall rock chamber. Between the stone pillars, a wide tunnel shimmered, its floor made of fractured granite, littered with fresh tracks. Not from animals. Not from orcs. From dwarves.

From many dwarves.

"What is this?" Kaidra asked, kneeling down. Her hand ran over boot prints, deep gouges, and the marks of pushed shields.

The runemaster immediately replied: "This is the path to the Crown Hall. And these tracks... belong to our brothers."

Borin paused. One second, two, three.

"The Dwarves of Ironwall?" he asked.

“Or the border guards who have returned,” Aldrik said. “Maybe they got the news. Maybe they’re already fighting.”

A new tremor ran through the tunnel, followed by distant thunder. It sounded like battle – shields clashing, voices shouting, steel striking stone.

Kaidra jumped up immediately. "It's coming from above!"

And then they heard it.

A horn.

Deep. Clear. Dwarfish.

Karim's eyes widened. "By the blacksmiths! That's the horn of the Stone Age fathers! It only sounds when—"

“—when a king dies or a new one rises,” Valmir said calmly, but with unusual sharpness.

Everyone was now looking at Borin.

But Borin shook his head. "Not now. Not yet. We have to go to the Crown Hall first. That's where everything will be decided."

They ran.



The tunnel widened, the air grew colder, and the thunder of battle louder. The path led into vast dwarven halls, through ancient smithing chambers and storerooms long abandoned. Everywhere they saw traces of the battle: broken orc weapons, scattered shields, and trails of blood across the floor.

And then they reached the antechamber to the Crown Hall.

A colossal archway loomed before them, hewn from black basalt and covered with ancestral runes. Two massive doors of hardened steel stood wide open, but both were dented and bent, as if some immense power had tried to force them open.

Behind the gate, the battle raged.

They saw the sparks of weapons. They heard the shouts of the dwarves. They heard the war cries of the last orc warriors.

And above it all, through everything, came the sound of laughter.

A laugh that they all recognized immediately.

"No..." murmured Aldrik. "That can't be..."

Borin felt something burning inside him—hotter than any fire pit. Ordrim had fallen, yes... but something of his shadow must have escaped. Something had sped ahead to the upper halls.

Karim pulled out the axe. "If he's still alive... if he somehow made it up here... then I'll personally kill him for the third time."

Valmir raised his hand. "Don't get angry. Anger blinds. And this could be a trap."

"Trap or not," said Borin, stepping forward, "we're going in."

They entered the Crown Hall.

And their hearts froze.

The dwarven guards fought desperately against a horde of dark orcs—creatures that had never even been part of Ordrim's army. They seemed like a last-ditch effort, spat out from the depths in a final act of hatred. Fallen dwarves and orcs lay scattered everywhere, along with shattered shields and broken pillars.

But in the center of the hall, directly in front of the empty throne...stood a figure.

Large. Shadow-shrouded. A final, twisted fragment of the power that had destroyed Borin in the depths.

A shadow that had not come to terms with dying.

He turned his head.

His face was an empty mask of darkness. His eyes blazed green. And his voice was no longer Ordrim's, but neither was it that of an orc.

*“BORIN...”*

Valmir whispered: “A splinter. A damned splinter of the primal wound...”

Karim raised the axe. "Then we'll chop it down before it grows back!"

Borin stepped forward. He raised the hammer. The golden runes glowed.

“This,” he said, “is the last shadow to fall.”

And then the Crown Hall plunged into its final storm.

The Crown Hall trembled like a living organism. Sparks danced through the air, swords clashed against shields, and the cries of the wounded echoed like individual drops in a storm of steel and blood. But all this was merely the backdrop—the true horror stood in the center of the hall, where kings had once been crowned, oaths sworn, and stories born.

The shadow.

He was not Ordrim. And yet he carried the echo of his hatred. He was not the shaman. And yet the same twisted magic pulsed within him. He was not the wound. And yet he was a part of it.

A fragment. A heart shard of pure darkness, left behind when Ordrim fell — and now seeking a new host.

“HE'S GETTING BIGGER!” Kaidra exclaimed.

She was right. The shadow absorbed everything around him—light, warmth, even the energy of the fighting dwarves. Every blow against him dissipated, as if he were feeding on the violence meant to strike him.

Valmir raised his staff. “Keep your distance! He has no body—he IS the spawn of the primal wound! Nothing in this world can hold him back for long!”

The splinter turned its gaze towards Valmir. A sound crept out of it — a hoarse, deep hiss that sounded like the tearing of metal.

Borin stepped forward.

Slowly. Unwaveringly. The hammer in his hand glowed brighter than in the fire pit, as if the mountain itself were whispering strength to him.

"You are the last one," Borin said softly. "You are the final lie in a long suffering."

The shadow reacted. It practically exploded. A beam of darkness shot out of its body like a spear and raced towards Borin.

"BORIN! GET OUT OF THE WAY!" yelled Aldrik.

Borin didn't.

Instead, he raised the hammer — and the dark energy bounced off him as if it were water against a mountain.

A scream echoed through the hall.

Not Borin's. The shadow screamed, for for the first time its power had found no hold. The hammer pulsed white, and a wave of light spread around Borin like the first ray of sunshine after a long winter.

Karim laughed in disbelief. "HA! The thing thought it could hurt HIM!"

But Valmir remained serious. "That was just a test. Next, he'll try to devour us all!"

The shadow grew longer. The darkness stretched out like arms, reaching for every dwarf in the room. Some fell, screaming as their strength was drained. Others staggered, their eyes empty, as if their souls had been sucked out.

"PROTECT THE BORDER!" roared the rune master.

He drew three runes in the air — they glowed, swung above the warriors' heads, and formed a shield that held back the darkness.

"JUST A SHORT TIME! BORIN, MAKE YOUR END!"

The splinter now formed into a head. Into two arms. Into a body.

A distorted, false dwarf.

A counter-image. A mockery.

He spoke — or tried to. The voice was an echo from Ordrim, from the shaman, from the primal wound.

*"Booooo... riiin..."*

Borin felt something calling him from the depths. Something wanted to grab his heart. Something wanted to break him.

But he stood.

He didn't call back.

He marched.

The ground trembled beneath his steps. The shadow retreated—not in fear, but in realization.

Valmir raised his staff. His radiance shone through the hall.

"NOW, BORIN! THE ROUND IS RIGHT! THE MOUNTAIN IS WITH YOU!"

Borin wound up.

The shadow stormed.

Karim and Aldrik shouted and threw themselves between them — not to stop him, but to cut a path for Borin.

They were thrown away, but they had reached their destination.

Borin jumped.

The hammer sang.

He struck.

No scream followed.

Only silence.

A silence heavy as a fallen mountain. A silence that tore the shadow apart. A silence that let the last splinter of the primal wound burn out like dust in the light of the forge.

The shadow crumbled. It dissolved. It was gone.

Finally. Definitely.

The Crown Hall breathed a sigh of relief.

The dwarves sank to their knees — out of exhaustion, out of shock, out of gratitude.

Karim stood up, limping, and looked at Borin.

"Brother..." He grinned broadly. "...now there's only one thing missing."

Aldrik nodded. "Yes. Just one."

Valmir smiled. A genuine, calm, knowing smile.

Borin turned around.

The throne waited. Empty. Old. Abandoned.

No longer.

Borin stood at the center of the throne room, while the dust of the fallen shadow settled across the floor like fine black ash. The mountain's spasms slowly subsided, the air calmed, and the last echoes of the battle faded among the hall's ancient pillars. The crown room, once a place of pride and power, now resembled an exhausted giant finally resting after a long struggle.

The dwarves stood around Borin. Exhausted. Wounded. But alive.

And her gaze rested solely on him.

Not because of the hammer. Not because of the shadow. But because he was the only one who could deserve this place now.

The throne rose at the far end of the hall—monumental, forged from the black stone of the depths, its surface inscribed with runes that slumbered only in moments of true destiny. The throne's back depicted the mountain itself, its peak surrounded by stars. The armrests were shaped like two stylized dragon heads, their eyes once bristling with fire.

Now they glowed slowly. Like a heart beginning to awaken.

Borin sensed the anticipation in the air. The anticipation of the dwarves. The anticipation of the mountain. The anticipation of his people – even of the fallen who lay here, as if their souls had been waiting for this moment.

But Borin didn't leave immediately.

He saw the injured. He saw the fallen. He saw the damage that Ordrim's corruption had caused.

And he saw his companions.

Karim, his armor in tatters, but a grin almost pathologically wide. Aldrik, leaning heavily on his axe, but with shining eyes. Kaidra, silently cleaning her daggers, scrutinizing Borin like a rock. The Runemaster, offering only a slight nod, his gaze filled with pride. Valmir, the sorcerer, lowering his staff and exhaling deeply, as if he had won a war against time and space.

Valmir stepped forward. His voice was calm but firm, borne of ancient certainty.

"Borin, son of Darnak," he said. "You have healed the primal wound. You have saved the mountain. You have done what no other dwarf has done for eons. You alone wield the hammer. You alone have tamed the depths. The mountain acknowledges you."

He made a small gesture with the staff.

And the ground responded.

A faint sound, like the strike of an anvil in the heart of the rock, reverberated through the hall. The runes on the throne glowed – first gently, then more intensely, then so brightly that they filled the room.

Karim whispered: "By the ancient gods... he is calling him."

Aldrik nodded. "The throne calls the king."

Borin felt his heart pound. Not from fear – but because he felt the weight of history on his shoulders. The weight of his ancestors. The weight of his people.

"It's not over yet," he said quietly.

Valmir immediately replied: "Yes. It starts now."

Borin took a deep breath.

He went.

Every step echoed. Not like the steps of a man – but like the blows of a blacksmith's hammer reclaiming its place in the world.

The throne glowed. The runes blossomed in gold. The air vibrated.

As Borin reached the top of the stairs, a voice suddenly called out:

"BORIN!"

It was Kaidra. For the first time, her voice didn't sound harsh, calculating, or like that of an assassin.

She sounded... vulnerable.

"Are you sure you want this?" she asked.

Borin looked at her. For a second. For an eternity.

"No," he said. "I don't want to. But that doesn't matter."

Karim grinned. "That's the right answer."

Borin turned back to the throne. He slowly climbed the steps.

Each step made the room brighter. The runes glowed. The rocks sang. The hammer vibrated.

As he reached the final step, it happened:

The runes closed around the throne like a circle. A ray of light from the ceiling, from the highest point of the mountain, broke through and struck Borin like a crown of fire.

The dwarves knelt.

All.

Even the seriously wounded. Even those who could barely stand. Even the dying rose one last time to bear witness.

Borin sat down.

The throne reacted immediately.

The runes on the backrest shot upwards like flames, wrapping around his back and shoulders to form a golden wreath of light that hovered above his head.

Valmir lowered his head.

“Borin, son of Darnak,” he said loudly, clearly, with full dignity —

“KING OF THE DEEP.”

The Crown Hall trembled. Not out of fear. Out of appreciation.

The mountain had found its king.

And so began a new era.

## The Hammer and the Sword

The Crown Hall still vibrated with the energy that had permeated Borin's coronation. The runes glowed faintly, like the first light of a new dawn. But the world outside... waited no longer. The depths never rested for long, and the mountain demanded decisions—a king could not sit in silence while the blades outside grew sharper.

Borin rose from his throne. Not ceremoniously. Not with a triumph. But with a burden on his shoulders that felt like the entire mountain itself.

His gaze swept over the assembled dwarves. Knights, smiths, border guards, old warriors who, despite bleeding wounds, had risen to salute him. They looked at him like a star in the night. But Borin didn't feel like a star. He felt like a man who had just crawled out of hell.

Karim stepped closer, leaning heavily on his axe. "Well? What is your first order, my king?"

Borin grimaced. "Never say that again in that tone, or I'll break your teeth out."

Karim laughed loudly. "Ah! Then you're definitely a king. Only kings threaten so friendly."

But the moment of lightness lasted only a breath.

Valmir stepped forward. His face was serious, as if announcing a firestorm. "Borin. We need to talk."

"I thought we had talked enough already," Borin murmured, but he followed the magician.

Valmir led him to a side balcony door made of black steel. It creaked open, and fresh, cold air rushed in. The balcony opened onto a massive ledge overlooking the outer halls—halls where lights burned, dwarves marched, blacksmiths hammered, and guards took their posts.

Borin stared out over his city. His city. His people.

Almost unbelievable.

Valmir stood beside him, his hands resting on the staff. "The hammer has destroyed Ordrim. The shadow has fallen. The primal wound is healed."

"Sounds good." Borin folded his arms. "What's the problem?"

Valmir took a deep breath. "The problem is that the fire in the mines... won't go out."

Borin turned around. "What?"

"It's not unnatural," Valmir said. "The mountain is healing. But healing means movement. Pressure. Change. The veins of fire are redrawing themselves. Some are opening up again. Others are drying up. There will be... tremors. For weeks."

"Earthquake?" Borin asked.

"Yes." "Fires?" "Some." "Collapsions?" "Possibly."

Borin sighed. "That doesn't sound like healing. That sounds like chaos."

"Healing is chaos," Valmir explained. "But it is the first chaos that we have been allowed to influence ourselves in centuries."

Borin leaned over the railing. "How bad will it get?"

Valmir looked at him for a long time. "It's bad enough that you need more than a hammer."

"And what exactly am I missing?"

"The sword."

Borin frowned. "Which sword?"

Valmir raised his staff and pointed into the distance — towards the great northern halls, which lay in semi-darkness like a sleeping dragon.

"The Sword of the Ancients," he said. "The last weapon forged in the depths before the orcs first invaded our realms. It was never finished. It lacks..." He looked directly at Borin. "...a king."

Borin growled. "Then it's good that we have one now."

Valmir nodded. "Good — but also bad."

"Why bad?"

"Because the sword will test you. It was never meant to be wielded by a king, but by the right person."

Karim joined them. He had apparently overheard. "That sounds like dangerous shit."



"It IS dangerous shit," Valmir confirmed very seriously.

Aldrik also stepped out. "Whatever it is — we're going with it."

Borin shook his head. "No. Not this time. The last trials killed almost all of you. I'll do this alone."

Karim laughed harshly. "Certainly not. If you die, who will yell at me if I do something stupid?"

Aldrik: "Or who's going to remind me that I snore too loudly?"

Kaidra stepped silently out of the shadows. "And who's going to warn me before I stab you in the back—out of sheer boredom?"

Borin stared at her. "How... is that an argument for or against me taking me with me?"

She smiled subtly. "I'm not sure myself."

But in her eyes there was no more darkness. Only loyalty. Deep, true, unwavering loyalty.

Valmir breathed a sigh of relief. "Fine. If you want to die—then die together. You're worse than orcs..."

Karim: "Compliment accepted."

Valmir snorted. "But quickly. The mountain is moving. The halls in the north are not stable."

"Then we'll go," said Borin. "If the mountain wants to test me—let it do so, while my heart is still hot from the fight."

He stepped away from the railing, slinging the hammer over his shoulder.

"The hammer and the sword," he murmured. "It seems the Deep Realms want both."

Kaidra pulled her hood down further. "Then we should give it to them."

They left.

Together.

Into the darkness. Into the north halls. Into the next challenge.

The age of the new king had only just begun — and already the mountain demanded his courage.

The northern halls of the Underrealms greeted them not with splendor, but with silence—a silence heavier than any boulder. The air tasted metallic, as if the entire hall were filled with invisible sparks, and the floor vibrated occasionally, as if an ancient heart beat deep within. Torches burned in niches, but their light seemed pale, small, almost intimidated by the darkness that lurked beyond.

Karim muttered, "I don't like this." "Nobody likes this," said Aldrik. "Not even the rock itself."

Valmir led them further in, his staff now glowing a deep blue—a sign that he sensed powerful magic in the air. Kaidra glided ahead like a shadow among shadows, her eyes sharper than any dagger.

"Over there," she said quietly.

The north hall opened into another chamber, but this one was unlike anything Borin had ever seen. The floor was perfectly smooth. No dust, no scree, no dirt. A single, enormous block of stone, polished by time itself. In the center stood an anvil—massive, made of obsidian-black metal, crisscrossed with golden runic lines that pulsed to the rhythm of the mountain.

A sword hung above it.

Not laid down. Not bedded down. Floating.

A sword of pure silver steel, its blade traversed by three lines—one of gold, one of obsidian darkness, one of pure white. The hilt was broad, coiled like a flame cast in metal, and the pommel displayed the ancestral rune: a circle bisected by three lines.

Borin knew immediately: This was not a sword. This was a decision.

"The sword of the ancients," Valmir whispered. "The blade that can divide the world or divide one."

Karim crossed his arms. "It looks easier than my leg hair after a fire."

"Be quiet," Kaidra murmured.

Borin took a step closer. A breath of cool air brushed against his skin. The sword reacted.

It lowered slowly. Not like a weapon. Like a glance.

"It recognizes you," said the rune master reverently. "The mountain knows that you have come."

Valmir placed a hand on Borin's shoulder. "Before you touch it, you must know: The sword doesn't simply bind itself. It tests. It looks inside you. And if it finds you unworthy..."

"...what happens then?" Karim asked.

"Then it destroys him," Valmir replied without hesitation. "In a way that even the mountain never forgets."

Borin nodded slowly. "Good. Then the sword knows what it's getting into."

Aldrik smiled. "If it tries to eat you, I'll knock the blade out of its mouth."

"The blade has no mouth," the rune master said dryly.

"Then I'll punch him in the face."

Kaidra breathed a sigh of relief. "Borin... if you do that, you're not doing it like a king."

He looked at her. "Oh? How else?"

"As a dwarf," she said. "As a man. Not as a title."

Strangely enough, these words affected him more deeply than any warning.

Borin stepped forward. The hammer vibrated in his hand, but he held it steady, as one would soothe an old friend. The sword hovered only a hand's breadth above the anvil.

"And now?" asked Karim.

"Now," said Borin, "I'm taking matters into my own hands."

Valmir wanted to warn him — but Borin had already intervened.

His fingers closed around the handle.

A shock immediately coursed through his body.

Not pain. Not fire. Not cold.

All at once.

Images bombarded him. Golden halls. Smiths forging the sword. Giants dying. Dwarfs falling. One king who could not hold the sword—another who was forbidden to. A third who failed. A fourth who died.

And then — nothing.

A void. A question.

*"WHO ARE YOU?"*

The voice was not dwarfish. Not human. Not divine.

She was like the sound of a landslide trying to think.

Borin growled. "I am Borin. Son of Darnak. King—"

*"INCORRECT."*

The ground shook. The sword vibrated. The hilt became hot.

Kaidra shouted: "BORIN! LET GO!"

He did not hear her. The sword continued to speak.

*"THESE TITLES ARE WORTHLESS. WHO ARE YOU WITHOUT THEM?"*

Borin clenched his teeth. He was sweating. He was panting. But he answered.

"I am a dwarf. One of many. A son of the mountain. One who tries... not to fail."

The air vibrated. A crack appeared in the darkness around him. Something was approaching—something large.

*"AND WHY ARE YOU CARRYING THE HAMMER?"*

"Because I need him," said Borin. "Because the mountain gives him—and takes him away again."

*"AND THE SWORD?"*

Borin was breathing heavily. Then he said:

"Because a king doesn't just strike. He protects. And this here... is a weapon for protecting."

Darkness fell.

A light shone. A deep, golden, pure light.

The sword recognized him.

And then... it settled in his hand like a breath.

The rune master fell to his knees. "By the ancestors... he has accepted it."

Karim grinned broadly. "Does that mean we now have a king who carries two weapons?"

"No," Valmir said quietly. "We have a king who carries two worlds."

Borin stood. Hammer in one hand. Sword in the other. And the mountain vibrated—not from pain.

Out of appreciation.

The fate of the Deep Realms changed at that moment.

Forever.

The weight of the sword felt different in Borin's hand than that of the hammer. The hammer was a heartbeat, a rock, a will that rested in his arms like an old companion. But the sword... the sword was a breath. Not a tool. Not a symbol. Not an object. It felt like a decision waiting to be made. It hummed, vibrated, lived—as if listening for its wielder's next thought.

Borin paused. The air around him grew still. His companions stared at him as if he had just been struck by lightning.

“Is... everything alright?” Aldrik asked hesitantly.

Borin slowly turned the sword, letting the light of the runes sweep across the blade. "I don't know," he said honestly. "It feels like it's watching me."

Karim snorted. "If it's watching you, Borin, it's for one reason: so it knows when to strike."

Kaidra stepped closer. Her eyes were fixed on the sword, as if she feared it might explode at any moment—or speak. “You’re holding it still. Most men would scream. Or burn.”

“I’m burning with passion enough inside,” said Borin.

The runemaster bowed slightly, a gesture of deep respect. "The sword accepts you. That means it now expects something from you."

"What then?" Karim asked dryly. "That he juggles both weapons?"

Valmir replied in a serious voice: "That he leads them. Both of them. At the same time."

Borin raised an eyebrow. "Both?"

"The hammer is the blow," said Valmir. "The sword is the decision. The hammer breaks. The sword chooses. Together... they determine the fate of the Underrealms."

Borin looked at both weapons: hammer and sword.

He had never chosen such a path—he had been thrown into it. But now he felt that this path had always slumbered within him.

He was a blacksmith. A warrior. A dwarf king.

He was all of that at once — and now the mountain demanded that he prove it.

"What now?" he finally asked.

Valmir smiled darkly. "Now? Now we'll test whether you're a king—or just a man who's found a throne."

"And how do we test that?" Karim growled.

Valmir raised the staff. A soft humming filled the chamber. A rune – huge, ancient, vibrating – was burned into the floor beneath them. The stone trembled.

"With the final test," said Valmir. "The test of the double blow."

Aldrik frowned. "What the hell is a double strike?"

The rune master replied: “The deepest teaching of the ancients. Two forces that should never be united. Two paths that should never go hand in hand. Two weapons that should never accept the same wielder.”

He pointed at Borin's hands.

"Hammer and sword. Destruction... and destiny. Chaos... and order. No king before you has wielded both and survived."

Karim crossed his arms. "This story isn't getting any better."

"It will get worse," Valmir said. "Because in order to unite both weapons, Borin must show that he doesn't live through them — but that THEY live through him."

Kaidra quietly stepped back. "How do we test that?"

"So." Valmir drove the stick into the ground.

The room exploded in light.

The world around Borin blurred. He suddenly stood alone — in darkness. In gloom. On a circular stone plateau that hovered above a bottomless abyss.

"Valmir?" he called. "Karim?"

There was no reply.

Just an echo. His own.

Then he saw her.

Two figures stood before him.

The first was made of glowing gold — a giant of runes, light, and power. In his hand he held a hammer larger than Borin's entire body.

The second figure was made of silver, sharp as an edge, with eyes like ice. A warrior of pure steel spirit, wielding a sword that cut in all directions—even into silence itself.

The golden figure spoke first. Her voice was the sound of an anvil in the heart of the world.

*"I'M AMAZING."*

The silver figure followed. Her voice was a whisper, as sharp as a dagger.

*"I AM THE SWORD."*

Both approached Borin.

*"AND YOU... WHO ARE YOU?"*

Borin raised both weapons. He trembled. Not from fear — but because he knew what they demanded.

"I am Borin," he said. "And I will not serve you."

Both figures paused.

"I will guide you."

The abyss trembled. The figures froze.

Because that was exactly the right answer.

The hammer glowed. The sword sang. Both rushed towards Borin — not to destroy him, but to unite with him.

A light burst forth. A jolt ripped through the darkness.

And Borin was back in the north hall.

He held a hammer and a sword.

But they were different now.

Connected. Obedient. His.

Valmir nearly fell over in astonishment. "By all the stars—he passed the test!"

Karim grinned. "Of course he does! He's Borin!"

Aldrik: "And now?"

Borin raised a hammer and a sword.

"Now," he said in a voice that filled the entire hall, "the war of reconquest begins."

## The Fall of the Orc Prince

The journey from the northern halls back to the outer chambers of the Deep Realms felt as if the entire mountain were holding its breath. Borin felt it with every step: the hammer was heavy as a heart of stone, the sword light as a thought still seeking form. Two forces in his hands, not meant for each other—and yet now tamed by him. His companions followed behind, their steps steady, but the tension hung over them like a shadow. They knew what was coming. The orc lord was still alive.

As they reached the upper level, the smell of smoke and blood immediately assaulted their nostrils. The floor was ripped open, and the remnants of the battle they had begun in the Crown Hall lay scattered everywhere. But now it was silent. Unnaturally silent. No metallic clang, no roar, no creature's breath. Only the deep, slowly vibrating bass of a battle horn echoing in the distance—like a call summoning the last survivors.

"That is the horn of the orc hordes," Aldrik said hoarsely. "The prince is gathering his last warriors."

"Fine," Karim grumbled. "Then we'll beat them all to death in one fell swoop."

Valmir shook his head. "No. The orc lord is not calling them to battle. He is calling them to sacrifice."

Borin stopped. "He wants to get some strength."

"He MUST strengthen himself," Valmir replied. "The shadow that once supported him is destroyed. Ordrim has fallen. The primal wound is healed. The prince has hardly any magic left—so he is devouring the remnants of his own army to be strong enough for you."

Kaidra grimaced. "Orcs are disgusting."

Karim grinned. "Not just orcs."

Aldrik nudged him with his elbow. "Shut up."

Borin raised his hammer and sword. "Then we'll end this. Where is he?"

The rune master stepped forward, placed his hand on the ground, and murmured an ancient formula. The runes in the stone responded. A faint glow spread like a map forming itself from light. A figure appeared at the edge—large, monstrous, surrounded by flames and smoke.

"In the hall complex of the old smith thrones," said the rune master. "He is waiting there."

"To me," said Borin.

Nobody objected.

They began to move, faster than before. Each step echoed in the halls, and the torches flickered as if they sensed something greater than blood and iron passing through them. The temperature rose as they approached the forge complex. The walls were blackened, as if someone had hurled fire at them; in some places, the stone still glowed.

When they reached the first forge chambers, they saw the extent of the madness. Dead orcs lay piled on top of each other in grotesque heaps, their bodies drained of blood, their eyes empty. Not fallen in battle – drained dry. Used up. The air was thick with the smell of copper and burnt flesh.

Karim growled. "That's what the prince did."

Valmir simply nodded. "He wants power – to force your death."

"He's not getting anything at all," Kaidra hissed softly.

The path opened into a great hall – the Hall of the Bronze Throne. A forge so ancient that even the ancestral legends barely mentioned it. High stone arches spanned the space, enormous anvils stood like statues along the sides, and in the center burned a fire that could not be extinguished: the Heart Fire, a relic of the first forge.

And that's exactly where he was standing.



The Orc Prince.

He was immense—taller than two men, his muscles bulging, his skin crisscrossed with dark fissures from which black smoke rose. His eyes were two burning sparks in a face that resembled a daemon more than an orc. The armor he wore was molten metal, as if the mountain itself had fashioned it for him. In his hands he held a sword forged from the bones of his fallen generals.

He slowly turned his head when he saw Borin.

And he smiled. A broad, cruel, distorted grin.

“DWARFS...” he growled, his voice like thunder over coals. “YOU... ARE... BACK.”

Karim whispered: "By all the gods... he looks worse than before."

Valmir raised his staff. “This is no longer an orc. This is a vessel. For hatred. For residual power. For everything the depths have repelled.”

Borin took a step forward.

"Orc Prince," he said calmly. "This is your last breath."

The prince laughed. A deep, roaring laugh that shook the walls.

"I... EAT... YOUR... THRONE."

Borin raised his hammer and sword. Both began to glow—the hammer golden white, the sword silver-blue. Two powers, two worlds, two destinies.

"No," said Borin. "Only my steel."

The prince roared. The ground trembled. The hall filled with dark smoke. And the final battle of the Dwarven War began.

The first blow did not come from Borin – it came from the Orc Prince.

A scream, so deep it made the rocks tremble, echoed through the smithy. The lord lashed his bone sword upward, and a torrent of black fire shot out like a spear. The heat wasn't fire, but hatred—concentrated, sharp, deadly. Instinctively, Borin raised his hammer, and the golden-white light that streamed from it shattered the black, flame-filled blade like glass.

Explosion. The ground cracked open. Stone dust rose like smoke.

Karim was thrown to the ground by the shockwave. Aldrik shielded his face with the axe. Kaidra leaped sideways, light-footed as a cat that had seen a hundred battles.

But Borin stopped.

His beard fluttered in the afterglow of the explosion. The hammer glowed. The sword buzzed in his left hand like a nervous snake.

The orc prince charged forward.

Not like a warrior. Not like an animal. Like a force of nature.

Every step thudded, deep and loud, as if he were reshaping the earth with each stomp. His armor of molten steel rubbed against itself with every breath, spewing sparks. He wasn't just tall—he was monstrous, a walking colossus of damned power.

“COME!!!” he yelled.

Borin arrived.

He leaped forward, hammer in his right, sword in his left. The prince struck first—a horizontal blow so wide and powerful it could have shattered a rock. Borin slid beneath it, his body moving faster than a dwarf should have. The hammer crashed against the prince's armor.

An explosion of light. The prince was pushed back – half a step, no more. But that half step was enough.

Kaidra was instantly airborne, her blades flashing. She rammed her daggers between two plates of armor beneath the lord's left arm. He roared and swept her away with his forearm. She flew several meters, but rolled and stood upright again.

"Borin!" she cried. "The left arm! It's open!"

The prince turned to her – angrily, almost instinctively.

And Borin seized precisely that moment.

The sword rushed forward, cutting through the air like lightning, striking him below the rib. The prince roared – a genuine cry of pain, not triumph. Black blood gushed forth, boiling hot and brimming with putrid energy.

The prince grabbed Borin with his free hand. Hard. Relentlessly.

The fingers, like iron clamps, pressed around Borin's breastplate and lifted him up.

“WEEEEERE.... DUUU...?” roared the monster, drooling, trembling, and raging.

Borin slowly raised the hammer – his ribs cracked, his breath caught in his throat – but he still spoke:

"The one who ends you."

He shattered the prince's knee.

A thunderous crash.

The prince fell on one leg, roared, but wouldn't let go of Borin. Instead, he hurled him against a pillar. The pillar shattered like rotten wood, and Borin was thrown into a wall. The impact knocked the breath from his chest.

Karim charged forward roaring, threw himself at the prince's side, and hacked at his throat with both axes. The blades penetrated a few finger-widths before jamming. The prince hurled Karim back, but the tall dwarf immediately sprang to his feet—utterly mad, utterly brave.

"HAHA! YOU GO DOWN, YOU FAT SHIT MOUNTAIN!" he yelled.

Aldrik came from the side, striking the prince's skull with an axe blow so hard that the entire hall reverberated. The armor held. The prince seized Aldrik and hurled him like a child.

Kaidra was fighting again. Valmir stood behind, his hands raised, forming runes that flamed blue and flickered like strings of lights between the pillars.

"BORIN!" shouted the wizard. "SWORD AND HAMMER TOGETHER! THAT IS YOUR POWER!"

Borin stood up. The prince saw him. He roared. He came like a storm.

Borin ran.

Their footsteps echoed. Their voices fell silent.

The hammer turned white. The sword turned blue.

The prince swung his arm – a blow that could have destroyed the entire hall.

Borin jumped.

He jumped higher than a dwarf should have. Higher than a human could. Higher than an orc could have expected.

He crossed hammer and sword in the air.

A flash of lightning occurred between the blades.

Gold and silver. Light and steel. Hammer and blade.

A response.

And Borin plummeted down like a falling star.

The prince raised his weapon, but it was too late.

Borin struck.

A double blow.

Hammer – on the armor. Sword – into the heart.

The world exploded.

The orc prince did not roar. He died too quickly.

He took one last breath, hot as a blast from a furnace, then fell, heavy as a mountain.

The hall shook. The sparks died. The smoke dissipated.

It was over.

Aldrik slowly stood up. Karim wiped blood from his face. Kaidra sheathed her blades. Valmir lowered his staff.

Borin stood before the prince's corpse. Sword in one hand. Hammer in the other.

He said nothing.

Because some victories don't shout. They just keep breathing.

The orc lord lay motionless on the floor of the forge, a mountain of flesh, bone, and corrupted power, now nothing more than a lifeless corpse. His last breath had faded, as if all orcishness had lost its final spark within this hall. The heat, which had been mounting and menacing, began to subside. The heart's fire smoldered more calmly, the seething cracks slowly closed, and the foul smoke dissipated like a fleeing ghost.

But the silence that followed was not a triumphant silence. It was heavy. Like the breath of an exhausted giant.

Borin lowered the sword. The hammer in his right hand barely glowed; the force of the double blow had pushed even this weapon to its limit. A thin crack had appeared at the tip, barely visible, but Borin felt it – like a pain in his own bone.

Karim came panting up, hands on his hips. "Ha... HAAAA!" He laughed hoarsely. "That was the biggest bastard I've ever had the misfortune of fighting. And I'm still prettier than him."

Aldrik, wiping the blood from his face, snorted. "You were never pretty."

"Compared to THAT one!" Karim kicked the prince's corpse. He immediately withdrew his foot. "Ouch! It's still as hot as an oven door!"

Kaidra approached quietly, her movements as feline as ever. Her eyes rested on Borin.

"The mountain is silent," she said. "It is... relieved."

Borin looked at the orc prince for a long time. "It's over."

Valmir also stepped closer, his staff leaning at an angle against the ground. His face was exhausted, but filled with profound relief. "The war under the mountain is over. The last shadow is destroyed. The primal wound sealed. And the prince of the orc hordes lies dead at your feet." He made a small gesture. "This is a new age, Borin."

The runemaster knelt beside the prince's corpse, placed a hand upon it, and murmured an old farewell formula—not out of respect, but to ensure that no residual magic remained in the carcass. Then he nodded.

"He is gone for good. No return. No fragments. Nothing remains."

Borin exhaled deeply.

He hadn't known how much tension was in his body until it now poured out of him like water from a burst barrel.

Karim patted him on the back – firmly, but this time with a touch of caution. "You made it up to me, brother. King or not – I'll still follow you. Even if you tell us tomorrow to fight dragons."

"Please, no dragons," Aldrik muttered. "I hate dragons."

Kaidra smiled weakly. "If he says dragons, then we will kill dragons."

Valmir closed his eyes. "The question isn't whether we fight dragons. The question is whether the mountain will finally grant us a rest."

Borin hung his hammer and sword over his shoulders, looked at his companions and spoke:

"The war... is over."

But the rune master raised his hand in warning. "Not quite."

Borin turned to him. "What do you mean?"

The old dwarf stood up, leaned on his staff, and declared:

"The prince has fallen. But his armies don't know it. The orcs still fighting outside, the splinterers living in the tunnels... they could rage on for days or weeks. They need to see it."

"See?" asked Karim. "See what?"

The rune master pointed at the prince.

"The dead body of their king."

Kaidra nodded slowly. "It's true. Orcs obey strength – and when the strongest of them can no longer stand, they break."

Valmir confirmed: "We must show his body to the armies. Then the horde will break like a rotten wheel."

Aldrik turned to Borin. "What do you say?"

Borin stared silently for a while at the corpse of the gigantic orc.

Then he raised his hammer and sword – both at the same time.

"We are carrying his death upwards," he said, "and showing the orcs that their time is over."

Karim grinned. "That sounds like a plan I like."

The rune master: "It is a dangerous path. But necessary."

Valmir: "And after that... the reconstruction begins."

Kaidra: "A new age."

Borin nodded.

"All right. We'll bring the prince to the gate."

But as they approached the body of the mountain, the ground trembled again – not from danger, but from respect. The entire mountain seemed to lift its breath, hold it... and then slowly radiate it out again.

A sign.

A blessing.

Thank you.

Borin placed his hand on the cold armor of the fallen prince. "Your end is our beginning."

His companions rallied around him.

Together, the new royal guard prepared to carry the final message of the battle upwards.

A chapter had come to an end.

The last one would begin soon.

## The Rebirth of the Deep Throne

The ascent from the forge halls up to the upper levels took longer than the descent into the darkest depths. Not because the path was harder—but because it weighed heavier. Borin felt every step, not just in his muscles, but in his heart. Behind them lay the last battle of the old world. Before them began the new.

The dead orc warlord was not carried; he was too large, too heavy, too intertwined with the dark magic that had created him. Instead, the runemaster used an ancient transport formula, one meant only for things greater than life and death. Runes glowed beneath the warlord's body, bluish and cold, lifting him like a floating monument. The corpse drifted just above the ground, borne by the power of the mountain itself.

"The mountain carries its enemy to the final gate," Valmir murmured. "Just as it happened in ancient times."

"If the mountain can carry it," Karim growled, "it can carry it damn well faster. This thing smells like five-hundred-year-old sauerkraut."

Aldrik looked at him. "Sour coal doesn't smell like that."

"I know. I'm trying to stay cheerful."

Kaidra walked slightly ahead, her daggers loose in her hands. Not out of mistrust—but out of habit. The sudden silence in the mountain made her uneasy. Where just moments before orcs had crawled, dark magic had blazed, and the ground itself had seemed to pulsate, there now lay an odd stillness. Too still.

"I don't like that," she said quietly.

"Nobody likes that," Borin replied.

The new king strode ahead. Hammer and sword he wore across his chest, crossed like two ancient truths. The dwarves they encountered stopped abruptly, as if witnessing a legend striding through the halls. Some honored Borin with their fists against their chests. Others fell to their knees. Some wept silently, for they had lost brothers and fathers in battle.

But they all had the same look: hope.

The news spread faster than footsteps could. "The king is coming." "The prince has fallen." "The deep lives."

When Borin's group reached the Great Walk—the wide hall leading to the main gate—they were no longer alone. A dozen dwarves joined them, then two dozen, then dozens more. Wounded men, blacksmiths, guards, veterans. Many leaned on others for support. Many had bloody bandages. But all went along.

"This is the beginning," murmured the rune master, "not the end."

At the last threshold, they heard distant roars. Orcs.

But not in attack. Not in anger.

Confused. Uncertain. Leaderless.

Karim spat. "They can smell that their boss is dead."

"Yes," said Valmir. "And they have to see it to believe it."

Borin nodded, stepped to the massive gate, and placed a hand on the metal. The gate was covered in ancient runes, once used for defense. Now, however, they glowed faintly. Not fire. Not anger. Only recognition.

"Gateway to the Deep Realms," Borin said calmly. "Open."

The runes answered. A deep, ancient rumble filled the hall. Then the massive gate began to open. Slowly. Like the breath of a giant.

And the light from the outside world streamed in.

The orcish courtyard in front was overcrowded. Orcs. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. Wounded, exhausted, but ready to fight.

When the gate was fully open, they reversed. Their weapons were raised. Their eyes widened. Instinct. Fear. Rage.

Until they saw it.

The floating body of the orc prince.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the whole horde froze – as if their backs had been broken.

A lone orc, a shaman, began to howl. Others followed. Deeply. Sadly. Desperately. Inhuman – but full of truth.

The orcs stared at their dead prince. Then at Borin.

The hammer in one hand. The sword in the other. A king of stone and will.

Borin stepped forward. Not as a warrior. Not as a victor.

As the one who explains the end.

“Your prince has fallen,” he cried, his voice like a hammer blow. “Your war is over.”

The orcs moved slowly. One dropped his weapon. Then a second. Then a third.

Like a stone that sets a mountain in motion, the orcs dropped their weapons. One by one. Then entire squads. Then the whole mass.

The war under the mountain did not end in bloodshed, but in the silencing of blades.

Kaidra whispered: "I never thought it would end so... quietly."

Karim: "I prefer it quiet."

Valmir simply nodded. "An age rarely ends loudly. It ends the moment courage has a greater power than fear."

The rune master raised his staff. "So be it."

Borin raised a hammer and a sword.

He spoke softly, but everyone heard him.

"The Deep Realms are back."

And the world responded.



With silence. With peace. With history.

The orcs retreated as Borin and his companions emerged from the gate, accompanied by the floating corpse of their fallen lord. The silence that followed was thicker than smoke—a silence that seemed to fill the mountain itself. The dwarves behind Borin, hundreds now, stood shoulder to shoulder, forming a living wall of steel, stone, and history.

The runemaster slowly lowered the prince's corpse to the ground. The black, molten shimmer that had covered his skin faded. Without the dark power that had sustained him, he suddenly seemed smaller. Mortal. Ugly as truth itself. A fallen king in a realm that had never been his.

The orcs huddled closer together, large and small, warriors and shamans, injured and half-starved figures, all bearing the same question in their eyes: What now?

Borin took two steps forward. He stood before them like a boulder that could not be moved in a storm.

“Your war is over.” His voice carried across the stone plateau like the blade of a knife – clear, non-negotiable.

A deep rumble rippled through the ranks of the orcs. Not as a threat—but as helplessness. Many lowered their weapons. Some cast one last glance at the dead prince, as if they could force his return, but nothing happened. The body lay still, a cold reminder of the price he had paid for his madness.

Then an old orc stepped forward. A shaman, his skin covered in tattoos and branding. His hands trembled, but he stood upright. He was not an enemy—he was a voice.

He stared at Borin as if testing him.

"Dwarf King..." he growled. His accent was rough, his words grinding like stone on stone. "What do you want... with us?"

Borin breathed out calmly. "I want peace."

A murmur went through the orc crowds — incredulous, frightened, irritated, almost offended.

The old shaman blinked hard. "Peace...? With orcs?"

"Yes."

"Why? We killed many of your people. Many halls are drowned in blood."

"For this reason."

The shaman remained silent. Borin continued:

"Blood begets blood. Violence begets violence. I am King of the Deep Realms. And I want my people to live—not die for a war none of us ever wanted."

The orcs murmured. Some looked at each other, uncertain, fearful, but no longer hostile.

Kaidra stood close to Borin. Her voice was quiet, but sharp as a blade. "If they want peace, fine. If they don't... then just one word needs to be spoken."

Borin nodded briefly. "Yes. But we're giving them the choice."

The old shaman knelt down slowly, heavily, as if his own weight were pressing him down.

"Our prince... was strong. But foolish. He listened too much to dark powers that are not of our world. We followed him... because we knew nothing else."

"Now you know something different," said Borin.

The shaman looked up. "What will you give us when we leave?"

"A free path out of the depths. And enough provisions to keep your children alive."

"And in return?"

"You're abandoning our halls. Forever."

The shaman lowered his head. His breath trembled. He spoke loudly so that everyone could hear:

"We accept."

A shock ran through the crowd—like a rumble of reality itself. The orcs rose slowly, one after the other, some leaning on each other, some carrying the wounded, some gazing one last time at their dead ruler.

But nobody protested.

Nobody resorted to weapons.

The war was over — truly, finally, irrevocably.

The runemaster raised his staff. "The path to the north – the old mine tunnel – leads to the surface. It is safe. We will open it for you."

The orcs began to move. Slowly. Peacefully. Beaten, but not broken.

Kaidra stepped closer to Borin. "You didn't just end a war. You changed a world."

"Perhaps," Borin said quietly, watching her. "Or perhaps I've simply opened a path that others must walk."

Karim growled. "I would have preferred to kill them all. But..." He scratched the back of his head. "...I think you're right. If you want peace, you have to stop hitting at some point."

Valmir smiled. "The sword decides. The hammer ends. You chose both."

Aldrik nodded. "The King of the Deep Realms has spoken."

Borin looked out, beyond the hordes now retreating from the mountain. He did not see the enemy. He saw history set in motion.

"Good," he said. "Now the reconstruction begins."

As the orcs retreated north and the wounds of battle slowly faded in the haze of the halls, the Great Walk transformed into something that had not existed for centuries: a place of new beginnings. Dwarves who that very morning had believed the mountain would be their grave now stood shoulder to shoulder, watching their king stride through the ranks.

Borin felt the stares. Not only those of the living – but also those of the dead. Every stone, every pillar, every rune seemed to have eyes that finally wanted to see again. The mountain itself seemed to whisper:

*Finally. Finally I can breathe again.*

The dwarves formed a circle around their king. Not a circle of war, but one of protection, honor, and gratitude. Borin stepped into the center, hammer and sword still in his hands, and a soft murmur rippled through the crowd like wind through ancient trees.

The rune master stepped forward, his hands raised, and his voice echoed like an ancient song.

"The king lives." "The throne stands." "The deep is healed."

With each sentence, the tension rose until the dwarves raised their fists and joined in:

"THE KING LIVES!" "THE THRONE STANDS!" "THE DEEP IS HEALED!"

A call that went not only through the halls, but through the rock itself, squeezing the last vestiges of darkness from the cracks.

Borin raised his hand, and the shout fell silent like a sea that suddenly becomes calm.

"My brothers and sisters," he began, "this is not a day of triumph. It is a day of return."

The crowd listened. Every breath seemed to be simultaneous.

"Our halls are wounded. Our families have shrunk. Our hearts bear scars." He lowered his weapons. "But we stand."

A collective nod, raw and genuine.

"And because we are standing," said Borin, "our people will grow again."

Kaidra stepped beside him, her hood pulled low over her face, but her gaze steely. Karim and Aldrik positioned themselves on his other side, the Runemaster and Valmir directly behind them. This wasn't a guard. This was family.

Borin raised his hammer and sword again.

"These weapons do not symbolize war – but the future. With the hammer we reforge what is broken. With the sword we protect what is sacred to us."

The crowd began to whisper. Appreciation. Astonishment. Pride.

Valmir stepped forward. "The mountain has spoken. It has chosen a king who does not destroy – but unites."

"We all connect," Borin said calmly. "Because the throne does not belong to one man. It belongs to the people."

Karim shouted loudly: "THE THRONE BELONGS TO US ALL!"

The crowd cheered. The stones echoed the shout like thunder in a gorge.

Aldrik approached Borin, quietly. "The people trust you."

"I know," said Borin. "That's why I can't fail."

"You won't," Kaidra said with a calmness that surprised Borin. "Because you are not alone."

The king looked out at the crowd.

Dwarves filled the hall. Wounded men jostled one another. Blacksmiths with soot-stained faces. Old warriors with white beards. Young men bearing their first scars. Women clutching their children, proudly explaining that this was the king who had freed the Deep.

The rune master raised his staff.

"It is time."

Borin understood.

Together they made their way back to the Crown Hall – the place where the throne awaited. Not the old throne of the fallen kings, but the new one. The one the mountain itself had resurrected through light and fire. The Deep Throne, which in this age was not made of gold and stone, but of courage, sacrifice, and hope.

The path grew brighter with every step. The runes glowed more intensely. The air vibrated like a heartbeat.

As Borin stepped across the threshold, the throne rose in the light, and each rune lit up like a chain of stars.

Kaidra whispered reverently, "He is calling you."

Valmir murmured: "A king for a new age."

Karim grumbled. "Just sit on it already."

Aldrik grinned: "He's right."

Borin went to the stairs. Each step a promise. Each step a farewell to the past. Each step a step into something greater.

He sat down.

The throne reacted instantly. A wave of light flooded the hall, spread into the corridors, filled shafts and old chambers, penetrated forgotten tunnels, and rose to the highest ore veins.

The mountain answered.

Not with an earthquake. Not with a storm. But with a breath of light.

The Deep Throne was reborn.

And Borin was his king.

### A new age under stone

The wave of light emanating from the Deep Throne was like a breath, penetrating the entire mountain. It spread across the halls, the passageways, the forges, the chambers, the dwellings, and even the deepest mines. A warm, profound glow filled the world beneath stone, and for a moment it was as if the entire mountain were a single heart—and Borin was its beating.

But the light was not blinding. Not intense. Not overwhelming.

It was comforting. A whisper that said, "You are no longer alone."

The dwarves in the hall sank to their knees. Some wept. Some laughed. Many didn't know what was happening to them—they hadn't expected to witness the rebirth of the Deep Throne. Others had believed the old stories were just fairy tales.

But now the truth glowed like a rune in the heart of the world.

Borin sat calmly on the throne, hammer to his right, sword to his left. He felt the mountain's power flowing through his back, through his arms, through his entire being. But it was not a power that took him over—it was a power that acknowledged him.

*"You are my king," "The mountain seemed to be saying."  
"And I will carry you."*

Kaidra stepped forward. She looked at Borin, and in her eyes was something he had rarely seen in her: pride. Not in herself, but in someone she had deemed worthy.

"The throne accepts you completely," she said softly. "More than anyone I've ever known."

Karim roared loudly: "THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN SAYING ALL THE TIME!" Aldrik elbowed him in the ribs. "Shut up, you troll."

Valmir also stepped forward, his staff glowing faintly at the tip. “Borin, listen carefully. The throne has not merely renewed itself. It has changed. The light it created—that was no ancient ritual. That was... a new choice.”

“An election?” Borin asked.

“Yes,” said Valmir. “He didn’t just choose you. He chose an era.”

The runemaster nodded. “An age beneath stone. Not above stone, not in shadow, not in fear—but beneath stone. An age of depth, resting on your guidance.”

Borin placed a hand on the armrest. The runes in it pulsed slightly.

“And what does that mean?”

The rune master replied:

“It means that the mountain wants to live again.”

A murmur went through the crowd.

Valmir added: “The fire veins are changing. New passages are opening. Old paths, long buried, will return. The forges will burn brighter than ever before. The mountain itself will help us—just as it did in the days before the Dark Mines fell.”

Karim raised an eyebrow. “The mountain helps? That means... we have to work less?”

Kaidra: “No, that means YOU have to work less. The rest of us continue working as normal.”

Laughter swept through the hall — genuine, warm laughter that echoed through the pillars.

The mountain responded with a faint vibration, almost like a humorous echo.

But Valmir's tone became more serious again. “There is much to do. A great deal. The halls must be cleaned. New walls built. Wells repaired. The cursed tunnels secured. The path to the surface realms reconfirmed. And the orcs must be led out of the Shadowlands.”

Aldrik nodded. “And we must gather our people. Find the families. The children who have hidden. Bring the old people out of the deep chambers.”

The Rune Master: “And above all, we must reawaken the runes. The knowledge that was lost can return. The smiths of the ancients can sing again.”

Borin stood up.

A collective gasp went through the crowd.

His shadow fell across the steps of the throne as he descended. Hammer and sword held effortlessly in his hands—a symbol the dwarves would never forget. No king since the days of their forefathers had carried both.

"I will lead you," said Borin. "But I will not lead alone."

He looked at his companions.

"Kaidra, Keeper of Shadows. You will lead the scouts and drive the last remnants of the enemy from the tunnels." Kaidra nodded curtly. "It will be my pleasure."

"Karim, son of Thunderarm. You will train the first new sentinels. The dwarves need warriors as tough as you—but less noisy." Karim grinned. "I'll do my best, King... but being quiet is hard."

"Aldrik, Brother Smith. You will lead the forge. New weapons, new armor. The Underrealms shall shine again." Aldrik beat his chest with his fist. "It will be done."

"Valmir, guardian of the runes. You will rekindle the ancient symbols and bring the magic of the mountain back to our halls." Valmir bowed. "It is an honor."

The rune master stepped forward and knelt down. "My king... my life is always at your service."

Borin raised his hand. "Stand up. You do not serve me — you serve the Deep Realms. Just like me."

The old dwarf smiled. An honest, tired, proud smile.

Borin turned to the people.

"Work with me," he cried. "Fight with me." "Build with me." "For this is the beginning of a new kingdom—a kingdom we will build together."

The dwarves answered, all at once, like a single boulder with a thousand voices:

"FOR THE DEEP!"

A storm of voices. A roar of hope. A cry that would shape the next generations.

Borin raised his hammer and sword for the last time that day.

"A new era is beginning," he said.

And the mountain answered:

With light. With warmth. With peace.

The following hours were filled with work, voices, and the first faint pulse of the new age. Dwarves hurried through the halls, relaying orders, tending the wounded, carrying stones, repairing walls, and stoking new forges. The mountain was alive. It vibrated to a rhythm the dwarves hadn't felt in a long time—a rhythm that stirred a sense of ancient pride.

But then, when the first blacksmith's hammers rang out again and the runemasters began to light their ancient halls, something completely unexpected happened.

A sound. A faint one. A strangely bright one. Almost like... a ringing.

Karim turned around, puzzled. "What the hell...?"

Aldrik frowned. "That doesn't sound dwarfish."

Valmir raised his head. "No. That sounds... like grass."

"Grass?" Kaidra asked.

"Yes," said the magician. "Like someone trudging through tall grass." He closed his eyes. "But we are hundreds of paces deep under the mountain..."

Then they heard it more clearly:

**Tap-tap-tap...**

**Tap-tap...**

**Tap-tap-tap...**

A short pause. Followed by a voice.

"Excuse me? Hello? Is anyone here?"

Everyone stared at the tunnel entrance to the surface ramp.

A shadow moved there. A small shadow. A round shadow.

Borin stepped forward. Hammer and sword crossed on his back. The dwarves instinctively raised their weapons—not threateningly, more reflexively. Strangers rarely came, and certainly not voluntarily, beneath the mountain.

Then he came around the corner.

A small fellow. About hip-high. With curly hair on his head and feet. A brown jacket. A pipe in his hand. And a facial expression like someone who had accidentally stumbled into a hut where a king was being crowned.

A hobbit.

He saw the dwarves. He saw the weapons. He saw Borin.

He froze.

"Oh... oh heavens. This is... well... I hope I'm not interrupting... uh... anything."

Behind him appeared two more hobbits — one fatter and sweating, and one thinner who looked as if he would fall over backwards if you looked at him askance.

The fat hobbit shyly raised his hand. "Good... good day. We are here... uh... from the Vale. And we... um... are traders."



The thin one whispered: "Say it right!"

"Excuse me!" The fat hobbit straightened up, pulled a much too large map from his waistcoat, and began to read. "We come to... er... propose a trade agreement! With... with the venerable dwarves of..." He looked at the map. "...Deepgrim? Deep-Secret? Deep-Something? It's a bit blurry."

Karim stared at the three of them. Then he blurted out:

"HOW DID THEY GET IN HERE?!"

The fat hobbit was so startled that he dropped the map. The thin one clung to his shoulder. The first one to hold the pipe raised both hands.

"B-but please don't hit us! We had an invitation! Well... not an official one. But we heard that the dwarves are trading again! And we have excellent mushrooms! And tea! And cake!"

Kaidra whispered: "Tea?"

Aldrik: "Cake?"

Karim shrank back briefly. "I love cake."

Valmir stepped closer, curious. "Hobbits rarely come to the Underrealms. You must have traveled a long way."

The whistling hobbit smiled crookedly. "Oh yes... very, very long. And very, very dark. And honestly, if any of you knew how we could get out... we would be very grateful. We've gotten lost about... five times."

Borin had to suppress a laugh. It was the first time since the beginning of the war that he felt a genuine, honest smile inside him.

He stepped forward.

The hobbits stared at him as if a mountain on two legs stood before them.

"You want a trade agreement?" Borin asked.

The fat hobbit nodded eagerly. "Yes! Cake against... anything that isn't cake!"

The thin hobbit slapped him on the arm. "No! We bring herbs, candles, fruit, flour, wine... and cake. We are seeking shelter and a trade route."

The pipe-wielding hobbit looked at Borin. "With respect, Mr. Dwarf... we noticed that you came directly from a throne of light. We hope... we are not disturbing you?"

Borin placed a hand on his hammer.

"You're not disturbing anyone." He smiled. "You've arrived at just the right time."

The dwarves held their breath.

Borin straightened up and spoke with a new royal voice:

"The Under Realms are opening their gates — not just for traders, but for friends."

The pipe-playing hobbit beamed. The fat hobbit wiped his forehead. The thin hobbit almost fainted.

Borin continued:

"We will trade. We will make treaties. And you will return safely home — with the first trade pact of a new age."

Karim whispered: "And with cake."

Aldrik nodded seriously. "Yes, cake is important."

Kaidra rolled her eyes. "You are hopeless."

Valmir smiled. "The mountain will be pleased. It loves new paths."

Borin raised his hammer and sword one last time, the light of the throne glowed in the distance, and he spoke:

"A new age under stone begins — and you, little friends, are the first to walk its streets."

The trade agreement with the hobbits was sealed in the grand walkway, where the mountain still echoed with the runes of the throne. A wooden barrel containing the hobbits' finest cake was opened—and the dwarves regarded it with a reverence that surprised even Valmir. It was the first foreign taste in many years that didn't taste of war.

Borin stood on a raised platform and watched his people. How they laughed. How they worked. How they breathed.

This was the new age. An age he had not conquered — but earned.

But deep in the distance, the mountain vibrated. A gentle sign. A friendly one. But a warning.

Kaidra approached him, her movements as silent as ever. "You can hear it too."

"Yes." Borin placed a hand on the stone. "The mountain is breathing. But something is stirring."

"Danger?" she asked.

"Not now." Borin looked out over the crowd. "But sometime."

Karim approached, his beard covered in cake crumbs. "As soon as there's danger, we'll smash her skull in, right?"

Aldrik nodded. "Correct."

Valmir, however, was silent. His gaze wandered into the darkness of the high ceilings, as if he saw something that the others did not.

"Our ancestors hid many things," he said quietly. "Many secrets have been brought to light today... but some have not."

The rune master also approached. "New passages open. New runes awaken. And deep, deep beneath the halls... there are places that even we do not know."

Borin looked at him. "I know."

He reached for his belt, untied the hammer and sword, and crossed them before his chest. A symbol. An oath.

"We will find them. All of them. And if something lurks in the depths, we will confront it."

Kaidra smiled. Karim growled contentedly. Aldrik shook his shoulders. "Then I'll start forging sharper blades."

The three hobbits stood at the edge of the crowd, marveling at a kingdom reinventing itself. The Pipe Hobbit puffed on his pipe, blew a perfect smoke ring into the air, and said:

"You dwarves... you have something ahead of you that is bigger than cake."

Borin laughed. "Then stay a while. Maybe you can help us."

The hobbits exchanged nervous glances, but finally they nodded.

Valmir turned to Borin. His voice was clear, but there was a hint of worry in it.

"This is the end of the war," he said. "But not the end of history."

Borin placed a hand on his shoulder.

"No," said the King of the Deep Realms. "This is only the beginning."

The mountain trembled slightly — not threateningly, but like a heartbeat.

A promise.

A whisper from the depths:

*"Soon."*

The runes on the walls glowed, as if they wanted to give the first spark to a new path.

Borin gazed into the darkness.

He saw no end in sight.

He saw the beginning of a new adventure.

An age buried beneath stone — but something greater awaited deep below.

Something that would challenge them all.

## imprint

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