

cuts & catastrophes

A Cozy Fantasy

Tales from the Broken Claw

Book Eight

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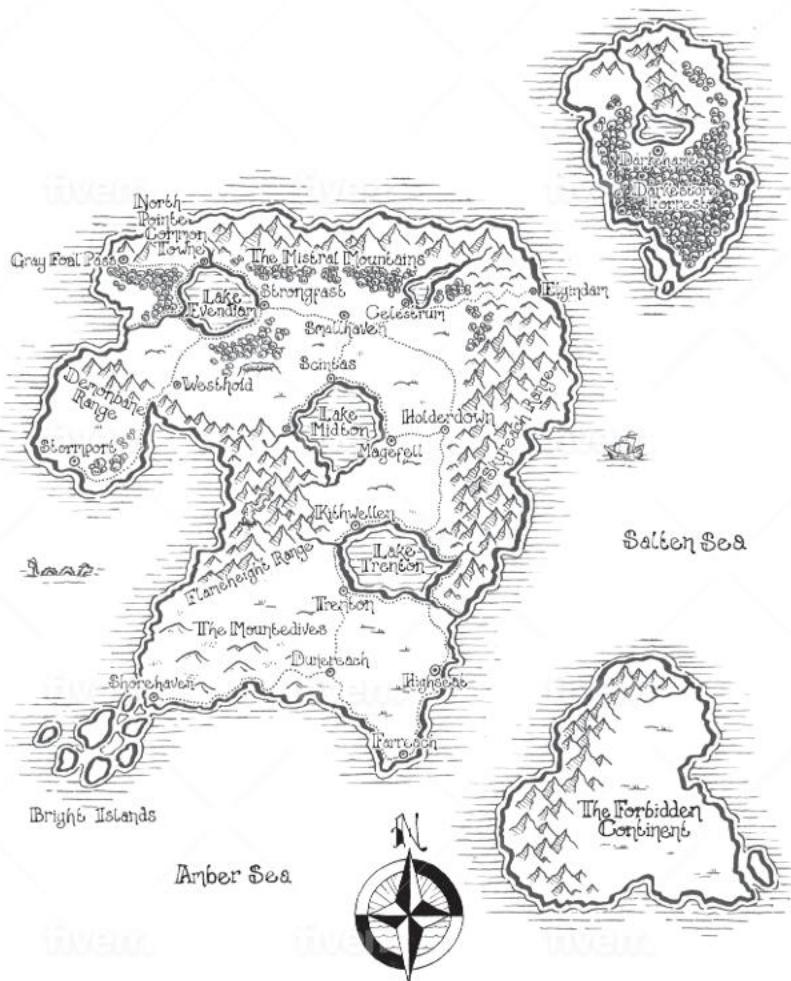
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contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	9
Chapter 3	21
Chapter 4	31
Chapter 5	43
Chapter 6	55
Chapter 7	67
Chapter 8	79
Chapter 9	91
Chapter 10	105
Chapter 11	115
Chapter 12	127
Chapter 13	139
Chapter 14	149
Chapter 15	161
Chapter 16	171
Chapter 17	183
Chapter 18	193
Chapter 19	203
Chapter 20	213
Chapter 21	225
Chapter 22	235
Epilogue	255
Afterword	265
Award-Winning Fiction	267
About the Author	269
Also by Don Jones	271

Urwald



2019



one

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DARDRAD PEBBLEBLADE STOOD in the thickest, richest air in the world: the air of his own butcher shop. He filled his lungs with it as he surveyed his glass case, proud of the neat rows of roasts, sausages, and slabs, each nested with a sprig of something green and pleasing to the eye. Dawn had barely kindled over the grass-plain, but the shop already buzzed with the energy of coming business—a sense, not a sound, more felt in the bones than the ears.

The place was smaller than it looked from the outside, because Dardrad had filled every corner, shelf, and drawer with purpose. The counter itself was a polished old oak, two full handspans thick, darkened by oil and years of careful scrubbing. He'd had to commission a platform box for himself, of course; while the space had been vacant when he and his wife had first arrived, the town couldn't seem to grasp the concept of any scale that wasn't human. Even on that, his head just cleared the jars of mustard and pickled gherkin lined along the back wall. Above him, morning light stabbed in through narrow windows, catching the ever-present sawdust in slow, lazy eddies. The sweep of the stuff would be Dalossalda's job, later. For now, he let it dance.

Dardrad set to work, checking the overnight brining. His hands

were broad and so dark with old cuts and the traces of tallow that they almost matched the countertop. He grunted with satisfaction at the slab of rosemary-braised beef in its ceramic pan. Perfect. He flipped the lid back on with a practiced clack.

As the first bell sounded from the village square—distant, polite, letting everyone know the night was officially over—a shadow fell across his front window, then disappeared. A moment later, the bell above the door gave a thin jangle, and a customer poked his head in. The customer hesitated: a young human, perhaps only a dozen years grown, skinny as a beanpole and clearly from somewhere that didn't see much dwarven trade.

The lad's hair was a mess, his nose already pink with cold, and his cloak hung in a way that suggested he'd slept in it. He looked around at the neat jars and hanging hooks, then at Dardrad—who, when he gave a proper glare, could still unsettle grown men—and tried for a smile.

"Er, hullo," the boy said.

Dardrad grunted. "You're late. The sausage rolls are gone."

The boy's face flickered through confusion, then faint panic, then a sort of grateful relief as he realized it was a joke. "I'm not here for breakfast," he said, stepping in. He let the door close behind him and stood awkwardly, eyes darting over the meat display. "I, um. I'm—well, I'm leaving for the Shadowfen. Today."

Dardrad wiped his hands on a rag. "You don't say." He looked the boy over again, this time for the pack, the boots, the faint smell of nervous sweat. "Going alone?"

The boy shook his head too quickly. "Group of six. We meet at the causeway at second bell. I drew provision duty." He leaned on the counter, lowered his voice. "They said you'd know what's best."

"Did they." Dardrad eyed the traveler's skinny wrists, the brittle look in his eyes. "How many days?"

"Four. Well, four to reach the ruins, then however long to—uh—get the stuff."

"And how long before you need to run back here with your tail between your legs?"

The boy smiled, this time more sure of himself. "That's the plan. Sir."

Dardrad let the silence stretch, as was his way. He surveyed the case. Pork was no good; the salt would draw too much water. The lamb would turn in the warmth and was only good for those who'd sleep in the open, away from the bog. He could feel it—a faint, low whisper at the back of his mind, guiding his hand before the customer even finished speaking. He slid open the chilled glass and pulled out a wrapped parcel, no heavier than a handful of apples.

"Mossbear," Dardrad announced, unwrapping the cut so the boy could see. The flesh was deep red, marbled with veins of emerald-green fat. "Chops easy. Won't sour in a sennight if you keep it dry. Best part—" he tapped the meat with a thick finger, "—gives you nose like a wolf. Smell anything, even through the bog."

The boy blinked, then stared. "Is that... magic?"

"Call it what you want." Dardrad started slicing, each cut an exercise in precision. The knife moved in his hand like it wanted to please him. "You eat this before you get to the Fen, you'll smell which way the wind blows, you'll smell bad mushrooms, even tell fresh from old blood. Saved more than a few from gas pockets, I'll wager." He wrapped the slices in waxed paper, folding the corners tight as origami. "Two silver. Tell your friends to eat only a slice a day."

The boy dug into his pouch with shaking hands, produced three tarnished coins, and set them on the counter. "We, uh, won't waste it. Thank you." He hesitated, glancing at Dardrad's face, then down at the parcel again.

"Don't thank me," Dardrad said, softer now. "Thank the beast who gave up its flank. If you do get back, bring a bottle of fenwine and I'll show you how to cook the rest."

The boy grinned, genuine this time, and nodded. "I will. Promise."

He left, package held to his chest like it was something precious. The bell gave a sharper jangle on the way out.

Dardrad watched the motes swirl in the shaft of new light, then turned to the ledger, marked the sale, and added a single line in the margin: "Mossbear, for the nose. Good luck, boy."

He waited for the whisper to fade from his mind, for the calm it left

behind. When he felt it go, he moved on to the next task, already listening for the next unspoken request.

The sun had not yet climbed to its zenith, but the morning's business was already dying back, leaving Dardrad Pebbleblade with that rarest of treasures: a candlemark for himself.

He swept the shop with a broad broom, pausing only to glare at a loaf of bread that had the audacity to go slightly stale near the crust. Once everything was in its proper place—meat wrapped, shelves wiped, cutting boards oiled—he double-checked the door, then drew the iron deadbolt. Satisfied, he disappeared behind the counter, where the floorboards were newer and laid just a little too straight.

The rug there was a joke, really; it barely hid the seam, and anyone with a nose for secrets could tell what lay beneath. Dardrad lifted it and thumbed the hidden latch, exposing a slab of stone cut into perfect stair-steps.

He shut the trapdoor behind him and started down. The temperature dropped with every step, the sharp briny warmth of the shop replaced by the clean, mineral chill of the earth. The descent was tight for a human, but to Dardrad it felt like a proper passage: close, sturdy, comforting.

At the bottom, the world opened up. The warren sprawled in every direction, a marvel of dwarven engineering and an act of devotion in its own right. The walls curved and sloped as if grown, not carved, all smooth to the touch and laced through with glittering seams of quartz. Lanterns glowed at regular intervals, set in cunning little alcoves, giving the entire space the golden hush of early evening. It was so beautiful it could almost make you forget you were underground.

Dardrad ran his hand along a stretch of wall as he walked. The rock was so finely finished, not a single tool mark remained; it felt more like glass than granite. The passage bent left, then right, then opened to a high chamber with a domed ceiling, ribbed with what looked for all the world like petrified wood.

Dalossalda was there, at her usual work. She stood on a scaffold,

her back to the entrance, both hands pressed against the stone of a new archway. Her hair was tied up in a severe knot, which made her head look almost too small for her broad, square shoulders. She didn't turn at his approach, but she didn't need to. Dardrad watched, silent, as her fingers glowed with a faint blue light, coaxing the arch into a perfect, seamless curve. The sound was like two blocks of ice sliding together: faint, deliberate, inevitable.

"Don't distract me," she said, the moment his boot hit the flagstone. "The keystone's not set."

Dardrad grunted, more in admiration than defiance. He folded his arms and leaned against the nearest wall. "You're off the line by a finger's width on the left."

Dalossalda hissed through her teeth. "Liar."

He grinned. "See for yourself."

She did, and to his mild disappointment, he was the one in error. She finished the arch with a subtle twist of her wrist and stepped down, dusting her hands on her apron. The blue light faded. "Now you're allowed to speak."

"Busy morning," Dardrad said. "Sold the last of the mossbear. Had to talk a city whelp out of pork shoulder."

Dalossalda's mouth curled in the faintest of smiles. "Did you glare at him?"

"Just enough," Dardrad admitted. He lifted a hand, wiggling his fingers as though playing at puppetry. "He left with all his limbs intact, so I'd call it restraint."

She gave him a flat look, but the corners of her eyes twitched. "You're getting soft, old man."

"I'm not old," he protested.

"You're fifty-two," she replied.

He opened his mouth, closed it, and finally settled for, "I could have you outwrestled by lunch."

Dalossalda shrugged, unconcerned. She reached for a canteen, sipped, then gestured to the new archway. "Tell me it's good."

Dardrad looked again, careful this time. The span was flawless, each block flowing into the next, the curve so gentle it was almost

sensual. "Better than good," he allowed. "It'll last longer than the bakery upstairs."

She grunted, pleased, then fixed him with her intense, stone-grey stare. "Did you feel it?"

Dardrad raised an eyebrow. "Feel what?"

She jerked her chin toward the far end of the warren, where the wall bent in a way it had not, yesterday. "Bedrock shifted. Only a hair, but enough that I had to rework the buttress. It's nothing, but—" she frowned, thinking.

"But?" Dardrad prompted.

Dalossalda shook her head. "Old rock shouldn't move at all. Not without cause."

Dardrad considered this, running his tongue along the inside of his teeth. "There's water under the bakery, you know. The humans refuse to drain it proper. Always a trickle after a thaw."

"That's not it," Dalossalda said, certain. "This is dry shift, not wet."

They stood in silence, listening to the echoes. It was quiet, but not empty; the warren always seemed to breathe, just a little, as if remembering the hands that had shaped it.

"It's just settling," Dalossalda said at last, the way a person might say it's just a little pain in the arm. "But I'll keep watch. No tunnels will come down on your head, promise."

"On your head, you mean," Dardrad corrected, gentle. "I spend my days up there, pretending I'm a chef."

She snorted. "You're a better chef than any aboveground. Even the baker admits it."

Dardrad let that praise hang, then glanced at the finished arch. "It's beautiful," he said, earnest. "If the old clan saw this, they'd be jealous for a moon."

Dalossalda smiled for real this time, a small, proud thing. "Then let them be."

He hesitated, then, with the easy candor of someone long married, said: "If the rock keeps moving, tell me."

"I always do," she replied, eyes softening. She reached up, laid her hand on the wall, and listened a moment, the way some folk listened for a heartbeat in a child.

Whatever she heard, it satisfied her. She let her hand fall and turned to Dardrad. "Come. We've got the rest of the roast to finish before second bell."

They left the chamber together, their steps echoing in the hollow beauty of their secret world. And if Dardrad glanced back, once, to check the subtle bend in the stone, well—old habits died hard, and he'd always been stubborn about the things he loved.

two

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DARDRAD PEBBLEBLADE TOOK a last look around the shop, one hand on the deadbolt and the other already reaching for the sign. The morning had been steady—two more travelers in for salted elk, one oldster buying bones for broth, and a farmer who'd simply wanted to gossip while admiring the state of the sausage links. The shelves were perfect, the glass display glinting without so much as a breath of fog, and every scrap swept to the bin.

He gave a grunt of approval, then fished the small wooden plaque from its hiding place beneath the counter. "Back in a Tall Moment," it read, in a hand that had once tried for calligraphy and settled for legible. He hooked it over the outside knob, gave the door a gentle tug to check its bite in the frame, and stepped back inside with a deep, satisfying exhale.

The butcher's apron came off next, its front marked with the honest record of a morning's labor. Dardrad rolled it with care and set it on the counter. The feel of the air on his arms was bracing, and a shiver of anticipation curled down his spine—not the nerves of a young man about to do something reckless, but the cool spark of tradition about to be honored. He tugged the sleeves of his traveling shirt, inspected his

bare feet for bits of sawdust, and smoothed his beard with practiced fingers. It would do.

There was no need for boots where he was going.

He ducked behind the counter, lifted the rug, and thumbed the latch in one practiced movement. The hidden door swung up with a silent grace, revealing the first few steps of polished granite descending into soft, forgiving dark. Dardrad paused only to shut the trapdoor behind him, then started down, his soles finding familiar purchase on each cool step.

The air shifted with every pace. It left behind the sweet tang of smoke and meat, and took on the flavor of ancient earth: cold, iron-rich, with a clarity that made his teeth ache. The light, too, changed—lanterns set in cunning little alcoves glowed with a gentle amber, their flames steadied by the invisible art of generations of dwarves. Each landing curved, each turn bespoke intention, every inch of the warren designed to be walked barefoot, blind, and unafraid.

He passed through a corridor lined with what looked, in passing, like stacked barrels. In truth, they were the petrified cores of the trees that had once ruled these plains, hollowed out to form storage for pickled roots and spiced flour. He ran a hand along one, felt the warmth held within, and moved on. The walls glittered with quartz dust, not from sloppiness but from some ancestor's notion of what beauty meant.

He made a right at the first fork, then a left at the chamber of bells, where rows of tiny brass instruments hung from the ceiling. They rang not with sound but with the passing of footsteps, each visitor tuning the invisible song of the warren. Dardrad liked to imagine that, if someone ever mapped the melody, it would spell out the story of their clan in perfect, ringing order.

He took the spiral stairs down three more turns and emerged into the central vault: a space so open it always surprised him, even after decades of coming here. The ceiling arched high, nearly lost in gentle darkness, but the floor was a single, unbroken circle of deep gray stone—so finely finished it reflected his own squat shape back at him, if he squinted.

At the center waited the transit chamber, a dais just large enough

for one. Around its edge, the ancient runes of movement and memory glimmered with the faintest blue. Above it, a single lamp shone in a perfect cone, making the surface glow as if moonlit even at this depth.

Dardrad walked to the dais, feet making no sound on the perfect stone. He set himself on it, arms folded, and for a moment just stood there, letting his breathing fall into the rhythm of the warren. He could feel every inch of the place—each pressure point where the arches met the bedrock, the faint tickle of air through the long-forgotten vent shafts, even the restless dreams of the stones themselves, shaped and pressed and loved into being.

He closed his eyes and reached down to the hem of his shirt, feeling for the little patch his mother had sewn in when he was a boy. A shield, she'd called it, for journeys. He pressed it, once, a gesture of habit and comfort, and then let his hands fall to his sides.

"Here we go, then," he murmured, voice low and even. The acoustics of the chamber caught the words and bounced them back, softened and gentle.

He drew a deep breath, filling his lungs with the cold clarity of the earth. As he did, the air seemed to thicken—just a little at first, then more, as if every atom in the room had woken up to his presence. The floor beneath his feet warmed and softened, not physically but in the curious way that magic sometimes chose. He opened his eyes and saw the blue of the runes rising up, tracing patterns along his legs, his arms, his chest.

Dardrad exhaled, long and slow, and with it let go of the surface world—the shop, the chatter, the sunlight on windows. There was only the chamber, and the stone, and himself.

He took one more breath, this one almost a sigh, and let the sinking begin.

At first, it was just a tingle in his toes, as if he'd stood too long on a cold morning. Then it was the sensation of moss underfoot: soft, yielding, eager to give way. He looked down and saw his feet vanishing into the surface, not swallowed so much as absorbed. He'd always imagined it like stepping into water, but it was nothing so dramatic—it was simply a gentle insistence that he belonged here, a logic older than air.

The stone crept up his shins, slow and certain. It wrapped his calves, cradled his knees, took his thighs in a firm, unhurried grip. The blue of the runes climbed with it, the light growing brighter where it touched his skin, then dimming as the stone passed over.

Dardrad kept his head high, eyes steady, and let the sensation fill him. It was not cold, not exactly. More the feeling of a storm approaching, that pressure in the bones that warned of change. He felt every pebble, every seam, every memory etched into the stone—felt himself added to their number, another line in the history of the warren.

His hips and belly went next, then his chest. With each inch, the outside world grew quieter. The lamp above seemed to recede, the shadows in the arch grew softer, and his own heartbeat echoed like a drum in a deep well.

As the stone reached his shoulders, Dardrad allowed himself a smile—a tiny, rare thing, but real. He was always at peace in these moments, even when the job above waited for him or the stock was running low or there were travelers counting on his work. Down here, in the embrace of the earth, he felt exactly as he should be.

The last thing to go was his beard. It fluttered once in the still air, and then the blue light swept over it, tucking every strand away.

The process ended as gently as it had begun. Dardrad was gone from the chamber, not so much vanished as folded into the stone, every cell accounted for, every memory held close. In the echoing quiet, the blue runes faded, leaving only a faint glow behind.

Above, in the world of sunlight and bells, a butcher shop waited for its master. Below, the earth cradled its son, bearing him across time and distance to where the mountain called.



Dardrad Pebbleblade came back to himself in an instant, though in truth it was exactly one candlemark later. Not a moment before, not a tick after. The mountain did not believe in wasted time.

He surfaced just as he'd left: upright, breathing, and not the least bit dizzy from the world's sudden rearrangement. At first there was only stone and shadow, cool and absolute, pressing gently against

every part of him. Then, with the slow bloom of a sunrise, sensation trickled in—skin first, then bone, then blood, until he stood ankle-deep in a bed of scree, the world blindingly bright above him.

Dardrad blinked, squinting against the dazzle of highland sun. Thin air sliced at his throat, so sharp it made his nose ache, and the wind drove tiny pinpricks of cold straight through his shirt. Good, he thought, rolling his shoulders. The feeling of being alive and somewhere you shouldn't be—he'd always liked that.

He stood at the edge of an alpine meadow, the kind that seemed stitched onto the shoulder of the world by an inattentive god. The ground sloped away below, littered with boulders striped black and white by lichen. Between the rocks, drifts of tough bluegrass danced like the fur of some sleeping animal, every blade standing at stubborn attention. Far off, the peaks of the Mistral Mountains marched in ragged rows, each one crowned with snow even at this time of year. Here and there, clusters of tiny yellow flowers huddled close to the ground, desperate to believe in summer.

Above all, there was wind. It whistled through the short, stunted pines, carrying with it the keening cries of the mountain rams and the fainter, almost choked laughter of something larger, something rooting in the rocks just out of sight.

Dardrad felt it before he saw it: the presence, the weight, the certainty of the Ridge-boar.

He kept still for a long moment, letting his senses do the work. Ears open, eyes just slitted enough to keep the glare out, nostrils wide as he tasted the air. He could pick out the spicy resin of the pine, the clean snap of frost, and beneath it all, the peppery musk of Ridge-boar fur. Fresh. Not more than a few hundred paces off, upwind. Grazing, likely. Lazy.

He crouched, testing the scree with his toes, and began to move. The trick was never to walk directly—Ridge-boar saw better than most gave them credit for. Instead, Dardrad picked a zigzag path through the stone, keeping to the shadows cast by jutting boulders, never stepping twice in the same line. His breath stilled, every muscle honed to the task; this was the old way, the dwarven way, taught not with words but with stories and scars.

The world fell away. There was only the ground before him and the distant, invisible promise of meat.

He caught sight of the beast just as he'd cleared the shoulder of a broken pine. It was every bit as big as memory, a mountain in its own right. Ridge-boar were not like the mud-wallows of the plains—these creatures were built of stubbornness and cold air, their bodies slung low and wide, every muscle grown for war. Its back was armored in ridges of bone, the hair along its spine alternating black and gray in a jagged pattern. The snout was long, almost wolfish, and the tusks curved up with a vengeance, yellowed at the tips like old ivory.

This one was alone, which was both good and bad. No competition, but no distractions, either.

Dardrad studied it for three long breaths. The beast was busy rooting under a slab of loose rock, ignorant of anything above its dinner. Dardrad shifted his weight, inching closer, and the wind covered him in a shield of noise.

Ten paces out, he stopped. This close, the boar's smell was overwhelming: earth, sweat, a curious note of wild garlic. Dardrad reached to his side, fingers closing around the haft of the knife he'd brought. The blade itself was nothing fancy, just good iron, but it held an edge like a mountain's shadow. He took a moment, as was proper, and whispered the old words:

"For meat and bone, for life to life. Rest easy, friend."

He didn't expect the beast to understand, but it felt wrong to do otherwise.

Then he moved. Not fast, not slow, but with the absolute certainty of someone who'd done this a thousand times before. The boar caught the motion, snorted, and turned, but Dardrad was already upon it, his weight balanced, the knife aimed for the place just behind the thick shield of the skull.

The strike was clean. The Ridge-boar reared, staggering sideways with a sound somewhere between a cough and a thunderclap. Blood welled, dark and steaming, and for a moment Dardrad just held on, riding the animal's last surge of wild energy. The knife held true, the edge splitting bone and sinew as though opening a loaf of bread. Then

the boar slumped, legs folding beneath it, and the world snapped back to silence.

Dardrad let go, stepping clear as the body settled. He knelt beside the beast, set his palm to its flank, and breathed a slow, respectful breath. "Thank you," he said, not loud, but not a whisper. "You'll feed more than you know."

He set to work, moving quickly and with a precision born of long practice. The hide was thick, the underlayer matted with fat and stiff hair, but the blade answered every touch. He opened the animal from shoulder to haunch, working in a pattern that would have been a song, if anyone else had been there to watch.

He took only what he needed. The Ridge-loin, that long strip of marbled muscle running along the backbone, was what the travelers would be wanting. It was said that eating Ridge-loin lent a person the balance and grace of the beast itself, and the stuff was rich and hearty, and kept for longer than any other meat Dardrad had ever handled. He carved out the section in three neat strokes, then wrapped it in a fold of waxed cloth he'd brought for the purpose.

The rest, he left. He was not alone on the mountain, and even now the scavengers would be watching, waiting for his back to turn. That was the way of things, and he'd never begrudged them. Dardrad ran his hands over the boar's skull once more, then stood, brushing bits of hide and fat from his hands. "*Ingonyama nengw' enamabala*," he whispered in Old Dwarvish.

Around him, the wind had changed. It no longer sang with the anticipation of a hunt, but with the low, contented hum of a job well done.

Dardrad looked up at the sky, the peaks, the sharp and endless blue. He filled his lungs with the air, feeling it burn and freeze all at once, and smiled. Not many things left in the world could surprise him, but every hunt, every kill, reminded him of the balance he'd sworn to keep. Not butcher, not just provider. Steward. Keeper of the proper order.

He turned back to the patch of scree where he'd arrived. The stone called to him, a familiar tug behind the heart, and he obeyed. Setting

the precious bundle against his chest, Dardrad knelt, pressing one hand to the cold granite and the other to the meat.

He closed his eyes, let his breathing settle, and spoke again—not to the boar this time, but to the mountain itself.

“Done, and done right,” he said, low and sure. The runes he’d carried with him all his life glimmered along his arms, the magic of the warren answering across all this distance. The world trembled, the ground gave way, and Dardrad Pebbleblade sank—stone to stone, life to life, all as it should be.

The mountain accepted him, and he was gone.

The re-entry was always smoother than the departure. One moment Dardrad Pebbleblade was nothing but a notion in the memory of stone; the next, he was squeezed into himself again, standing firm on the dais in the vault, meat package snug beneath one arm. The air below was still cool and steady, and the light above the dais had not flickered a single time. If not for the bundle and the telltale scuffs on his shirt, a person might’ve thought he’d never left.

He shook the dust from his beard, then made the climb back up, retracing the familiar path—past the chorus of bells, through the hall of petrified larders, up the spiral that spiraled just the right way for tired legs. The warren’s magic lingered along his skin, settling him, and as he reached the trapdoor he felt it release him, gentle as a mother’s hand at the gate.

The butcher shop was just as he’d left it, except for the sharp aroma of fresh bread now sneaking in from the bakery a few doors down. The sign still hung on the outside knob; the glass counter caught every shaft of afternoon sun. Dardrad flipped the sign to “Open” and strolled in, glancing at the clock-candle. He’d been gone—well, not even a bell. Just as it should be.

He walked straight to the back case, lifted the lid, and set the Ridge-loin on its central marble slab. The display case was another marvel of dwarven craft, imported at insane expense from some uncle’s cousin in the north: the moment meat touched the slab, a faint

blue shimmer ran through it, stabilizing the temperature and keeping the cut at peak perfection. The Ridge-loin gave off the barest hum, a note you could feel more than hear, like the purr of a sleeping cat. It was a very satisfying sound.

He rewrapped the rest of the waxed cloth, put it away for trimming, and stepped back to admire his work.

The bell above the door rang, not in the frantic way of a new customer but with the steady confidence of someone who thought of the shop as a second home. Cole Coleson bustled in, bringing with him a gust of late-summer wind and a hint of turned earth. Behind him, Alred Grasswalker moved in the more careful, deliberate style of Plains Elves, eyes already scanning the walls for new curiosities.

"Afternoon, master butcher!" Cole boomed, thumping the counter with a palm. "Tell me you've got something for stew. I'm feeding a dozen and my wife says if I bring home sausage again she'll strangle me with it."

Dardrad grunted, not without pleasure. "You want stew, you want Ridge-loin. Fresh." He gestured to the case, where the cut gleamed a deep, proud red.

Cole's eyes went wide, and for a moment it looked like he might actually salute. "Well, that's a wonder and no mistake. Did you just—?"

"Just," Dardrad agreed. "You'll want a half measure, sliced thin. The fat's strong."

Cole nodded, eyes never leaving the meat. "Winter tubers are coming in early, too. I got a crate that'd put a grown man on his knees. This," he pointed reverently at the Ridge-loin, "with those, and a little dry-mustard. Folks might just dance up the side of a mountain."

"That's the idea," Dardrad replied, already reaching for the butcher's knife.

Alred stood a little off to the side, hands clasped behind his back. He gave Dardrad a polite smile, but his attention flicked from the case to the window, then out again into the street. Not unusual for Alred, but there was a distractedness to him today, like his mind had one foot on the far horizon.

"Anything for you?" Dardrad asked, sliding the knife in neat, prac-

ticed arcs through the meat. The Ridge-loin parted like it had been waiting its whole life to oblige.

Alred blinked, startled from whatever reverie held him. "I, ah, don't suppose you've any dry-aged rabbit left?"

"Three cuts, none finer," Dardrad said. He took a moment to look Alred in the eye, noting the fine tension around the corners of the elf's mouth, the way his fingers flexed against each other, knuckles pale.

"I'll take a strip, then," Alred said. "For...a guest, I think." He glanced at Cole, then away, as though the idea embarrassed him.

Cole caught the glance and grinned. "No shame in wanting the good stuff, friend. If I had your kitchen, I'd eat like a king too."

Alred smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "That's kind."

Dardrad finished the slicing, weighed out the portions, wrapped them in waxed paper with a flick of the wrist. The parcels looked almost festive, their colors bright against the dark wood of the counter.

Cole reached for his wallet, but before he could get it open, he leaned over and dropped his voice. "Speaking of guests, you heard the news?"

Dardrad paused, curiosity piqued. "No. What news."

"Travelers again," Cole said. "Not the regular sort, either. Came in from the east, said they were heading for the ruins. One of them—strangest thing—looked like he'd seen a ghost. White as lard, and not a mark on him."

"Town's getting crowded," Dardrad observed, more to see what Cole would say.

"You're telling me," Cole replied, rolling his eyes. "If they keep coming, I'll have to hire on help. And I don't trust my eldest with the scales, not after what he did to the salt weights last moon." He grinned, but his hands fidgeted with the waxed package, nerves showing beneath the talk.

Alred accepted his own parcel without comment, tucking it into a satchel with practiced efficiency. He seemed about to leave, but instead drifted toward the front window, gazing out into the square.

Cole watched him go, then leaned closer to Dardrad, lowering his voice further. "You noticed?" He jerked his chin toward the elf. "Alred's been...off. Like his soul's half a day behind the rest of him."

Dardrad considered this, eyeing Alred's silhouette against the late sun. "I've seen. Not my place to ask."

Cole nodded, lips pressed thin. "No, I guess not. But if it was something bad, you'd tell me?"

Dardrad thought of the shifting stone, the way the warren had murmured in its sleep. He thought of the ghosts travelers sometimes carried, the stories they brought with them. "If it was," he said, "you'd know before anyone."

That seemed to satisfy Cole. He paid for the meat, threw in a coin for luck, and left with a cheery slap on the counter.

Alred lingered, gaze unmoved from the street.

"Something out there?" Dardrad asked, voice soft enough not to carry.

Alred flinched, just a touch, and then turned, blinking as if waking from a nap. "Nothing," he said, and the lie sat gentle and obvious on the counter between them. "Just watching the wind."

Dardrad said nothing more. He cleaned the counter, put the knives away, made everything perfect for the next bell. When he finally looked up, Alred was gone, leaving only a faint smudge on the glass where his breath had fogged it.

Outside, the light was already shifting, and the shadows of the grass-plain stretched long across the town. Dardrad watched them, waiting for a message he could not name. For now, he'd done what needed doing. But the mountain was never silent for long, and the wind never blew quite the same direction twice.

He made a note in the ledger, and another in the memory that lived behind his eyes, and waited for the next story to find him.

three

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THE COLD ROOM was never truly silent. Even at this time—before the sun had heated the shop above, before any of the day's customers had come by for suet or marrow bones—there was a low, steady music to the place. Dardrad Pebbleblade preferred it this way: the gentle ticking of the brine tank settling, the faint hissing of cold draft sneaking past the wooden hatch, the minute, constant creak of ropes as cured sausages and hams rocked in their racks.

He had the run of it, down here. The shop itself was for display and customer talk, but the cellar was for the work: the cutting, the brining, the blending of ancient spice and fresh muscle. Dardrad rolled up his sleeves, exposing his arms to the nip of the underground air, and set his thick hands to slicing a run of wild-pig strip for jerky. His knife, ground to a molecular edge, parted flesh from fat with a surety that was almost musical.

He worked by the light of a single lantern, hung over the workbench and swinging just enough to give the walls a slow-drifting shadow. All around him, rows of aging sausage and sides of beef hovered in a frosted gloom, like silent judges at a trial. The meat for today's job was not so grand—a long-haul merchant up from the southern coast, wanted something to keep on the road, spiced hard

enough to wake the dead. Not many people asked for so much pepper, but Dardrad obliged.

He sliced and salted, building up a rhythmic pattern: knife through meat, flick of wrist to lay the cut, handful of black pepper and crushed mustard seed. Each layer stacked perfectly on the last, just as he'd been taught by the silent, stone-handed dwarves who'd raised him. It was meditative, in a way, and he liked the thought that this small ritual would send someone safe across the wilds.

He was halfway through a pig side when the tremor hit.

At first, it was nothing more than a ripple across the workbench. The lantern's chain began to sing. The rows of meat, normally so steadfast, twitched on their hooks like an audience startled by a joke. But then it deepened—a second, more insistent vibration, like the heartbeat of the earth itself. The jars on the storage shelves rattled, the brine in the tank sloshed against the lid, and for a single frozen moment, Dardrad felt the world turn beneath him.

He did not move. Knife still pressed to the cut, he listened, every muscle tensed.

When you were born and raised underground, you developed a sense for this sort of thing. Most folk above would have shrugged it off as a cart rolling past, or a tree falling somewhere in the next field. Dardrad knew better. He had felt earthquakes small and large, mining collapses, the peculiar lurch of a warren wall when some fool put an arch in backwards.

This was not a natural shift.

The tremor faded, as quickly as it came. The lantern stilled. The meat swung gently, as if embarrassed by its outburst. Dardrad set the knife down on the board, careful not to disturb the order of his work, and ran a hand along the cold stone of the wall.

Nothing obvious. No cracks, no new dust, no trickle of water where water shouldn't be. Still, something was wrong. He could feel it in his bones—a faint, unsettled echo in the way the floor pressed against his soles, a buzzing that hadn't been there when he woke.

He wiped his hands on the apron, careful and methodical, then began the circuit of the room. First the outside wall—solid, cold, older than the shop above by a factor of centuries. Then the ceiling: he ran

his fingers along the seams, pressing into mortar and stone, testing for any weakness. Nothing gave. He checked the brine tank's bolts, the rope hooks, the chain of the lantern. All sound. He knelt by the floor, bare toes pressing into the chill flagstone, and waited with eyes closed for the next tremor.

Nothing. Only the slow return of breath, the distant tick of water, the life of a cellar settling back into its patient routine.

But the feeling did not go away.

Dardrad finished prepping the jerky batch, wrapping it up in layers of waxed paper and twine. He stamped the merchant's name on the parcel, set it in the ready bin, and glanced at the heavy ironbound clock that hung on the wall. Not even halfway to second bell. Plenty of time, and yet the urge was there—the old, impossible-to-ignore itch to see for himself, to check the bones of the place.

He took off his apron, set it aside, and walked the length of the cellar. At the north wall, he pulled aside a cask of lard, exposing the trapdoor that led down to the support passage. He hesitated, listening. Still nothing but the heartbeat in his own chest, and yet.

With a grunt, he levered up the hatch and squeezed into the crawl-space beyond. This was not a proper dwarven tunnel, but a rough passage, just wide enough for him to worm through on hands and knees. He felt his way along the wall, fingers probing for flaws, eyes straining in the dark for any sign of fresh dust.

He found nothing. Still, the sense of wrongness remained—a tension in the stone, as if the whole town above was balanced on a single, shifting slab.

He made his way back to the main cellar, stood for a moment to catch his breath, and wiped the sweat from his brow. He glanced at the waxed jerky, the rows of hanging meat, the tidy bins of bones and fat. All was in order, but he could not rest easy.

Only one thing for it.

He straightened, set his jaw, and made for the stairs at the far end of the room—the ones that led not up, but down, into the warren beneath. If anyone would know what had gone off in the stone, it would be Dalossalda.

He paused, just long enough to touch a hand to the rock wall in

passing. It was a gesture more ancient than speech, a way of saying: I am here, and I hear you. The stone did not answer, but it felt just a shade less lonely for the touch.

Dardrad ducked into the stairwell, boots ringing soft against the worn granite, and descended into the darkness below.

The stairs curled downward in a tight, deliberate spiral. Every step was worn shiny in the middle from Dardrad's own footfalls, and those of the dwarves who'd come before. Even so, he took them slower than usual, bracing the palm of one hand against the wall as he descended.

He kept his ears open for the old, familiar sounds—drip of condensation, grind of the settling rock, the faint pulse of the warren itself—but tonight the air felt different. Not heavier, exactly, but as if the walls were holding their breath, waiting to see what he would do next.

He reached the landing and paused, listening.

The warren was more than a home, more than even a fortress or a tomb. It was the sum of every hope and failure in Dardrad's line, and the only thing that made sense when the rest of the world refused to. Its design was as much instinct as blueprint: each room and turn exactly where it ought to be, as if the mountain had been born with the passages already in its bones.

Tonight, he felt all the old boundaries stretched just a touch too thin.

He padded through the corridor, moving past the larder door (he double-checked its latch, just in case), then past the old chamber of bells. The bells were supposed to be ornamental, or so the town's architects had insisted, but Dardrad knew their true purpose. They were early warning, memory, insurance against exactly the kind of shift he'd just felt above.

He paused and gave the largest bell a tap. It sang, clear and true, its ring echoing all the way up the stair. No cracks. That was good. He kept walking.

At the first branching tunnel, he turned left, following the familiar path to the library nook. The shelves here were grown straight from the bedrock, lined with battered volumes, ledgers, and a few precious relics from the old clan. He found Dalossalda exactly where he

expected her: perched on a low stool, both hands pressed to the wall as she coaxed a new shelf into being.

The air around her glowed faint blue, an aurora of magic so subtle it might have been a trick of the lamp. As he approached, Dardrad took a moment to study the effect. The stone, under Dalossalda's touch, bent and shifted in ways that would have horrified a human mason—stretched grain, pockets of fused quartz, a delicate ribbon of mica splitting the difference between support and show. It was improvisational, a kind of geology music, and he'd never seen anyone else do it half so well.

He cleared his throat. "You're at it early."

Dalossalda did not look up from her work. "And you're late," she said, her voice muffled by her concentration. "Usually you come down before the bell."

He grunted, moved to stand beside her, and ran his own hand over the half-finished shelf. The stone was still warm and soft at the edges, not quite set. "Merchant order took longer than expected," he said. "Wild-pig jerky. The kind that can burn a hole in your tongue."

"City folk," she said, with a snort of something between amusement and contempt. "They'd eat rocks if you told them it was a delicacy."

He leaned in, close enough to catch the scent of her hair—a note of mineral and sweat, not unpleasant. He found the next words stubborn in his throat.

"Did you feel it?"

Dalossalda froze, both hands still pressed to the wall. For a moment, neither of them moved.

"Yes," she said, at last. "I felt it."

Dardrad shifted, the old discomfort back and gnawing at his chest. "It was different. Not like the others."

She let go of the wall and shook out her hands, wincing as the magic drained away. "It was. More like a—what's the word? When a line is strung too tight?"

"Strain," he said.

She nodded. "That. Not a break, not yet. But the sort of thing that gets worse if you don't fix it."

Dardrad ran a hand through his beard, thinking. "You sure it's not wet? Or thaw? This is the season for it."

Dalossalda gave him a look—direct, level, and just a little sharp around the edges. "I've lived in more warrens than you've had knives, Dardrad Pebbleblade. I know water shift when I feel it. This was magic, not geology."

He grunted. He didn't like magic, not even his own.

She bent to the shelf again, but did not start working right away. Instead, she turned to face him fully, elbows on knees, fingers steepled. "You've been using the gift more. Maybe you're pulling at the lines yourself."

He bristled, just a little. "I'm careful."

"Are you?" she said, but not unkindly. "You come down here every moon, you open the stone, you bring back cuts that taste of places no one in the village's ever been. You're not a miner. You're not a shaper. You're—"

She broke off, searching for the word.

Dardrad finished it for her. "Butcher."

She smiled, softening. "That's what they call you. But you're more than that, even if you don't want to admit it."

He shifted again, the small of his back aching against the low stoop of the tunnel. He hated when she was right, and she was almost always right.

He looked around the room. Every shelf was perfect, every curve designed to hold just what it needed to. He imagined what would happen if the strain in the stone were to snap, and the vision made him cold.

"What do you think caused it?" he asked, voice low.

Dalossalda shrugged. "Could be the north wind. Could be the moon. Could be you, worried about something you haven't said out loud yet."

He grunted, unwilling to argue. Instead, he plucked a book from the nearest shelf, turned it in his hands, then set it back exactly where it belonged.

"Let me know if it happens again," he said.

She nodded, already returning to her work. "Of course. But next

time, you check the bakery before you come down. Humans are terrible at stonework."

He managed a laugh at that, low and brief. "Ain't that the truth."

He watched her for another moment, then turned to leave. At the doorway, he paused, one hand resting on the cool arch above his head.

He did not say what he was thinking. That was how these things got out of control. Instead, he took a breath, deep and careful, and climbed the stairs back to the world above.

If the stone had more to say, it could say it later.

The Broken Claw smelled of bread and woodsmoke, with just a hint of the cheap hops favored by the town's less ambitious drinkers. The trestle tables were sticky with the memory of a thousand spilled ales, and the benches creaked like old knees when anyone so much as shifted their weight. Tonight, the hearth was working overtime, trying to keep ahead of the sudden chill that had moved in at dusk.

Dardrad Pebbleblade nursed his first mug, letting the bitter foam cling to his mustache as a buffer against conversation. He'd chosen the table nearest the fire, both out of habit and because it was the one least likely to attract the stares of travelers. Not that the Broken Claw saw many strangers, especially once the wind picked up. But even on a slow night, Dardrad had no wish to explain himself to newcomers.

He was not alone. Cole had arrived in a flurry of elbows and loud opinions, his mood already several drinks ahead of his companions. He'd plunked himself down beside Dardrad and begun a running commentary on the state of local agriculture, the weather, and the hopelessness of his eldest son. Alred completed the trio, taking his seat with the silent, measured caution of someone who'd rather be elsewhere.

"—you think you've tasted sweet," Cole was saying, "but you haven't, not until you've had a mouthful of these new plums. I swear, they're the color of sunset, and so rich they leave your teeth sticky." He thumped the table with a palm for emphasis, sloshing foam over the rim of his mug.

Dardrad grunted. "Plums don't grow this time of year."

"They do if you know how to coax them," Cole said, jabbing a finger at Dardrad as if to punctuate his point. "These came in just yesterday, and I had my Ivy dry a whole tray. The flavor's... well, you'll see. I brought a parcel." He dug into his satchel and produced a twist of waxed paper, tossing it onto the table with the air of a magician revealing a trick.

Dardrad opened the parcel, sniffed, and popped one of the shriveled fruits into his mouth. He chewed, considered, and chewed again.

"Well?" Cole prompted.

"It's a plum," Dardrad said, with a shrug. "But it's not bad." He wiped his lips, then nodded at the paper. "Could use more salt."

Cole laughed, shaking his head. "You'd salt your own shadow if you thought it'd stick."

Dardrad grinned, and for a moment the mood was light, as it ought to be.

Alred had not touched his mug. He sat with both hands wrapped around it, eyes fixed on the middle distance, posture so perfectly still that he looked more like a sculpture than a Plains Elf. The fire painted strange colors on his skin, giving him the haunted look of someone in a story told at midnight.

Cole noticed, eventually. "You all right, Alred?" he asked, tone gentling. "You're quieter than usual."

Alred blinked, slowly, and turned to look at them as if seeing both for the first time. "I'm fine," he said, voice even and low. "Just thinking."

"About what?" Cole asked.

Alred's lips twitched, not quite a smile. "Travelers, mostly."

"Always more of them, this time of year," Dardrad said. "Especially with the road still good."

Alred nodded, but didn't respond right away. He seemed to be working something out, fingers kneading the side of his mug. Finally, he said: "They pass through. Take what they need. Leave again. And we stock the shelves, bake the bread, lay out the welcome mat as if they'll remember us a day after they're gone." He paused, staring at the fire. "Sometimes I wonder what's the point."

Cole bristled, as if the very idea were sacrilege. "The point is, you never know which traveler is the important one. The next legend, the next founder, or even just someone who needs a place to catch their breath. That's the point."

"Is it?" Alred's tone was gentle, but there was an edge to it. "We're all just... holding patterns, for people who don't stay."

Dardrad watched him, studying the set of his jaw, the way his gaze never quite met theirs. There was something there he did not understand—an absence, maybe, where there should have been purpose. He didn't like it.

Cole pushed the plum parcel toward Alred, a peace offering. "Try one of these, friend. It'll remind you that there's still sweetness in the world."

Alred accepted the fruit, turning it between his fingers, but did not eat it. Instead, he set it on the table, perfectly centered between the three of them.

"Did you know," he said, "that in some parts of the world, dried fruit is a sign of mourning? You eat it at funerals. To remember what was, instead of what is."

Dardrad felt the tremor in his bones again—not in the stone this time, but in the air between the three of them. He glanced at Cole, who looked just as unsettled.

"Maybe you need a change," Dardrad said, as gently as he could manage. "Get out from behind that counter, stretch your legs a little. There's more to life than shelves and stock."

Alred smiled, small and private. "I suppose there is."

For a while, they sat in silence, watching the fire and listening to the soft chaos of the pub around them. Cole eventually steered the talk back to crops and weather, and Dardrad followed along, but part of him stayed with Alred's words, worrying them like a sore tooth.

He glanced at the clock above the hearth. Still a ways before closing bell. Plenty of time for another drink, or two, or three. He ordered a round, and when it came, he raised his mug.

"To sweetness," he said, "and to things that last."

Cole echoed the toast with enthusiasm. Alred raised his mug too,

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but his eyes were far away, fixed on something Dardrad could not see and, for the first time in years, was afraid to ask about.

The rest of the night went on, as it always did. But the memory of the tremor—first in the stone, then in the people—stayed with Dardrad long after the fire had burned low.

He would keep watch, as always. Sometimes that was all you could do.

four

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IT WAS NEARLY opening when the next client arrived, though Dardrad had long since swept the last sawdust from the entry and restocked the counter. The morning light made even the plainest glass case gleam; inside, the rolls of sausage and layered pink hams shone with a subtle, inviting luster. The smell of brine and pepper hung in the air, cut only by the barest tang of soap and the memory of smoke from the last curing. Dardrad stood behind the counter, using a heavy cloth to polish the brass edges of the case, when the bell above the door gave its subdued, almost scholarly jangle.

The customer was not one of the regulars, nor even a semi-regular from the square's usual circuit. The newcomer's arrival seemed to hush the whole shop, as if the very boards wanted to know what sort of being wore such a thoroughly battered set of scholar's robes and a woolen scarf with at least three visible mends. They were small for a human, shorter than Cole but taller than any gnome Dardrad had ever met. Their hair was pressed into a tidy bun; their fingers, which gripped a notebook and the strap of a leather satchel, were so ink-stained that even the knuckles bore a midnight patina.

The visitor entered with a gait both careful and slightly anxious, pausing three steps in to inspect the layout of the shop and perhaps,

Dardrad thought, to verify it matched whatever travel diary or almanac had recommended the place.

Dardrad watched as the customer drew a breath, hesitated, and finally closed the gap to the counter with a self-conscious smile.

"Excuse me," the newcomer said, voice pitched so it wouldn't disturb any dry goods that might have been resting on a shelf. "You are the proprietor, yes?"

"I am," Dardrad replied. He gave a brief, courteous nod, setting down the polishing cloth with ceremony. "Dardrad Pebbleblade. Welcome to my shop."

The scholar bobbed their head, warming to the script. "My thanks. I'm—" Here, a moment's pause, as if unsure whether to give a real name, or perhaps which real name would be correct. "—Erlion. I'm passing through on way to Mistral Ridge, and was told to consult the butcher about expedition supplies."

They raised their eyebrows, eyes bright, awaiting judgment or perhaps a joke about how little they looked suited for the wilds.

"Ridge, eh?" Dardrad said, with the slight narrowing of the eyes that meant he was already calculating distances and weather. "You're late in the season. Roads can go wrong quick."

Erlion flushed, just a shade, and shifted their grip on the satchel. "Yes. My—well, the university sent me later than planned."

Dardrad let the silence work for a moment, noting the tremor in the scholar's hand and the academic's poorly disguised discomfort with the cold. "Not many make it to the Ridge and back after first frost, and that comes midsummer up there. You'll need fat and salt enough to carry you, or you'll be feeding on lichens with the rams by mid-sennight."

Erlion nodded, biting a lip, and fished in their satchel for a list already crumpled along the creases. "I have a provision list here. It's from the old mining maps, so there may be... oddities." They unfolded it with the reverence usually reserved for sacred texts. "But I was told you would know what to recommend for—" here they lowered their voice, though no one else was present—"resisting the more unusual protections around the ruins."

Dardrad took the list, though he didn't need to look. He could

already sense it—the low, background hum that sometimes buzzed behind his ears when a client's request bent toward the extraordinary. It was a subtle magic, not so much a voice as a pressure, as though the shop itself wished to see something done and would not be satisfied until he guessed it right.

Usually, the shop's "whisper" was just that—a whisper, a notion, a memory of an elder's advice. This time, it pressed against him with such clarity that for a moment he had to steady himself on the counter. It felt not only urgent, but tinged with loss—a sadness that didn't belong to the scholar, or the meat in the case, or even to Dardrad himself. The sadness seemed to seep from the stone underfoot, from the old bones in the warren, from the deep memory of places broken and never quite mended.

He composed himself, then looked over the list: hardtack, dried sausage, suet cakes, preserved mossbear (which made him smile, as it suggested a previous customer had survived to spread the legend). But next to the more ordinary requests was a note, in an unfamiliar hand: "For illusions, counter by strong sense of self—traditional is pungent or unusual meats, especially those with ancestral resonance."

Dardrad looked up at Erlion, who watched him with both hope and the kind of nervousness seen in those who'd never bought anything with a face attached. "You're not afraid of new flavors, are you?" he asked, picking up a fillet from the chilled side of the case and holding it up for inspection.

Erlion shook their head, mouth drawn tight. "Not in the least. That is, I'm more afraid of being eaten by mountain shades or tricked into wandering off a ledge."

Dardrad grunted approval. "You'll need more than jerky, then. The ruins—what you'll find there isn't fooled by weak spice or a bland memory."

He set the fillet down and, guided by the shop's nudge, reached toward the far, rarely-used end of the case. There, wrapped in heavy waxed paper and bound with a strip of blue cloth, was a single slab of something that even Dardrad had forgotten he'd stored. He unwrapped it with care, revealing a cut of meat deep maroon, marbled with a blue-black fat that almost glistened in the cold.

"Highelk haunch," Dardrad said, setting it before the scholar. "From the Mistral Mountains, hunted two winters ago. Dried and aged, but it'll come back to itself in the pan." He looked up, letting the scholar feel the weight of the find. "It's what the old dwarves would pack when they had to march through Glamourfields. Nothing sees through an illusion better than a gut full of this. The mind remembers its real shape."

Erlion stared, awe overtaking anxiety for the first time. "It's—" They fumbled for the right word. "It's beautiful, actually."

Dardrad let himself smile, just a touch, and began slicing off thick, even portions. "It's rare, these days. I haven't had a full haunch since last season's end. I can spare you a pound, if you don't mind a touch of frost on the edge."

The scholar nodded, then realized it was not a question of choice but of fate, and nodded again, more reverently. "Please. However much you think right. I'll make it last."

Dardrad considered. "I wish I had something fresher to offer you."

"I'm sure it's fine."

Dardrad wrapped the slices in a waxed pouch, double-folded for the climb, then added a smaller parcel of mossbear for luck. "You eat these only when you must. Don't waste them on an empty stomach—wait for the fog or the color-shift, or if you start hearing songs that aren't your own. You'll know."

Erlion swallowed, clearly believing every word. "Thank you," they said, voice nearly trembling. "Truly, I—if I make it back, I'll write the university and tell them who saved the expedition."

"And... you'll spend the night at the inn." It wasn't a question. "If I can get something fresher, I'll bring it to the Claw this evening."

"Where would you—"

"I know a guy." Dardrad tucked the packages into a sturdy twine sack, added a handful of salt packets, and slid them across the counter. "And if I don't see you, just bring back a story," he said. "And if you see anything out there with more than two eyes, don't try to argue logic with it. Just run."

Erlion's laugh was more genuine now. "Is that also a dwarven proverb?"

He considered it. “No. That’s just common sense.”

The shop’s pressure eased as the transaction completed, replaced by a contentment that left the air lighter and the room a bit less haunted. Dardrad felt his own mood lift, the old sadness washing back into the stones where it belonged.

The scholar paid—more than asked, less than the meat was worth—and gathered the parcels with both hands. “I leave at dawn,” Erlion said. “If I make it back, I’ll try to bring you a souvenir.”

Dardrad, feeling unusually generous, said: “If you make it back, next time the meal’s on me.”

The door closed behind the scholar with a soft finality, and the butcher’s shop resumed its old rhythm: the ticking of the brine tank, the faint creak of hooks, the muted pride of a job well done. Dardrad watched the empty counter for a long time, letting the memory of the “whisper” fade.

Above, the town bell chimed. Dardrad set to work tidying the display, but the smile lingered, stubborn as winter on the slopes.

The rest of the day passed in a hush, the kind that set nerves on edge if you weren’t careful. Even after Erlion’s departure, Dardrad couldn’t shake the sensation of that lingering whisper—like a bell rung in his bones, refusing to stop vibrating. By late afternoon, he’d wrapped every leftover in the case and cleaned the knives with such concentration that not a single chip or curl of fat remained. The feeling did not subside.

I should get more Highelk, he thought. He couldn’t tell if it came from within his own mind or from the shop, but as soon as the words slipped through his brain, he couldn’t let them go. The problem was that the usual hunters hadn’t yet come down from the season’s hunt in the Mistrals.

He knew roughly where they camped, though.

At closing, he hung the sign with its customary promise (“Back in a Tall Moment”), locked the door, and ducked behind the counter for the second journey of the day. He rolled up the rug, pressed the heel of his hand to the latch, and let the cold of the granite steps seep up through his socks as he descended.

It was tradition to enter the warren barefoot. The touch of skin to

stone made the path real, even for those who'd been away from the deep long enough to forget its subtle moods. Dardrad's own feet were as wide as shovels and twice as stubborn, and he trusted them to tell him if the steps had shifted overnight. They hadn't, but he moved slowly, listening for that same uneasy shiver in the air.

The warren's main hall lay cool and waiting, the lanterns on the walls throwing a lazy yellow glow across the floor. Dardrad moved through the chamber as quietly as a ghost, pausing only once at the shelf of stone-etched ledgers to retrieve a flask. It was good to have something on hand if the passage went sour.

He reached the transit chamber without event. The place never failed to impress, even after years of use. It was simple: a round, windowless vault, floor of perfect gray, with a single circle at the center like the pupil of an enormous, patient eye. The walls, lined with veins of crystal, hummed in the presence of magic. Dardrad crossed to the center, set his flask at the edge of the circle, and took a long, steadying breath.

He shrugged out of his apron—no need for it where he was going—and rolled his shoulders to loosen the tension. Then he stepped into the circle.

The shift was supposed to be gradual. Dardrad braced for the familiar compression, the gentle closing of the world around him, as if the stone was tucking him in like an old friend. Instead, he felt resistance—solid, deliberate, as if the rock itself had gone sticky. He tried again, focusing on the mental flex it took to let the floor swallow his feet.

Nothing.

He grunted, flexed his toes, and concentrated harder. This time, the gray of the floor seemed to crawl up his ankles, but it was as slow as cold honey. His legs ached with the strain, calf muscles bunching, sweat prickling at the small of his back. The sensation was less like entering a favored tunnel, more like being pressed into a jar just too small for the shape of his soul.

Dardrad swore under his breath. He'd never known the earth to refuse him—not since his first day as a child, when he'd sunk through the warren's practice stone under Dalossalda's watchful eye. Even

when tired, even after a fight with the old clan-master, he'd always been able to walk through rock as though it were a memory. Now, it fought him every inch of the way.

He thought of Dalossalda, her lecture on "strain and line," the way she'd said the earth sometimes grew nervous when you asked too much of it. He wondered if he was being punished, or warned.

"Come on, you bastard," he muttered, and gave himself to the process.

The rock closed over his knees, then hips, then chest, grinding against him with a friction that felt almost personal. His pulse hammered in his ears. For a moment, he worried he'd become stuck, half in and half out of the world, forever the joke of the village. The transit chamber offered no sympathy, no clever solution.

He bore down, imagining the hunting camp at the other end. He pictured the smell of wind in the high passes, the color of snow on the morning side of the ridge, the look on a hunter's face when presented with a proper buyer. With that image, the stone relented—a little. Enough for his shoulders, then his head, to submerge.

Then it was the dark, absolute and total. The journey, when it worked, was timeless: you became a thought, a smudge in the strata, and then you were somewhere else, whole. This time, every instant of the trip felt counted and tallied, as if the mountain's ledger demanded proof that you belonged.

He emerged from the rock gasping, clutching at the ground with his hands to make sure it was really, truly solid. His cheek was pressed to moss and grit. He tasted blood in his mouth, maybe from biting his tongue or maybe just the altitude. The world was cold, the wind sharper than memory, but he was alive and—by the look of the sky, the thinness of the clouds, and the lack of any looming stone above—he was exactly where he needed to be.

Dardrad rolled over and stared up at the sky, panting. He lay there for a full minute, letting the sweat on his face freeze into little beads. When he finally pushed himself upright, his legs trembled. His beard was caked with frost; his shirt, soaked through, clung to his back like a shroud.

"Old man, you're losing your touch," he muttered, forcing himself to stand.

The camp was only fifty paces off, visible as a ring of dark tents and the bright glint of a low-burning fire. He could see the shapes of people, bundled tight against the wind, moving from rack to rack as they tended their haul. He recognized the layout: this was the north-east arm of the hunting ground, where the best Highelk could be found. The cut he needed would be here, or nowhere.

Dardrad steadied himself, then started toward the camp, each step a little less hesitant than the last. The earth did not rise up to stop him, but he did not trust it quite the same way anymore.

He hoped Dalossalda was right, and that it was just a matter of strain and time.

He did not look back at the place he'd come from. He had a job to do, and the mountain would wait for him to finish it.

The approach to the camp was a lesson in humility. Dardrad walked as if through snowdrift, even though the bare ground was only patchily covered; each step reminded him of the effort it had taken to get here, and every breath stung the inside of his nose raw. His knees ached, and the inside of his boots were damp with sweat despite the cold. Still, he arrived at the ring of tents with his head high and his hands steady—at least until he saw the state of the hunters' haul.

Two humans worked the field. The first, a heavyset woman in a leather cap, wielded her skinning knife with a precision that made Dardrad pause in admiration. The other, tall and reed-thin, had hands so quick and clever he seemed to be more animal than man, the way he filleted each Highelk as if performing delicate surgery. Racks of meat already lined the windbreak, hunks of purple-red flesh glistening in the firelight, and the unmistakable scent of Highelk blood—herbal and sharp, like mint gone to rot—carried on the wind.

They spotted Dardrad the moment he entered the circle of light. The tall one gave a slow, two-finger salute. "Thought it was a bit early in the moon for trade, Pebbleblade."

"Need's a bastard," Dardrad replied, stepping close to the fire for warmth. He could feel the heat on his face but not in his bones. "You got haunch to spare?"

"Just bled the best of the lot," said the woman, barely pausing her work. She spoke around a mouthful of jerky, bits of which clung to her lower lip. "This late in the year, you'll be wanting the deep-fat cut. Keeps longer." She gestured with her blade at the drying rack. "S'that for a customer, or yourself?"

"Customer," Dardrad said. "Scholar type. Claims to be heading to the Ruins. Needs something to hold up against illusions. He's got an older cut... well-preserved, but... still."

The woman snorted, a cloud of vapor rising from her breath. "Scholars. Always think a bit of protein can save 'em from the fairies."

"Sometimes it does," the thin man said, voice oddly respectful. "You want the fresh or the cured?"

Dardrad considered. "Fresh, if you can wrap it in wax. Needs to survive the trip back."

"Done." The thin man knifed off a slab the size of Dardrad's forearm, trimmed it with two deft swipes, and rolled it in oiled cloth like a jewel in a crown. He tucked the parcel into a birch-bark box, then tied it off with a twist of sinew. The entire process took less than a minute, but it was done with a reverence Dardrad understood and appreciated.

He counted out the coins—three silver, two copper, and a chip of blue quartz for luck. The woman eyed the quartz but said nothing, only nodded her thanks and returned to her work.

Dardrad lingered a moment, letting the heat and the presence of others settle the last of his nerves. He watched the fire, watched the hunters, and then let his gaze drift beyond the camp to the mountains rising in the distance. Shattered spines of stone, blue and bone-white, ran like a scar across the world. Somewhere in that mess was the ruin of a dwarven hold, home to thousands once, now just a rumor and a pile of haunted gravel.

He felt the pulse of old grief in his chest—familiar, almost welcome. He let it wash through him, then straightened, nodded to the hunters, and turned back toward the spot where he'd surfaced.

He expected the return journey to be easier. It was not. When he knelt on the patch of granite and tried to "sink," the resistance was even worse than before. The stone seemed to cling to his boots, wrap-

ping around his calves like cold, dead hands. The transition came in fits and starts, with moments when he thought he'd have to crawl back to the shop on his belly, meat dragging behind him.

Halfway through the passage, the world went sideways. Dardrad felt as though every cell in his body was being counted and judged by the mountain. It was not pain, exactly, but an overwhelming pressure, a need to prove himself worthy of the trip. He gritted his teeth and shoved forward, sweat running down his ribs despite the freezing cold.

He came out in the transit chamber on his knees, the Highelk haunch clutched to his chest. He gasped, air burning his lungs. For a long, undignified moment, he could only crouch there, forehead pressed to the cold stone, until his mind caught up to his body and he remembered to stand.

He wiped his face with a trembling hand and, for the first time in his life, wondered if he'd lost the knack. The idea frightened him more than he'd admit, even to Dalossalda.

He staggered up the stairs, feet numb and leaden. By the time he reached the pub, the world outside was still dark, but he saw a familiar shape lurking by the bar—Erlion, the scholar, wrapped in their patched scarf, eyes bright with anticipation.

"You're... here," Dardrad managed, voice rough with fatigue.

"So are you!" Erlion chirped, almost giddy. "Did you—were you able to—?"

Dardrad set the haunch on the counter with a soft thunk. He untied the birch box, unwrapped the cut, and watched as the scholar's eyes went wide.

"It's perfect," Erlion whispered. "It's even got the..." They fumbled for the right phrase, settling for, "the blue veining. That's the part that works best, according to the treatises." He blushed. "After you sold me... I consulted some of my books."

Dardrad grunted. "You'd best believe it. Eat a slice each morning before you start climbing, and it'll keep you in your right mind. I threw in a little mossbear as well. For emergencies."

Erlion bowed, more graceful than Dardrad expected, and produced a drawstring purse heavy with coin. "I saw. These are for you. And—"

they hesitated, then added, “and if I make it back, I’ll bring you a copy of the findings. There’s a whole library under the Ruins. Maybe something you can use.”

Dardrad pocketed the coin, trying not to notice how badly his hands shook. “Just come back in one piece. I hate writing the names of dead clients in my ledger.”

The scholar grinned, tucked the parcels into their satchel, and made for the door. They paused, looked back, and said, “Thank you. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Dardrad only nodded, too tired for anything clever.

The door shut behind them, and the shop felt emptier than before.

He was about to collapse onto his stool when he heard footsteps in the back. Dalossalda emerged from the cellar, hair damp and plastered to her skull, apron flecked with stone dust. She took one look at Dardrad, frowned, and crossed the floor in three brisk strides.

“You look like hell,” she said, placing a hand on his forearm. Her touch was cool, grounding.

Dardrad shrugged, tried to play it off. “Long walk.”

She studied him with a mason’s eye, reading the set of his shoulders and the lines around his mouth. “You’re lying,” she said. “What happened?”

He took a breath. It did not steady him.

“The earth... fought me,” he said at last, voice low. “Like I was the wrong key for the lock. Like—” He broke off, not sure how to say it.

“Like Censure,” Dalossalda finished for him. Her face went pale.

He nodded. “I haven’t felt it since—”

“Since the collapse,” she said, not a question.

The memory of it hit him like a punch. The old warren, walls trembling, the feeling of the stone rebelling against its own shape. The way the passages shuddered and closed, sealing off kin and memory alike. He’d never wanted to feel that sensation again.

“I think,” Dardrad said, words thick, “I think something’s wrong. Not just with the passage. With the whole region. The mountain’s... unhappy.”

Dalossalda squeezed his arm, then let go. “We’ll keep watch,” she said. “Together.”

He nodded again, unable to trust himself to speak. They stood in silence, the scent of brine and woodsmoke all around, and listened as the world above began to stir—bells ringing, distant voices, the promise of another day.

But Dardrad felt it still, humming beneath the soles of his feet: the warning, the judgment, the certainty that something old and deep was shifting in the stone.

It would not be ignored for long.

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THE MORNING LIGHT had barely crested the north wall of the square, and already the day had taken on a flavor Dardrad Pebbleblade didn't like. The butcher shop was immaculate, every surface oiled and every tool at its station, but none of the usual comfort clung to him today. The scents—fat, pepper, woodsmoke, and the faint, familiar bite of brine—seemed sharper, almost metallic. Even the floor felt colder under his boots.

He stood at the counter, running a last inventory of the cold cuts, when Cole appeared in the doorframe. He didn't come in the way he normally did, all noise and loose elbows. Instead, he hesitated just past the threshold, rubbing his thumb along the seam of his apron as though feeling for a splinter.

Dardrad's first instinct was to ask what disease had gotten into Cole's house, but he waited. Cole was one of the few in town who understood the value of silence, or at least tried to. He shuffled to the counter and parked himself at the far end, not taking the usual seat, just sort of leaning with one hip and letting his gaze wander the glass display.

"Morning," Cole said, voice pitched low. "Looks good in here."

"It always does," Dardrad replied, not unkindly.

A few beats passed. Dardrad waited, skin prickling. He could sense a secret in the air, the kind that didn't want to be spoken but might settle for being dragged out by force. Instead, Cole cleared his throat, took a breath, and finally dropped his voice to a true whisper.

"I think something's wrong with Alred."

Dardrad didn't answer at first. He just set down the tally slate and folded his arms, the old oak counter creaking under his weight. "Go on," he said.

Cole kept his gaze fixed on a coil of sausage, not meeting Dardrad's eyes. "Yesterday, after closing, I went round to the dry-goods to trade for some barley flour. Alred wasn't at the counter, just standing near the back wall—staring at nothing, for a good few minutes. He had a stack of canned peas in one hand, a bottle of sewing oil in the other, like he'd forgot what they were for."

Dardrad grunted, skeptical. "Maybe he was thinking."

"That's not the strange part," Cole hurried on. "I called his name—loud, like you'd call a sheep in a storm. He didn't flinch, not even a twitch. Then, when he finally did look at me, he smiled, but it wasn't a proper one. You know when a person smiles but the eyes stay cold?"

Dardrad did know. It was the smile of someone reciting a script, not living it.

"He wrote up my order, but then—" Cole hesitated, voice trembling now, "—then he started putting things in my sack that I didn't ask for. Little odds and ends. Two jars of river clay. A length of waxed string. I tried to stop him, but he just shrugged and said, 'Might as well have them. I won't need them where I'm going.'" Cole's fingers worked at the edge of the counter, seeking purchase.

Dardrad waited, letting the pieces fall into their places. The shop felt suddenly colder.

"And then," Cole continued, "he asked me if I'd ever thought about walking east. Past the ridge, all the way to the Lonesome Valley. He said, 'It's easy to get stuck in one place. You ever wonder if there's anything left to see out there?'" Cole's words rushed out, then halted in a hush. "I thought maybe he'd been drinking, but he was steady as ever. Just... hollow."

"He say what he meant by it?" Dardrad asked.

"No," Cole whispered. "But it's not just me. Willow says he's been giving stuff away to travelers. Good stuff, too—tarps, those waterproof cloaks, even a coil of climbing rope. Told Willow the travelers 'needed it more than the shop needed the coppers.'"

The words fell into Dardrad like stones into a pond, sending ripples he didn't want to look at too closely.

He let silence have its due, then said, "Did you tell anyone else?"

Cole shook his head, looking suddenly like a boy afraid to tattle. "Didn't want to start a rumor. Thought maybe I was seeing things. You're the only one I'd trust to know if it's real."

Dardrad wiped his hands on the towel, more for something to do than out of necessity. He could feel the pulse of the place beneath his feet—the hum of old stone, the slow breath of the cellar—but it felt a little different now. He'd never known Alred to falter at anything. Alred was as reliable as the town bell, steady as the horizon.

"Do you think it's magic?" Cole asked, voice almost lost behind the glass case.

Dardrad considered. "If it is, it's the bad kind. The kind that sneaks up and waits in your blood."

Cole looked up then, eyes wide and anxious. "What do you think we should do?"

Dardrad didn't want to answer. He felt the memory of last night's struggle in the stone, the resistance of the earth itself, and wondered if it was connected. If there was a rot spreading under the town, it would start at the roots, not the leaves.

He grunted. "If he's truly off, he'll show it again. I'll close up early and go see him myself. Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's just too much time in the shop."

Cole let out a breath he'd been holding. "You'll tell me if it's bad?"

"You'll know," Dardrad said, voice steady.

For a while, the two just stood there, listening to the subtle life of the shop. Finally, Cole straightened, set his hands flat on the counter, and offered Dardrad a wry, sheepish smile. "Never thought the day would come when I'd rather be fighting mold in my root cellar."

Dardrad's own mouth twitched in reply. "That's because you've never fought proper mold. It knows how to dig in." He wiped the

counter with a final swipe, then nodded toward the door. “Best get back to it.”

Cole didn’t leave right away, but eventually he pushed off from the counter, squared his shoulders, and said, “Thank you.” He hesitated at the threshold, then added, “If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

Dardrad nodded, watching the shape of Cole’s back as he left, noting how the broad farmer’s shoulders drooped just a bit more than usual.

He waited until the footsteps faded, then circled the counter and made for the trapdoor. The touch of stone was grounding, but today it felt neither comfort nor clarity—just a cool indifference that made him uneasy.

He pressed his palm flat against the cellar wall, searching for a sign, a tremor, anything that would confirm or deny what Cole had brought. There was nothing at first. Then, faint and far-off, a soft click, like the rattle of dry beans in a jar.

Dardrad grunted, unsatisfied, and climbed back up. He put the towel away, reset the display, and stared for a long moment at the door of the shop.

He knew what he would find if Alred was truly “untethered.” He’d seen it once, years ago, when a traveling tinker got too deep into borrowed magic and forgot how to want anything for himself. The memory made Dardrad’s skin crawl, but he drew a steadying breath and prepared to face it again.

He untied his apron and laid it across the counter, as if leaving it in trust for the shop. Then he slid the deadbolt, hung the “Back in a Tall Moment” sign with its battered calligraphy, and stepped out into the changing light.

He didn’t bother locking the door. If something was really wrong, a lock wouldn’t keep it out.

He turned toward the square, shoulders braced against the wind, and set off to find Alred Grasswalker.

Dardrad found the dry-goods shop shuttered, its windows gone to shadow, though the sun had not yet finished burning out the west. The sight was more than odd—it was wrong, like seeing a river run backwards or a chicken lay a loaf of bread. Alred was never first to close, not in a sennight, not in a moon. He was known to keep the lamps burning past midnight, for those travelers who woke with a need for bandages or a bite of fruit.

The stoop creaked as Dardrad set his weight on it, and the boards gave a little more than he remembered. He rapped hard on the door, the sound echoing flat across the empty square. “Alred!” he called. “It’s Dardrad. Open up.”

For a while there was nothing, just the whisper of wind and the faint, rhythmic ticking of the clock in the shop above. Dardrad was about to try the handle, maybe lean in with a bit of dwarven charm, when the latch snicked and the door swung wide enough to reveal Alred’s silhouette.

He looked a mess. His tunic was untucked, and the collar sat askew, showing more of the elf’s long neck than was proper. His hair had lost its usual straight lines, instead falling in a dark, rumpled cloud over his ears. Worst of all, his eyes—normally the sharp, wary gray of a predator—were dull and sunken, as if the world had bled out all their color.

“Evening,” Alred said. His voice was even, almost pleasant, but it rang false in Dardrad’s ear.

Dardrad crossed his arms, feigning nonchalance. “You got a minute?”

Alred nodded, stepping aside to let Dardrad enter. The shop was colder than the air outside, with a stillness to it that made every sound echo twice. The counters were tidy, but the shelves behind the register had been picked over, gaps showing where staples should have stood in ranks. At the back of the shop, an empty tea cup sat beside a ledger, the rim stained red from the cheap hibiscus blend Alred pretended to like.

They stood a moment in the quiet, neither eager to fill it.

“Cole stopped by this morning,” Dardrad said, deciding to cut to it. “Said you’re not yourself.”

Alred managed a dry laugh. "I suppose he would notice."

Dardrad watched him carefully. "You want to talk about it?"

Alred moved to the counter and leaned on it, his fingers drumming the wood in a pattern Dardrad didn't know. "I'm not sure it would help."

"You don't know until you try," Dardrad said, voice gentler than he'd intended.

Alred closed his eyes, the lids translucent in the lamplight. "Do you ever feel like the thing you do—the thing you are—just... stops making sense? Like you're putting one foot in front of the other, but the ground's gone soft under you, and you're walking only because you're afraid to stop?"

Dardrad considered. "Sometimes. Usually means I'm tired or the meat's gone off."

Alred smiled, faint and brittle. "I think mine's gone off, then."

He reached behind the counter, pulled out the ledger, and set it open between them. The pages were covered in neat, slanting script, each transaction accounted for with a precision that bordered on obsession. Alred pointed to a line—yesterday, late afternoon.

"That's when I gave Willow the climbing rope," he said. "I remember writing it, but I don't remember why. It's like I watched my own hand do it."

Dardrad leaned over, squinting at the entry. The writing was perfectly normal, but the ink was blotched, as if Alred had pressed the pen too hard.

"I used to care about every sale," Alred said, not looking up. "Every trade, every can of beans, every strip of waxed cloth. But now it's all—" he made a vague gesture, "—drifting."

Dardrad let that settle between them. "Is it just work, or everything?"

Alred's hands went still. "Everything," he whispered. "Even eating, or sleeping. I forget to do both, until someone reminds me."

Dardrad felt a chill settle in his gut. "You ever think about leaving? Going east, maybe?"

Alred shook his head. "No. There's nowhere to go. North Pointe's the only place I ever belonged."

"Then maybe you should see the doc," Dardrad suggested. "Could be a head cold, or—"

"It's not a head cold," Alred snapped, then softened immediately. "Sorry. It's not that. I feel..." He trailed off, searching for the right word. "Untethered," he said finally. "Like I'm watching myself from outside. Like I'm just a copy, and the real me is already gone."

Dardrad watched the way Alred's fingers curled and uncurled, the restless energy of someone used to constant motion but now stuck in place. "When did it start?"

Alred hesitated, then said, "The day Llewel arrived."

That name rang a bell, but not one Dardrad liked. "The Mountain Elf?"

"Yes," Alred said. "I met him the first night. In the square. He looked... lost, but not in the usual way. More like he'd arrived at the end of a long journey and didn't know what to do next."

Dardrad grunted. "He buy anything?"

"No," Alred said. "But every day since, I've caught him staring in the window. Not at me, I think, but at the shelves. As if he's cataloging what I have, or what I lack."

Dardrad chewed this over. "You think he's a thief?"

"No," Alred said, and laughed. "I think he's a reminder. Of something I don't want to remember."

Dardrad let the words hang, heavy as a side of beef.

"Listen," Alred said, "there's a thing I haven't told anyone else. Not even Cole. I think I'm losing my gift."

Dardrad's brow furrowed. "Your shop is always stocked."

Alred shook his head. "It's not that. I mean the knack for it. The knowing. I used to be able to see a person and know what they needed before they did—if it was a blanket for the cold, or a set of buttons for luck, or just a loaf of bread to hold off the dark. Lately, I look at people and I don't see anything. Just... space. And... the shop isn't restocking. I think it knows."

The rawness of it stung. Dardrad reached out, put a heavy hand on Alred's arm. "Sometimes it comes back."

"Does it?" Alred asked, voice so small Dardrad almost missed it.

He searched for a better answer, but came up empty.

They stood like that a while, the only sound the distant ticking and the soft shifting of light as the sun finally vanished. Dardrad let his hand fall away, feeling suddenly helpless.

"Can I do anything?" he asked.

Alred shook his head, lips pressed tight. "No one can."

Dardrad felt a prickling at the base of his skull, the sense that the whole world was poised on the edge of something sharp and mean. "If it gets worse—"

"It will," Alred said, with the certainty of someone who had already given up.

Dardrad felt a tremor then—not in the air, but in the ground itself. A low, barely audible hum, as if the stones beneath the shop were struggling to hold together. The feeling made his teeth ache.

He looked Alred in the eye, trying to find the man he'd known for decades. "Don't do anything stupid," he said.

Alred smiled again, that brittle smile. "I won't. Stupidity's for those who still care about the outcome."

Dardrad wanted to argue, but the words caught in his throat.

He stepped back, the boards creaking under his weight, and made for the door. "If you need anything, I'll be in the Claw tonight. Or just send a runner."

Alred nodded, but already his focus was a mile away, lost in a place Dardrad could not reach.

Dardrad pulled the door shut behind him, feeling the tremor fade as soon as he hit the dirt. The cold air was a shock after the strange stillness inside. He took a few steps, then turned back to look at the shop, expecting maybe a sign, some change, anything. But the lights inside were already snuffed, the windows black as pitch.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, feeling the lingering chill of the encounter settle into his bones. Something bad was coming, and for once he didn't think it was just his imagination.

He headed for the pub, needing the comfort of heat and noise, but mostly needing the chance to forget—if only for a while.

The Broken Claw was its own world, and tonight it felt like a warm cave against the gathering dark. The air was thick with the perfume of roast and yeast, the hearth radiated a glow so steady you could time

your pulse to it, and the lamps strung along the rafters were already going gold at the edges. Dardrad took his usual seat in the corner, back to the wall, view of the door unobstructed.

It was busy for a mid-moon night. Not packed, but every table was alive with conversation, and the pub's proprietor, a woman who had inherited both her mother's voice and her father's legendary frown, was making the rounds with tankards of the good stuff. Dardrad liked the sound of it all—the hum of voices, the crash of a dropped plate, the shuffle and deal of playing cards. Tonight, though, even the good noise couldn't loosen the knot in his chest.

He ordered a pint and nursed it, letting the chill settle behind his eyes and dull the edge of the evening. Around him, the world went about its business.

The travelers sat two tables down, a pair of them, both too clean to be here long and too loud to have learned the rules. They played a dice game on the bare wood, each roll punctuated by a little cheer or a curse, depending. Dardrad pegged them as scholars or perhaps surveyors, given their odd clothes and the way one kept scribbling in a notebook between rounds. He watched them with half an eye, more for the comfort of routine than any real interest.

The first bell after dusk rang out, a sound as familiar as his own heartbeat. Dardrad lifted his mug and toasted nothing in particular. The memory of Alred's gray face and brittle voice still lingered. He tried to chase it away with a swallow of ale, but the memory clung.

He'd only just set the mug down when the travelers' game erupted.

"You're cheating," the younger one hissed, face flushed from drink and indignation.

The older man—hard to tell if he was really older or just more used to drinking—laughed it off. "You always say that when you lose."

"I'm not losing! You're changing the rules!"

They leaned in, voices sharp and high. A few heads turned, then looked away. No one wanted to get involved. Dardrad watched, waiting to see if the fight would go to fists or just fizzle.

Then it happened—a tremor, so subtle most would have missed it. Dardrad felt it first in his boots: a tightening, a pressure. Then the floor

itself went taut, and for a heartbeat the whole pub seemed to hold its breath. The glasses on the bar did a little dance, the lamp chains quivered, and then it was gone.

It lasted less than a second, but Dardrad saw the way the locals reacted. All the townies, all the permanent fixtures—they glanced down, hands instinctively going to the tables or benches, eyes narrowing just a hair. The travelers, meanwhile, just kept arguing, oblivious.

Dardrad reached under the table and pressed his palm flat to the wood. The vibration was fading, but the memory of it lingered in his bones. He looked to the barkeep, who shot him a glance over the heads of her customers. They both knew what it meant, though neither would say it aloud.

It was happening again. The world was getting ready to break, and the only ones who could feel it were the ones who'd spent a lifetime learning the rules.

The travelers' spat wound down, both men sullen now, hunched over their mugs. The pub gradually returned to its rhythm, but the air was a touch heavier, the fire's glow a bit less warm.

Dardrad finished his pint, ordered another, and sat with his thoughts.

It wasn't just Alred. It was all of them. The town, the warren, the magic in the stone. Something was pulling it apart, strand by strand.

He tried to remember if he'd ever felt a tremor like that in the Claw before. Not in a moon, not in a year. The last time the ground had moved was the season the north wall had collapsed, and that had taken three sennights to repair.

He looked around the room, taking stock. Cole was at the bar, talking softly with the barkeep. Two farmers debated over the merits of a new plow. Even the kid who swept the floors seemed spooked, moving slower than usual.

Dardrad let the silence build in his head, chasing away the noise, until only the facts remained.

If Alred was right—if he was “untethering”—then the problem wasn't just with the elf. It was with the whole lattice that bound the

town together. If the gifts started to fail, or the rules stopped making sense, there would be nothing left but ruin and memory.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture the world after such a thing. The thought made him sick.

The travelers called for another round, voices already healed by the passage of time and ale. Dardrad watched them for a long minute, noting how their laughter never touched their eyes.

He drained his second pint and wiped the foam from his mustache with a thumb.

He had work to do. Real work, not the kind that could be solved with knives and salt.

He stood, tossed a coin on the table, and nodded to the barkeep as he passed. She nodded back, eyes saying more than words ever could.

Outside, the wind had shifted again, colder now, the sky scoured clean of even the memory of warmth.

Dardrad set his jaw and headed for home, feeling the stone beneath his feet and listening, as always, for the next warning.

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THERE WAS something to be said for starting a morning on one's knees, hands braced on the living rock and the taste of cold iron in the air. Dardrad Pebbleblade would never admit it, not even to Dalossalda, but the deeper chambers of the warren always made him feel smaller—like a bead of water caught inside a glacier. The hush down here was not the hush of the surface world, all wind and weather, but a slower kind of silence, as if the stone itself had stopped listening out of respect.

Dalossalda knelt beside him, her hair tightly bound, blue light flickering from her fingertips as she coaxed the magic to life. The cavern was lit only by that glow, and by the shivering veins of crystal that ran, here and there, through the walls. The effect was eerie, making Dalossalda's broad face look almost spectral, cheekbones cored with shifting shadows.

"Nothing yet?" Dardrad asked, keeping his voice low. It seemed disrespectful, somehow, to break the quiet.

Dalossalda shook her head, jaw set and eyes fixed on the stretch of wall before her. "Not at the surface," she said. "Give it a moment."

He watched the way her hands moved, fingers splayed and palms open, hovering an inch above the cold granite. It was an old dance,

one he'd seen a thousand times: the flex of wrist, the deliberate press of the thumb, the way she inhaled before a particularly tricky sequence of signs. Dardrad envied the certainty of it, the sense of belonging that she radiated whenever she touched the stone.

His own magic was subtler and less dramatic. He could move through the earth, yes, but the stone never sang for him the way it did for Dalossalda. It tolerated him; it loved her.

After a moment, a new light bloomed under her left palm—a starburst, impossibly fine, that traced its way out along an invisible fault. Dalossalda grunted, a sound of both triumph and irritation.

"Found your tremor," she said, glancing sidelong at Dardrad. "It's right where you said."

Dardrad shifted forward, bracing his callused hands against the flagstone. The cold radiated up his arms, sharper now, and he hissed a breath through his teeth.

Dalossalda leaned closer, eyes narrowed. "Don't touch it yet," she muttered. "It's more delicate than I thought."

He nodded, watching as she worked. The light from her fingers grew brighter, tracing a vein the width of a hair, running not just along the surface but deep into the floor. The more she coaxed, the further the line traveled, until it arced, impossibly, up and over the ceiling, looping around the chamber like a drawn bow.

Dardrad recognized the geometry at once: this was not a slip or a water-borne flaw. The line was too straight, too deliberate.

He swallowed. "It's a cut," he said. "Like a saw in the grain."

Dalossalda grunted in agreement. "A clean one. Not from settling, not from thaw." She ran her left hand along the fracture, then paused, frowning.

Dardrad squinted, trying to follow her line of sight. The warren's stone was smooth, but here and there the blue light revealed a shimmer along the crack—like the inside of a split pearl, or the gleam of new glass.

He touched a knuckle to the wall, careful not to interrupt her work. "Where does it go?"

Dalossalda bit her lower lip, then flexed her fingers, sending another pulse of light along the fault. The whole chamber flickered for

a heartbeat, and then the line snapped into sharp relief—an unbroken path running due east, straight under the square, and up toward the surface.

"It's under the Broken Claw," Dalossalda said, voice a whisper now.

Dardrad felt the floor go cold beneath him. "That's not possible. The pub's on clay and old river stone. You couldn't get this kind of tension under sand, not without—"

"Magic," Dalossalda finished for him. "Or something worse."

She let her hands fall, and the blue light guttered, then faded to a faint, anxious hum along the crack. Dardrad leaned in, close enough to smell the salt and sweat on her skin.

"What do you see?" he asked, softly.

She hesitated, then pressed the heel of her hand flat to the fracture. The blue glow surged, casting long shadows on the wall. For a moment, she was still. Then her whole body shuddered, and her eyes rolled back, showing only the whites.

Dardrad cursed and reached for her, but the moment he touched her shoulder the same shock ran through him—a freezing jolt, as if someone had poured a bucket of river melt down his spine. His vision went black, then white, then exploded into color and sound.

He was falling through the stone, through layers of memory and history, each one colder and older than the last. He caught flashes: a younger Dalossalda, hair unbound, laughing as she shaped a spiral stair out of raw bedrock; the first time he'd ever held a butcher's knife, his hands trembling but sure; the night they'd run from the old clan, hands stained and hearts on fire, both of them knowing there would be no going back.

Then the visions merged, and he saw the fracture not as a line but as a wound, raw and bright, bleeding energy into the dark. The wound pulsed, not with life but with the memory of something broken and never healed.

He tried to speak, but the world shook around him.

Then, all at once, he was back in his body, kneeling on the cold stone of the warren. Dalossalda was gasping beside him, her eyes wild and glazed.

He reached for her, and their hands found each other, fingers clasping with the desperation of those who know the end is coming and can do nothing to stop it.

Above, the blue glow faded, and the cavern was plunged back into darkness—only now, the silence felt less like peace and more like a warning.

Dardrad squeezed Dalossalda's hand, not sure whether he was comforting her or anchoring himself.

"It's not a crack," he said, voice hoarse. "It's a message."

Dalossalda nodded, her breath coming in sharp, uneven bursts. "And it's not done yet."

The words echoed in the chamber, then died, leaving only the faintest shimmer of blue along the fracture—a thread of memory, waiting for someone to pull it.

He didn't have to wonder what would happen if it broke.

He could see it, as clear as if it were already written in the stone: the warren collapsing, the town above sinking into its own secrets, the magic of the place unwinding like a dropped spool.

He held Dalossalda's hand, and together they waited for the next vision.



The first sound was always singing. Not voices—though those would come, layered in by the hundreds—but the pure, unbroken note of the stone itself. In the vision, Dardrad Pebbleblade stood not in the warren's cold dark, but at the mouth of the Deep Gallery, its vaults arched higher than any cathedral and lit from below by lines of liquid fire. He remembered the shiver that ran through him, the sense of being both infinitely small and uniquely chosen. The air buzzed with hope and pride and the weight of every ancestor who had walked here.

Beside him, Dalossalda wore her architect's braid coiled tight and pinned with copper. Her beard—then only a soft haze, barely a year old—glowed with mineral flecks. They were newly wed and had never been more certain of their place in the world.

He could almost smell the night: a tangle of hot-forge steam, old dust, and the fresh sharpness of obsidian shavings. Dardrad's hands were steady as he gripped the edge of the stone tablet, every etched rune lined in black pitch. The weight of it thrilled him. To stand here, in these halls, tablet in hand, meant you had earned the right to mark the future.

A procession was forming beyond the gate, their kin gathered in ceremonial vest and helm. Elders with braids down to the floor. Crafters with fingers banded by silver. Even children, clutching the geometric lanterns that glowed like caged fireflies.

Dalossalda nudged him, eyes alive with mischief even in this moment of solemnity. "Don't drop it," she whispered.

He grunted. "I could balance this on my beard, if I had to."

"Not with that chin," she said, and squeezed his arm. He looked at her and felt the old ache of pride, the kind that made your chest too big for your coat.

A horn sounded. The crowd parted to let through the Speaker, ancient and rigid, his beard in nine distinct braids. Behind him, two recorders—one of whom Dardrad recognized as his own aunt, her eyes as sharp as ever—clutched quills of gold.

The Speaker's voice rolled out, rich and dry. "Dalossalda, Dardrad, you bear the vision and the burden. Step forward."

They did, together.

The sacred vault was small compared to the Great Hall, but no less grand. Every surface was inscribed with patterns that seemed to crawl in the corners of the eye. In the center stood the ceremonial plinth, a block of unblemished basalt veined with opal. Dalossalda and Dardrad set their tablets down with practiced synchrony. The tablets clicked into place, runes aligning, the seam between them invisible.

The Speaker laid a hand on each of their shoulders. "The foundation remembers. The foundation judges. May your work stand a thousand generations."

Dalossalda bowed her head. Dardrad tried, but something in the vault caught his eye—a shimmer, high up, where the torchlight hit the lintel. He squinted, forgetting the ritual, the words, even the presence of the clan.

Embedded in the stone, just above the arch, was a pattern unlike any he'd seen. Most crystal veins followed the logic of the fault lines, fractal and somewhat chaotic, but this one—this was different. It split the arch with a spiral, every turn precise, echoing the geometry of the runes on their own tablet.

He wanted to point it out to Dalossalda, to the elders, but already the Speaker was calling for silence, and he knew better than to break tradition.

As the voices rose around him—prayer, affirmation, the low hum of a hundred dwarves singing the foundation song—Dardrad let himself imagine what that crystal meant. What if the rock itself was echoing their work? What if, through some trick of pressure and time, the stone had made its own mark in anticipation of theirs?

After, as the crowd drifted out for the feasting, Dardrad lingered. He ran his fingers along the edge of the plinth, then turned to the wall, tracing the spiral with his gaze. It seemed to pulse in the magic light, as if daring him to reach higher.

He stretched up, and with the tip of his smallest finger, nudged a flake of dust from the base of the crystal. The touch was electric—a charge, a promise.

He did not know that Dalossalda was watching.

She came up behind him, arms crossed. "What are you doing?"

"Look," he said, voice low. "It's perfect. Same as the runes on our work. Same spiral."

She frowned, following his line of sight. "It's a vein, Dardrad. Not a rune. Don't start seeing things."

He grinned, but did not explain. Instead, he touched the crystal again, feeling the pattern under his nail.

Later, when Dalossalda was called to confer with the other architects, Dardrad stayed behind. He knew the others would think him brash, even foolish, but something about the spiral made his heart beat faster.

He studied the lintel, the weight it bore, the symmetry of the load. It was strong. Overbuilt, even. The old masters always doubled their work on ceremonial arches.

He looked left, looked right, made certain no one watched.

Then, using a chisel borrowed from his own pocket, he shaved the tiniest sliver from the base of the crystal, exposing its heart. The spiral flared in the torchlight, brighter than before. He felt a rush of pride—a secret improvement, a mark of himself on the world.

He tucked the chisel away and left, never guessing at the consequence.

Three days later, the ritual was set. This time, the whole clan gathered. Even the Speaker's voice shook as he declared the vault "sanctified." The elders chanted, pouring in the power from their own bloodlines, hands pressed to the runes as if pushing their life into the rock.

It was beautiful—until it wasn't.

Midway through the closing song, the arch trembled. A hairline fracture appeared in the lintel, running straight through the spiral. At first, it was only a shimmer, a subtle wrongness. Then, with a sound like a bell splitting, the crystal snapped. The lintel groaned, shifted, and dropped half a finger's width onto the plinth.

The runes—still hot from the ritual—shattered. The basalt block broke into two perfect halves. Tablets went skidding across the floor. No one was hurt, but the sanctity of the vault was ruined, the power leaking into the floor like spilled wine.

There was chaos. Shouting, the crash of boots as crafters scrambled to secure the walls. Dardrad could do nothing but stare at the spiral, now dull and broken.

Dalossalda found him in the confusion, dragging him away from the edge. She looked at his hands—still dusted with blue, betraying his tampering—and her eyes widened.

"You touched it," she breathed. "Why?"

He shook his head, at first unwilling to speak, then unable. "I only... I thought it would—"

She slapped him, hard and quick. "You always think, Dardrad. You never listen."

He looked away, unable to meet her gaze.

The clan called an emergency council. The Speaker, voice stripped of all warmth, pronounced the words no dwarf ever wished to hear: "Those who fail the foundation cannot be trusted."

No one said his name, but the eyes of every elder, every child, every cousin and friend, fixed on him and Dalossalda.

After, as the crowd dispersed, his own aunt pressed a ledger into his hand. "You are to leave," she said, "before sundown. The stone remembers what you did, but it might forgive you if you do not linger."

Dalossalda did not speak. She packed her tools in silence, eyes dry and distant.

Their families did not say goodbye.

Dardrad remembered every step down the silent gallery, how the light from the fire lines flickered and died as they passed. He remembered the ache in his throat, the sense of falling and never hitting bottom. They reached the edge of the city and walked out together, not looking back.

He reached for Dalossalda's hand, but she would not take it.

They crossed the border in darkness, carrying nothing but their shame and the memory of stone that had sung, once, for both of them.

In the vision, Dardrad tried to speak, to beg forgiveness, to undo what had been done. But the world of memory was merciless, and the song of the foundation was forever broken.

He felt the judgment of the rock, the cold certainty of it. The wound he'd made was not a crack in stone, but a fault in trust.

It would follow him wherever he went, no matter how many new warrens he dug, no matter how deep he buried the memory.

He saw Dalossalda's face in the moment before they crossed into exile: set, determined, but broken in ways words could not heal.

The vision held him there, at the edge of the old world, until even the memory grew thin and faded.

He woke in the warren, hands clenched into fists, sweat cold on his skin.

Beside him, Dalossalda trembled, not with fear but with the old, familiar anger.

They did not speak. There was nothing to say that hadn't already been carved into the stone.

The world came back in ragged pieces, each one too bright and far too loud. Dardrad Pebbleblade sucked in a lungful of frigid air and nearly choked; the sweat that soaked his brow chilled to ice in the breath it took to remember where he was. Beside him, Dalossalda heaved, shuddering like she'd run a mile straight up the ridge. Her hands were still pressed to the stone, knuckles white and rigid.

He closed his eyes. It didn't help.

"It's happening again," he said, after a long, ragged minute. His voice cracked on the first word, steadied by force for the rest. "The rock knows. It remembers."

Dalossalda let her head drop, forehead resting against the wall. For a moment she didn't answer, just breathed until her shoulders smoothed out. Then she lifted her hand, found his, and squeezed.

"Of course it does," she said. Her voice was calm, but each word seemed to shake the dust from the ceiling. "Nothing like a fresh wound to remind it of the last."

He stared at their joined hands, the way hers was streaked with blue from the crystal vision, and his still carried the grime of a thousand butchered slabs. He was supposed to be the steady one, the anchor. Today, he felt more like ballast.

"It's worse than before," he managed. "I thought we left all that behind. All those years—"

"It never left you," Dalossalda said. She turned, so their eyes met in the wavering crystal glow. "You've been carrying it every day. And now it's found a way out."

He tried to argue, tried to find words to smooth the edge, but she cut him off with a look.

"I mean it, Dardrad. You never stopped running. Even when we dug in here, even after all the good we did. The stone—" she tapped the wall, not gentle, "—it never forgets who's meant to stay and who's meant to go."

He looked away, unwilling to let her see how much the words stung. His eyes wandered up to the ceiling, where the fault line shimmered in and out of sight with every flicker of the crystal. He could see it more clearly now: not just a line, but a warning, an old scar about to split open.

He ran his thumb along the edge of the crack. It vibrated, faint and high, almost like the whine of a blade after sharpening. It felt alive, but not in a way that offered comfort. More like the last breath before a landslide.

He remembered the vision. The spiral. The fracture. His own hand, making the smallest, most arrogant change—and the way the world had punished him for it.

He swallowed. “Do you think,” he started, then paused, searching for the bottom of the thought, “do you think it’s because of what I am? What I did?”

Dalossalda pulled herself upright, wiping her palm on her apron, then sat beside him on the cold flagstone. She looked so tired, so old, and for a moment he saw her as the clan must have: the daughter of builders, wed to a man with more curiosity than sense.

“No,” she said, softer now. “Not because of what you did. Because of how you never made peace with it.”

He shook his head, stubborn. “I tried. I tried to make this place—this life—worth the trouble.”

She smiled, small and sad. “You did, Dardrad. But you used the gift the same way you always have. As a way to go, not as a way to stay.”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he pressed his palm flat against the stone, feeling for the line. The blue light in the fault pulsed under his hand. He concentrated, letting his magic follow the cut, mapping it as he would a bone split in a carcass.

He understood now. His gift was never just movement, never just slipping through stone to chase down a quarry. It was connection. The ability to feel the perfect fit of every layer, every grain. And he’d used it all these years to get away—from the old shame, from the memory of what he’d broken. Never once had he tried to mend.

He heard the faint sound of water dripping, far down the warren. It echoed, lonely and relentless.

“I’ve been using it to run,” he said, barely above a whisper. “To escape what I did. Not to fix it.”

Dalossalda put her hand over his, warm and steady. “And now the town feels that weakness. The icosagon is only as strong as the lines

that hold it together. If there's a break, even a hair's width—" She gestured at the glowing crack. "This is what you get."

He looked up, finally meeting her eyes. There was no anger there now, just the blunt honesty he'd always loved.

"So what do I do?" he asked.

She didn't have an answer, not right away. They sat like that, hands together on the trembling stone, the cold of the floor creeping up through their boots.

Above, the town would be waking soon. Customers would come for their sausage and suet, the bells in the square would ring, and the Broken Claw would open its doors as if nothing was wrong.

But down here, beneath it all, the secret was out. The foundation was wounded, and it would not heal on its own.

"We find the break," Dalossalda said, finally. "We face it. Together."

He nodded, feeling the old sense of purpose spark in his chest. "Together," he agreed.

They stayed a while longer, silent except for the tap of the drip and the slow hum of the magic in the stone. The future felt as brittle as the lintel had, all those years ago.

But this time, at least, they would not walk away.

seven

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THE FIRST SIGN was the salt jar rattling—a gentle tick-tick that could have been a trick of the wind through the bakery’s vent, but Dardrad Pebbleblade’s bones knew better. The sound swelled: then, in a moment, the entire shop joined in, a rumbling orchestra of trembling glass, swinging lanterns, and the metallic shriek of cleavers hopping off their hooks. The main beam overhead gave a sigh as old as the town itself.

A slab of beef tumbled from the curing rack and slapped to the floor, the thud echoing against the crash of the day’s work-in-progress: a line of pork shoulders that flopped sideways, each one rolling in sequence like a row of half-baked loaves. Dardrad gripped the counter to steady himself, but the vibration traveled through wood and up his arms—a pulse, purposeful, not the aimless shudder of a faraway quake. The floor under his boots was alive, straining. He could hear it, and worse, he could feel the flaw: thin as a spider thread, sharp as a bone saw, running straight beneath his feet.

Down below, in the cellar, something deep let go with a grinding, hollow pop. The sound carried through the subfloor in a way only Dardrad’s ears, and perhaps Dalossalda’s, could truly appreciate: it

was the sound of a column giving up, of a load-bearing friend calling for help.

He threw the trapdoor open, half expecting to see dust or smoke rise from below. Instead, the cellar was lit blue and bright—the magic lanterns down there vibrating in perfect sync with the disaster above. Somewhere among the barrels and hanging larders, Dalossalda’s voice cut through:

“DON’T MOVE!”

He did not. Not right away. It wasn’t fear that stopped him, but the memory of a thousand drills, every warning his old clan had ever drilled into him about what happened when a load shifted but the rest of the world didn’t know it yet.

“Stay right there,” Dalossalda barked again, then, with less force: “Count to ten, slow.”

Dardrad obliged. He made it to seven before she appeared at the top of the stairs, hair wild and skin shining with sweat. She paused just long enough to sweep the room, her eyes tracking every swinging lantern, every shivering bottle on the wall.

“It’s just us,” she said, voice flat. “No tremor outside the shop. Did you feel it up here?”

Dardrad pointed at the counter, where a crack no thicker than a hairline now ran from the chopping block all the way to the register. “All the way through,” he said.

Dalossalda swore under her breath, then darted to the window. The square beyond was undisturbed; the bakery, the general, and the restaurant were as calm and oblivious as a painting. A child chased a hoop past the dry goods shop. Not even the birds on the wires had scattered.

“Localized,” Dalossalda muttered, mostly to herself. “It’s a rejection.”

Dardrad didn’t answer. He was still counting—past ten now, up to twenty, as if by sheer willpower he could outlast the aftershock. It wasn’t working. The flaw below had not set, and the blue haze of the cellar lights said there was more to come.

Dalossalda stalked across the room to stand beside him, their shoulders almost touching. She smelled of granite dust and iron, the

sharp tang of her own magic riding the air. "We have to fix it," she said, voice low and urgent. "Now, before it gets an idea and takes the rest of the building with it."

Dardrad swallowed, tasting blood. "If it's a rejection," he said, "we need a stabilizer."

"We need a keystone," Dalossalda corrected, her gaze flicking to the trapdoor. "And you're the only one who can set it."

He shook his head, hands clenching on the towel he'd grabbed by instinct. "No. You know I'm not—" The words got stuck, the air in the shop too tight for them.

"Don't start," she said, but not unkindly. "We're out of time. You know the feel of it better than anyone."

He wanted to argue. He wanted to grab his coat, walk out the door, and let the problem become someone else's. But the flaw was still there, humming in his bones, and it was impossible to ignore a wound once you'd mapped every inch of it.

Dalossalda gestured at the trapdoor, her face carved out of equal parts worry and absolute faith. "Go," she said. "I'll anchor up here."

Dardrad nodded, mostly because anything else would have meant moving, and right now he couldn't trust his knees to behave. He took the steps down in a slow, careful march, the chill of the stone rising to meet him. The cellar was worse than he'd thought: the racks along the east wall had shimmied half a hand's width out of alignment, and the central column—his pride, the one he'd set himself with a single block of quarried basalt—was rotated so the grain no longer lined up with the floor above.

He crossed the floor, steadying himself with each step. The blue lanterns made everything sharp, the edges of barrels and beams glowing with their own little halos. He knelt beside the column, running a palm along its flank, and felt the flaw like a heartbeat.

Dalossalda's boots thudded softly on the cellar stairs. She came only far enough to see him, then stopped, arms crossed, gaze locked on his hands.

"You're going to have to let it in," she said.

He stared at the flaw. "It doesn't want me," he replied, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "It never did."

"Then make it want you," Dalossalda replied. "You're a Pebble-blade, not a butcher who runs. Stop hiding behind the meat and do what you were born to do."

That stung, mostly because it was true.

He wiped the sweat from his brow, then braced both hands flat on the base of the column. The stone was cold as a corpse, and the first jolt of contact nearly buckled his wrists. He gritted his teeth and pressed, not with muscle but with the slow, patient logic of the old art. He let the world get quiet—let the tick of the brine tank and the faint hum of the lanterns and even the nervous breath of Dalossalda fade away. There was only him, and the flaw, and the memory of what it felt like to set a vault that would last a thousand years.

He pictured the keystone: perfect, unyielding, a wedge of self that would not break even when the world tried to push it out. He let that idea flow down his arms and into the column, his magic responding with a warmth that started at his spine and bled out through his palms.

The stone shifted—not a gentle, gradual move, but a sudden lurch, as if the flaw itself were angry at being touched. The entire cellar echoed with the sound, the barrels rattling so hard Dardrad feared they'd split their bands. The column twisted under his grip, the grain of the basalt grinding against itself, and for a moment he thought he'd only made it worse.

But then: a click, sharp and final, like a puzzle snapping into place. The column settled, the rotation reversing itself in a single, beautiful motion. The floor under Dardrad's knees stopped trembling.

He did not let go right away. He held the column until the magic drained out of it, until he could feel the flaw heal over, the cold seeping out of the stone. Only then did he pull back, hands shaking, fingers blue where the veins ran close to the surface.

He rocked back on his heels and just breathed, letting the air fill the hollow places in his chest.

Above, Dalossalda let out a soft, trembling laugh—the kind you make when you don't know if you're allowed to be happy just yet.

"You did it," she said, coming the rest of the way down to the cellar. She dropped to her knees beside him, inspecting his hands with

a professional eye. "You're bleeding," she said, and it took him a moment to realize she was right—tiny cuts all along his knuckles, each one filled with a shimmering dust that caught the blue light.

He wiped them on his apron, not caring about the stain.

"I haven't—" he started, then stopped, the emotion catching in his throat. "Not since we left."

Dalossalda squeezed his hand, gentle as possible. "You never lost it," she said, "you just forgot how to trust it."

Dardrad looked up at the column, solid and silent once more. "It won't last," he said, voice thick. "The town doesn't want me here. I can feel it."

Dalossalda shook her head. "It needs you. Even if it's too stubborn to say so."

He tried to smile, but it came out crooked.

They sat there, side by side, until the blue haze of the lanterns calmed to their usual glow and the magic in the cellar faded back to a quiet, hopeful buzz.

When Dardrad finally climbed the stairs, the shop above was eerily still. Not a jar or bottle out of place, not a tremor in the air. The crack in the counter had vanished, sealed over as if it had never existed.

He ran his thumb along the wood, feeling for any sign of the damage. Nothing. It was perfect, seamless, and—if you listened very closely—completely silent.

Dalossalda joined him, dusting stone from her palms. She looked at the shop, then at him, and nodded once, a simple gesture that said more than a hundred speeches.

Dardrad took a seat behind the counter, staring at his hands. They were still trembling, but not from fear. It felt more like after a good fight—like every part of him had been used for its proper purpose, and now it was time to let the world decide what to do next.

The door to the shop rattled once in the wind, then held.

He had barely finished wiping the blood from his hands when Cole Coleson stormed through the butcher shop's door, clutching his cap so tightly it looked ready to split in two.

"Dardrad!" he called, breathless and loud enough to rattle the bottles behind the counter.

"Easy, Cole," Dardrad grunted, stilling the swing of a lantern with a thumb and a glare. "It's not even second bell. What's set your boots on fire?"

Cole paused, eyes flicking to the counter, the shelves, the newly healed stone underfoot. He gave a sniff, as though expecting to smell something burning. Instead, he inhaled deeply, steadying himself. "It's Alred," he said. "He's gone strange again."

Dardrad's jaw tightened. "How strange?"

Cole leaned against the counter, shoulders hunching in on themselves. "Saw him with that Mountain Elf, the fancy one. Llewel, you know. They were outside the restaurant for—" He looked at the clock-candle, lips moving as he did the mental math. "Near a candlemark, I'd say. Just standing, talking, like the world outside them wasn't even real."

Dardrad set the cleaver aside, giving Cole his full attention. "And?"

Cole's voice dropped. "I waited across the street, pretending to sweep. Thought maybe it was business. But the whole time, Alred barely moved. He just listened. When they finished, he looked like—" Cole searched for words, "—like someone who'd finally put down a heavy load."

"He say anything to you?"

Cole shook his head, frowning. "Walked right past me, didn't even say 'Morning.' Just a nod, like he was going somewhere far off and couldn't take the rest of us along."

Dardrad considered this. He had seen people lose themselves to bad news before, to grief, to enchantments that ran counter to the blood. Alred had always been the solid sort, the kind you could count on to keep his own balance. This did not sit right.

"He's never been one for dramatics," Dardrad muttered.

Cole's eyes darted to the cellar. "Is he down there? I thought maybe—"

"No," Dardrad said, a bit sharper than he meant to. He felt Dalos-salda's gaze on his back, the silent rebuke for letting the conversation drift to a place it had no business going. "He's not here. Go on."

"That's all," Cole admitted, deflating. "I just thought you should

know. You're better at reading folk than I am. And you..." He trailed off, embarrassed.

Dardrad finished it for him: "And I'm stubborn enough to ask the questions no one else will."

Cole nodded, relief plain on his face.

"I'll check in on him," Dardrad said. "Go home, Cole. Take care of your own."

Cole hesitated, then put a hand on the counter in a gesture as close to thanks as he would ever manage. "You'll let me know?"

"If there's anything to know," Dardrad replied.

Cole left, the bell above the door ringing with a note of anxious expectation.

Dardrad stared at the empty shop. The world seemed to have paused, just for a breath, waiting for him to decide what came next. He caught Dalossalda's silhouette at the edge of his vision, her hands full of ledger books and her face pinched in concentration.

"Should I go?" he asked, not really asking.

Dalossalda didn't look up. "You already know you will," she said, softly. "Just try not to break anything this time."

He grunted, then pulled on his jacket and stepped out into the square. The air had turned brittle and dry, promising a cold snap before the night was out. He made his way across the square, passing the bakery, the dry goods, and finally the low-slung, glass-fronted restaurant that everyone in town called "the Place." The sign above the door was in three different alphabets, none of which Dardrad could read, but he knew the look of a place that cared about appearances.

The windows were spotless—almost unnaturally so. Through them, he could see Llewel Magcaryn standing just inside, polishing the glass from the other side with a square of white linen. The motion was so precise, so methodical, that Dardrad felt a twinge of respect. Only a true craftsman or a genuine lunatic cleaned like that.

He rapped his knuckle against the glass. Llewel didn't react at first, then finished his current stroke before setting down the cloth and opening the door.

"Master Pebbleblade," Llewel said, his voice as smooth and distant as ever. "What a surprise."

Dardrad shrugged. "Word is you had business with Alred this morning."

A flicker, barely more than a tightening around the eyes. "We spoke, yes. I find his insights... valuable."

"Cole says you had his attention for a full candlemark."

Llewel stepped aside, making a gesture for Dardrad to enter. The restaurant was empty, not even the faintest hint of bread or stew lingering in the air. Every surface gleamed. The tables were bare, the chairs upturned and stacked in perfect, mathematical rows.

Dardrad remained just inside the threshold. "You planning an event?"

"Not at all," Llewel replied. "Just preparing for the dinner service." He walked to a table, selected a single chair, and set it upright, as if by doing so he could make the room feel less like a museum. "You're worried about Alred," he said, not a question.

Dardrad considered denying it, but that would be pointless. "He's not himself."

"None of us are," Llewel said, and Dardrad felt the weight of the words. "Not anymore."

Dardrad crossed his arms. "I don't like riddles, elf. I want to know if you're putting something in Alred's head. Or if he's being threatened."

Llewel's face went absolutely still, a mask of polite confusion. "Why would I threaten him?"

"You tell me."

For a long moment, Llewel just watched Dardrad, eyes unblinking and bright as a winter morning. Then, quietly: "Mr. Grasswalker is preparing for a journey. One he's long avoided. It requires certain... final arrangements. I have no role in that, except to ensure he is adequately nourished."

Dardrad grunted. "If he's going somewhere, he should say it himself."

"He will," Llewel said. "He's not the type to leave unfinished ledgers."

Dardrad stared at the elf, weighing the truth in those words. The lines of Llewel's face were too perfect to read, but his hands—long, elegant, surprisingly callused—fidgeted with the cleaning rag, folding it and unfolding it with nervous precision.

"You done with him?" Dardrad asked, blunt.

Llewel allowed himself a small, sad smile. "No one's ever really done with anyone, are they?"

It was too much. Dardrad straightened, ready to leave, when Llewel spoke again:

"If you're worried about him, I'll be serving a meal for Mr. Grass-walker tomorrow. He requested a simple dish—venison, lightly seasoned. Would you supply it?"

Dardrad stopped, caught off guard. "You want common game for a guest of honor?"

"He asked for it specifically," Llewel replied. "Said it was the taste of home."

Dardrad nodded, already calculating the best cuts and whether any needed thawing. "I'll bring it round."

"Thank you," Llewel said, his tone warmer now, almost human. "You should come, too."

Dardrad shook his head. "Not my place."

"I think you'll want to be there," Llewel said.

They stood in silence, the moment hanging between them like a knife balanced on its edge.

Dardrad finally turned to go, but Llewel's voice followed him out the door: "Take care of your own, Pebbleblade."

The cold outside felt sharper than before. Dardrad walked back to the shop, mind racing through possibilities: Alred leaving, Alred in danger, Alred simply giving up. None of them sat right.

He entered the shop to find Dalossalda exactly where he'd left her, ledger open, pencil tapping a slow, thoughtful rhythm.

"He's leaving," Dardrad said flatly.

Dalossalda looked up, not surprised. "Mmm," she murmured. "Maybe we can help him go in peace."

Dardrad didn't answer. He just sat behind the counter, hands

pressed flat to the wood, and tried to imagine a world where things could be put right, even if only for a single night.

Outside, the sky faded from blue to gray, and the next challenge waited, as always, just out of sight.

The hunters arrived in a pack, shouldering through the door with the confidence of men who knew every square inch between their quarry and a warm, dry supper. They brought the wild in with them—mud caked on boots, twigs stuck in hoods, the unmissable tang of sweat and blood and something sharper underneath, like ozone right before a lightning strike. They greeted the shop with a roar: a joke, a curse, someone knocking an elbow against the display case, then all of them crowding around the main counter to unload their haul.

First out of the sack was a mountain cat, laid across both forearms of a heavyset trapper who looked as if he'd just rolled down the slope with it. The cat's fur was perfect, no sign of violence except the tidy slit at the throat, and the eyes were a glassy, unreal yellow that seemed to follow Dardrad as he made his way over.

"Behold!" the trapper boomed, spreading the beast on the block. "Bagged her with one shot. Never saw a hunter coming, not in two seasons."

The other hunters muttered their approval, but Dardrad barely glanced at the man. His hand hovered over the cat's head, just shy of the pelt, and the whisper hit him: *Clean kill, nerves intact. Retains low-light vision. Steeped in marrow, will keep a body warm through two snows.* The shop never lied, not about meat. He pressed down, fingers finding the grain of the muscle, and nodded.

"Full price," he said, pulling a ledger from under the counter. "You bring me the pelt separate, I'll pay you double."

The trapper tried to negotiate, but Dardrad waved him off. "Save your breath for the next run," he said. "I'll have none of it today." There was no offense taken; it was all just bluster, the sort that dissolved as soon as coin hit the palm.

Next up was a brace of fat forest birds, plump and feathered, their

feet still caked in loam. Dardrad ran his thumb along a drumstick. The whisper came softer: *Sinew strong, bones heavy with calcium. Eases ache in knees and hands. Good for those who work the field.* He gave the hunter—a broad-shouldered woman in a patched coat—a sideways look.

“Hard winter ahead?” he asked.

She shrugged, grinning. “Not if you keep buying my birds.”

He marked the order, then noticed her partner shifting behind her, cradling a parcel in both hands. It was a green, bulbous growth, covered in damp moss, with thin rootlets trailing out the bottom like a mess of hair.

“Don’t suppose you know what to do with this, do you?” the man said, pushing it forward as if afraid it might bite. “Found it walking. Not even kidding, it came out of the mud on its own. Nearly tripped me.”

Dardrad took the thing, weighing it. The roots twitched, seeking purchase on the wood. The whisper flared up: *Moving root, hunger-vine. Eaten raw, corrects any lack—iron, salt, vitamins, even the brain-rot if it’s caught in time. In large doses, can make a man see the future, or just kill him outright.* He set it down and looked at the man with a new respect.

“You’ll want to keep the price high on this,” Dardrad said, voice low. “Rare find. Town doc will pay triple, maybe more if you bring it in alive.”

The hunters nodded, grinning like they’d just split the king’s gold. Dardrad wrapped the root in wet paper, slipped it into a cold bin, and made a note to keep it far from the sausages.

There were half a dozen more specimens—a snow rabbit, a river fish the size of a child’s leg, even a pair of spiky rodents caught fighting in a burrow. Dardrad moved through them with quick efficiency, letting the whisper guide his appraisal: *This one for stamina, that one for a clear head, another for hair loss or toothaches.* The shop told him what he needed to know, and he told the hunters only what they needed to hear.

One tried to sneak a poorly field-dressed hare past him, the skin half-torn and entrails left inside. Dardrad’s eyes went narrow. “You think I’m blind?” he barked, slapping the counter hard enough to make the coins jump.

The other hunters cackled, pelting the offender with ribald jokes and a handful of discarded feathers. The man took it in stride, grumbling, but he had the decency to blush and stuff the offending carcass back in his sack.

“Come back when you’ve learned to use a knife,” Dardrad said, the edge in his voice dulled by the twinkle in his eye. “Or better yet, don’t.”

They haggled and bantered and filled the shop with noise, the kind that settled deep in the bones and pushed back the cold. Under the lantern light, the coin changed hands, the meat was weighed and tagged, and even the oddest of the day’s business—the twitching, green root—found its place in the cycle.

By the end, the counter was a battlefield of scraps and ledgers, feathers and spilled salt. Dardrad wiped it down, arms aching but spirit lighter than it had been in days. The hunters left, boots tracking dirt but leaving behind a warmth that even the best furnace could not reproduce.

He sat for a minute, just breathing in the calm, the magic’s whisper fading to a low, satisfied hum. Outside, the world had gone blue with twilight, and for once the night felt like a promise rather than a threat.

There were still worries, yes. Alred was still missing, and the tremor in the stone might return, and the root-feet plant could be a miracle or a disaster. But for now, there was the steady thud of his own heartbeat, the knowledge that the shop would stand for at least one more night, and the certainty that, when the bell rang for the next challenge, he would be ready.

Dardrad Pebbleblade leaned back, rolled his shoulders, and let the last echoes of laughter and haggling settle over him like a well-worn coat.

It would do. For now, it would do.

eight

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BY THE TIME the fourth bell faded off the square, the only souls left in the Weary Head were the innkeeper, her daughter, and two travelers whose names no one in town had yet committed to memory. The windows of every home along the perimeter gleamed with lamplight, but the space between them—the grassy bowl of North Pointe’s square—sat empty, silent except for the wind nudging streamers of bunting that arched from post to post. It was the kind of quiet that made Dardrad Pebbleblade uneasy, even when he was the one responsible for it.

He and Dalossalda arrived early, before the first proper dusk, with a folding grill and a basket of cut wood slung between them. The grill was a marvel of dwarven engineering, a flat disc that packed down to the width of a dinner plate but expanded—once you twisted the central screw—into a full cooking surface ringed with heat stones. It made a sound like popping knuckles as it unlocked, which Dardrad always found comforting. “Set it by the elm,” Dalossalda suggested, already eyeing the ground for a level spot.

“Level’s for engineers,” Dardrad grunted, but he knelt anyway, adjusting the grill until it sat flush with the grass. Dalossalda set to stacking the wood, blue-veined logs from the riverbank, while

Dardrad unwrapped the meat: three fingers of Ridge-boar, each marbled with veins of white, and two thick slabs of Mossbear, pale and dense as cheese.

He laid the cuts out on a board, thumb running over the grain to feel for old wounds or splinters. The boar, he knew, would take flame fast, but the Mossbear needed slow heat or it would go rubbery. It was not the sort of thing he had to think about anymore, but it calmed him to work the pattern through. When he glanced up, Dalossalda had the fire already kindled, her hands cupped around the flare as if coaxing a stubborn child.

She didn't look at him, but he could tell by the set of her jaw that she was running the same math in her head, calculating minutes to perfect sear, when the wood would burn hottest, how long before the first neighbors wandered over. Dardrad liked that about her. He didn't have to explain anything.

By the time the meat was hissing on the grill, the square had changed. The bunting, bright even in the dusk, now snapped with purpose as a slow tide of townsfolk rolled in from the east gate. They came in twos and threes, each bearing something: a folded blanket, a low table, a pot of beans or a dish swaddled in cloth. Most walked with the deliberate, unhurried step of people who had nowhere better to be. Others—mostly children—broke into skips and sprints as soon as they hit the grass, a freedom Dardrad remembered from his own brief, wild days before the family warren.

Makota and her kits were the first to reach the grill. She wore her usual apron, but had swapped the starch-white kitchen uniform for a soft red dress. Kene and Sora, her twins, circled the fire with an excitement that set their tails twitching. "Smells like real food," Makota said, and winked at Dardrad as she set a linen-wrapped basket on the ground. "We brought bread. Hope you left some room."

Kene, the older of the two, sniffed the air and made a show of wrinkling his nose. "That's boar, right? Not cat?"

"If you find a cat big enough to grill," Dardrad replied, "bring me its address."

The kits darted off, the joke lost on them but the prospect of free food clearly not. Makota lingered, arms crossed, her ears canted

forward. "They say you patched the crack in the shop," she said. "Twice as strong now?"

"Until someone drops a mountain on it," Dardrad said, turning a strip of Mossbear with his tongs.

She laughed, the sound sharp and genuine. "Better hope it's not my eldest. He's got a habit of climbing things he shouldn't."

"They all do," Dalossalda said, joining them with a handful of wood for the fire. "It's a wonder any of us survive to adulthood."

Makota's eyes narrowed. "You say that, but you have to admit it keeps the healers in business."

Dardrad grunted, then turned to the basket Makota had brought. Inside were three loaves, still warm from the bakery. He broke one open, letting the steam rise, and the scent of yeast and honey blended with the savory smoke of the grill.

"Smells like a feast," said Cole Coleson, materializing at Dardrad's elbow with a jug of his own. He wore a shirt that had once been white, now streaked with green from the day's work. "Brought some tubers from the garden. Sweet as anything this side of the river."

Dardrad took the offered parcel, weighing it in his hand. "You sure these are for eating?"

Cole grinned, teeth bright. "If they aren't, I'll eat them myself and take the loss."

"Fair," Dardrad said, and set the tubers on the grill, slicing a few to test their texture. The flesh inside was shot through with thin gold, a trait that marked them as Cole's own breed. The man tinkered with vegetables the way Dardrad tinkered with knives.

Dalossalda took charge of the bread, tearing it into hunks and laying them on a clean cloth near the fire. She and Makota began to arrange a spread, and soon it was joined by other hands—Willow and Ivy, Cole's girls, with a salad of pickled roots; Jen, the constable, with a heavy crock of something she claimed was soup but smelled closer to spiced cider.

Through it all, Dardrad kept to his station, turning meat and testing for done-ness by touch, the way he'd been taught. The Ridge-boar crisped at the edges, sending up occasional flares as the fat dripped onto the coals. The Mossbear's surface turned a shade darker,

releasing a briny, almost oceanic scent. When the juices ran clear at the tip of his knife, Dardrad knew it was ready.

He plated the first round, setting thick slices on a communal tray, and watched as the crowd converged. There was no official order to these things—no one called for a blessing, or a speech—but everyone seemed to know who should take first pick and who should wait. It was a choreography as old as any ritual.

Sam arrived late, but with purpose. She wore her hair in a single braid, and her battered coat looked as if it had just come out of a barroom brawl. She balanced a crate of mugs on one arm and a half-keg of ale on the other. “Pub’s slow tonight,” she called, setting her load down beside Dardrad. “Figured I’d better make sure no one goes thirsty.”

“You always know the right time to show up,” Dalossalda said, and Sam replied with a mock bow.

“Only skill I ever mastered,” she said, pouring a mug and handing it to Dalossalda. “That, and never passing up free meat.”

Dardrad handed her a plate, and she took it with a nod of thanks. For a few minutes, the group at the grill settled into a companionable silence, broken only by the crackle of the fire and the soft thud of mugs on wood. Dardrad found himself relaxing, the tension in his shoulders easing as he watched the square fill with people and sound.

Then he saw them: the two strangers from the inn. They hovered at the edge of the crowd, just outside the ring of lantern light, as if weighing whether they’d been invited or merely tolerated. The older of the two wore a jacket too fine for travel, and the younger kept one hand on the strap of his satchel, eyes darting from face to face.

Dardrad nudged Cole. “Guests from the Weary Head,” he murmured.

Cole followed his gaze, then gave a sly grin. “They look hungry.”

“Warren’ll sort them,” Dardrad said. Sure enough, the ogre smith himself was on his way across the grass, his stride as careful as a bridge-builder’s. Warren’s wife Susan followed, their boy Darby in tow. When Warren reached the newcomers, he loomed over them for a beat—long enough for the younger one to blanch—then broke into a grin that could have split a log.

“OGRE NOT EAT STRANGERS,” he bellowed, loud enough to turn every head in the square. “OGRE EAT ONLY WHAT’S ON THE GRILL!” He clapped the younger traveler on the back, nearly toppling him, then motioned them both toward the fire.

The effect was immediate: the strangers relaxed, the locals cheered, and the invisible wall between “us” and “them” melted in the heat of good food and good company.

“Not bad,” Dalossalda murmured, watching as the travelers loaded their plates.

Dardrad shrugged. “Town’s got a habit of swallowing people whole. Might as well enjoy the process.”

Dalossalda laughed, the sound rare and genuine. “That’s the spirit.”

He refilled the grill, this time layering the Ridge-boar with slices of tuber, and found himself humming—an old dwarven tune, half-remembered from childhood. The smoke curled upward in soft ribbons, mixing with the scent of yeast and honey and cider. Around him, the low tables filled, blankets unfurled, and the grass came alive with games and laughter.

Children—Cole’s, Makota’s, even a few Dardrad didn’t recognize—wove between the adults, chasing one another with firefly lanterns strapped to their wrists. The light from the lanterns bounced across the grass, painting the whole square in a shifting patchwork of gold and blue.

At one table, Jen and Sam debated the merits of the various town brews. At another, Makota and Dalossalda argued over whether bread should be dipped in cider or left to stand on its own. Cole circulated, mug in hand, offering unsolicited opinions and accepting compliments as his due.

Dardrad watched it all, the scene blurring a bit at the edges as he let himself breathe for the first time in days. The grill was nearly empty now, the last of the Mossbear crisping at the rim, and he could hear the contentment in the way people talked and laughed. It was a small thing, maybe, but in that moment it felt like the whole world had narrowed to the glow of the fire and the taste of good meat.

He caught Dalossalda's eye. She was watching him, arms crossed, a smudge of flour on her cheek.

"You did well," she said, voice pitched low.

He shrugged, but it meant something.

"Eat," she said, handing him a plate.

He did, and found it tasted even better than it smelled. For a while, he let himself believe that things might stay this good—that the cracks in the stone and the strange whispers and even Alred's haunted face were problems for another day.

Tonight, there was only the fire, the food, and the sound of laughter rolling across the square.

It would do.

When the first round of meat had vanished from the platters and the bread baskets held little more than crusts, Dardrad Pebbleblade did his customary sweep of the gathering. It was the kind of patrol he'd once made for safety—counting heads, checking exits, looking for the telltale posture of an argument about to go sour. Now, the job was mostly ceremonial, but old habits stuck. He made his way from group to group, a plate in one hand and a battered mug in the other, nodding to those who caught his eye.

Cole caught him by the arm near the cider table. "You outdid yourself, dwarf," he said, slapping Dardrad on the shoulder with such force that cider sloshed from his mug. "That's the best Mossbear I've had since the River Fair last year."

Dardrad grunted, not quite sure whether to accept the compliment or redirect it to the grill. "It's the wood. If you don't use the blue, you're wasting your time."

Cole beamed, then leaned in, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial hush. "Did you see Ivy tonight? She made the salad herself—picked half the greens before first bell."

Dardrad followed Cole's line of sight. Ivy, who had always looked too thin and sharp to be one of Cole's, sat with the traveler boys, teaching them the correct way to break open a firefly lantern. She looked happy. Dardrad found himself smiling, despite the undertow of unease that always came with gatherings.

"She's doing well," he said. "You should be proud."

Cole nodded, his grin fading just a bit. "I am, I am. But you know how it is. You watch them grow, and every time they change, it's like they leave you a little further behind."

Dardrad didn't reply. He knew that feeling well enough, even if he had no children of his own. Instead, he lifted his mug in a silent toast, and Cole did the same. They drank, and for a moment the world felt simple.

It didn't last. Warren found him next, approaching with the unmistakable rumble of a man too big for his own boots. The ogre's hands were clean tonight—Susan had made him promise not to blacken them before supper—but he still looked ready to pick up the whole grill and carry it home if given the chance.

"Dardrad!" Warren boomed, clapping him on the back with a weight that made Dardrad's knees flex. "You ever think about doing a full roast? Whole Ridge-boar, tusks and all? I bet you could eat it right off the spit if you keep the fire hot enough."

Dardrad squinted at him. "You want to stand over a fire for three 'marks, be my guest."

Warren grinned, then pointed at the plate in Dardrad's hand. "Let me show you something."

He took the plate—ignoring Dardrad's protest—and pressed a meaty finger into the center of the Mossbear steak. "See that?" Warren said. "Still springy. Means you did it right. But watch—" He flexed his thumb and pressed a second time, then a third, and by some magic the texture changed from soft to firm to perfect, each poke drawing a new line of juice from the meat.

"Smith's trick," Warren said, handing the plate back. "You got to test with the part of your hand that matches the meat. It's all about the grain."

Dardrad rolled his eyes, but inside he was amused. "I'll keep that in mind," he said, and Warren stomped off, already hollering for Darby to fetch him another mug.

Jen was harder to spot, until Dardrad noticed the line of children orbiting her near the edge of the square. She stood with arms folded, her long gray braid swinging as she supervised a game of chase around the bakery's low table. The children—most not even hers—

dashed in wild circles, shrieking whenever they got close to Jen, who would fix them with a stern look until they scattered.

Dardrad approached, careful not to interrupt.

"You keeping the peace?" he asked.

Jen didn't take her eyes off the game. "Someone has to. Otherwise they'll run right through the platters and we'll have stew for dessert."

Dardrad chuckled. "I hear you handled the last rowdy traveler without even drawing your blade."

Jen's lips twitched, almost a smile. "If you don't count the threat, maybe. But that's the job. People listen better when they think you've got a reason to be mean."

Dardrad nodded, watching as one of Cole's boys tripped and tumbled, then bounced up as if nothing had happened. "Town feels safe tonight," he said.

Jen's eyes narrowed, scanning the square. "Safer than last moon. Fewer strangers, less tension. Only thing I don't like is how quiet it is after the bells."

Dardrad nodded, understanding. He turned to go, but Jen caught his sleeve. "You keeping an eye on Alred?" she asked, voice lower now.

Dardrad hesitated, then said, "I try. He's... off, lately."

Jen grunted, releasing him. "Let me know if it gets worse."

He promised he would, then moved on.

Sam caught him at the drink table, refilling mugs with a speed that bordered on theatrical. "You look like you could use something stronger," she said, shoving a fresh mug into his hand. "On the house. Or the square, I guess."

Dardrad accepted, sipping the dark ale. It was rich and heavy, with a faint sweetness that lingered on the tongue. "You ever get tired of this?" he asked.

Sam laughed, tilting her head back. "Not a chance. I spent too many years on the road, eating dried beans and fighting off headaches with gutter wine. Nights like this? I wish they never ended."

Dardrad looked around. The square had settled into a hum of contentment, the earlier frenzy replaced by the softer sounds of conversation and laughter. For the first time, he noticed how the light

from the lanterns flickered against the stone walls of the shops, casting warm halos that seemed to keep the dark at bay.

"It's not bad," he admitted.

Sam leaned in, her voice dropping. "You're worried. I can see it."

He tried to deny it, but she shook her head. "You don't smile with your eyes, Dardrad. You're the only one here who remembers what real trouble feels like."

He stared into his mug, then said, "I can't stop waiting for the next crack in the stone. Even if it's fixed, I know it's still there."

Sam nodded, her gaze steady. "Maybe that's what keeps us safe."

He didn't reply, but the words stuck with him as he wandered back toward the grill.

The two travelers from the inn had found their place among the townsfolk, seated now between Ivy and Sora. They were mid-conversation, one gesturing animatedly with a fork, the other listening with a kind of cautious awe. Dardrad paused, listening.

"...not that we're scared, you understand," the younger traveler said, "but the tremors—never felt anything like it, even in the far north. We thought the whole town was about to split open."

Warren, who had returned for seconds, overheard and joined in, voice booming. "North Pointe's foundations go deeper than any of you can dig! Every beam, every block, it's all set by dwarven hands and ogre muscle. You could drop a mountain on this town and it would just shake the dust off."

Cole, who had also gravitated over, added, "And nothing we've built here ever gives way. Been standing longer than any of us have been alive."

The travelers exchanged a look, then laughed, the tension broken. "That's good to know," said the older one. "I'm not much for sleeping with a pickaxe under my pillow."

Dardrad's hands curled tighter around the handle of the tongs. He felt the old worry creeping up again, the same fear that had stalked him ever since that first day in the warren—the sense that he was a flaw in the stone, a patch over a crack that would someday give way.

He forced a smile, then excused himself. "I should check the grill. Don't want anything to burn."

As he stepped away, he paused for just a second, pressing his heel into the turf and feeling the ground for any tremor, any shiver of warning. There was nothing—just the cool, steady pulse of earth beneath his feet.

He wondered if anyone else could feel it. Or if, like always, the burden of worry would be his alone.

At the grill, Dalossalda waited, arms crossed, watching him with eyes that missed nothing.

“Trouble?” she asked.

Dardrad shook his head, but the lie tasted bitter.

He loaded another round of meat onto the grill, watching as the fat sizzled and the smoke curled up, lost in the night sky.

Around him, the picnic rolled on: laughter, the clink of mugs, the chase of children through the lantern-lit grass. But Dardrad Pebbleblade felt the weight of the stone and the memory of cracks that never really healed, and wondered how long the good nights would last.

He lingered by the grill after the last round of food had gone out, rearranging the coals with a long-handled poker and watching the red glow flare and fade. Dalossalda was there too, setting the cleanest plates in a tidy stack, her movements crisp and exact. For a while, neither spoke. They just worked, content to let the sounds of the gathering drift over them like a blanket.

When the grill’s heat fell to a whisper, Dardrad lowered his voice. “Maybe we should close off the lowest level,” he said. “Just for a while. Until the ground settles.”

Dalossalda didn’t look up. “You mean the old cellar?”

“And the third passage,” Dardrad said, poking at a stubborn chunk of charcoal. “It’s too long. More ways for a problem to spread.”

She finished arranging the plates, then wiped her hands on a rag. “You sound like a nervous apprentice.”

Dardrad grunted, setting the poker down. “I feel like one.”

Dalossalda stepped closer, her expression softening a little. “You’re a master architect, Dardrad. There’s no flaw in the warren you can’t fix. Even if you think you made one.”

He stared at the coals, jaw tight. “Censure was right. I never should’ve touched that spiral.”

She reached out, pressing a steady hand to his arm. "Censure was a farce. If anything, they should've thanked you for showing the old city's weakness before it killed someone."

He snorted, unconvinced.

Dalossalda squeezed his arm, voice low but fierce. "You're not a patch, Dardrad. You're the reason half these people still have a home. Stop treating yourself like a flaw in the stone."

He opened his mouth, but she cut him off with a look. "You'll go down tomorrow and check the lines. If anything feels wrong, we'll fill it in. Together. But you're not leaving North Pointe. Not now, not ever."

The finality in her tone left no room for debate. Dardrad gave a short nod, pulling at the strings of his apron until they lay flat. It was the third time he'd retied it in the past bell. He noticed the habit, but couldn't help himself.

He let out a long breath, then risked a glance back at the square. The crowd had thinned, but small clusters still lingered near the food tables and the bakery's steps. Most looked content, basking in the afterglow of too much food and drink. But one group stood apart: near the shadow of the east wall, Alred Grasswalker conversed in low tones with Llewel Magcaryn.

Dardrad watched them, his unease sharpening. The two were an odd pair—Alred, hunched and inward, hands stuffed in his pockets; Llewel, tall and upright, moon-colored hair catching every lantern flicker. From this distance, Dardrad couldn't hear the words, but the cadence was wrong. Alred spoke in short, mechanical bursts, and Llewel's usual reserve was gone, replaced by a nervous, insistent motion of the hands.

"Alred's not well," Dardrad said, not sure if he was asking or stating.

Dalossalda followed his gaze. "He's been on edge since the last tremor."

"He's more than on edge," Dardrad said. "Look at his face. It's like he's not even here."

They watched as Ivy Coleson approached the two, calling Alred's name with a cheerful wave. Alred barely turned, gave a quick, hollow

smile, then returned to staring at his shoes. Llewel said something, gestured toward the inn, and Alred nodded without conviction.

Dardrad felt his own shoulders tense. "He's going to leave."

"Then," she said softly, "we help him prepare. Or we help him stay."

They returned to the remains of the picnic. Dardrad stacked the last of the used plates, working slowly, his mind still on Alred and the crack in the stone he could never quite forget.

As the night deepened, the townsfolk peeled away in groups, carrying the sleepy children and leftover dishes home. The air grew colder, and the lanterns seemed to glow even brighter against the dark. Dardrad found himself at the edge of the square, staring at the emptying grass and the cold outline of the inn beyond.

He let his gaze linger on the silhouette of Alred and Llewel, now just two shadows moving toward the gate. The sense of foreboding settled deeper, the weight of old failure and new worry merging until it was all he could feel.

He stood like that a long time, hands curled around the rim of a chipped plate, until Dalossalda found him.

"Come home," she said, gently but firmly.

He went, but he couldn't stop the fear from trailing after him, as real and present as the smell of charred wood and the memory of cracks that ran beneath every foundation he'd ever touched.

The square, now silent, held on to the echo of laughter and the shimmer of lantern light. But beneath it all, Dardrad Pebbleblade heard the quiet warning of stone, and wondered if anyone else would ever listen.

nine

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IF YOU ASKED the travelers what they remembered of Pebbleblade's shop, they would say the smell—always the smell. Most butchers reeked of blood, smoke, rot, but Dardrad's carried a perfume of iron, wild honey, and the crisp, almost-electric tang of the mountain air after a rain. No matter the season, the place was kept a few degrees colder than outside. The fog from your breath would curl against the glass cases and linger for a moment before the shop's deeper chill devoured it.

Today, though, it was heat that ruled. Dardrad had thrown open both shutters and the front door, letting in a trickle of sunlight and a parade of errand runners, guide-hunters, and strangers who'd lost their names somewhere between the city and the wilds. The square outside was a blur of boots, voices, and the low, steady toll of the town's bell marking a late start to the morning.

Inside, the world was method: Dardrad's thick fingers folded a length of sausage into a twist, knuckles guiding the casing so neat it could have passed for a machine's work. He set the finished coil in a bin, then with the same hand reached for a slab of goat-rib already drying on the hooks above. The knife flashed, and a hunk the size of a baby's arm came off clean, ready for the salt.

Behind the counter, three travelers huddled around a table, eyes wide as their noses. One of them—a woman with cheeks as red as butcher’s wax—lifted her head and called, “Do you have anything that won’t spoil by tomorrow, Master Pebbleblade?”

Dardrad grunted, scanning the shelves. “How far are you going?”

The woman traded looks with her companions—one tall, one nearly child-sized, both furred like badgers. “Fifth rest, if we can make the pass.”

He nodded, then reached for a jar on the back wall, its glass cloudy from years of use. Inside were dense, dark squares of meat, each sealed in a triple layer of wax and parchment.

“Try this,” he said, setting it on the counter. “Ridge-boar, cured before last frost. It’ll outlast you if you don’t eat it first.”

The woman smiled, took the jar, and handed over a pouch of coins without counting. The exchange was silent and familiar, the kind that happened a hundred times a day but never lost its ritual. Dardrad found comfort in it. The mountain did not always offer such predictable patterns.

He wrapped the rest of the orders, paper crackling and folding with a precision only dwarves or magicians could match. The regulars would drift in soon—locals in need of marrow bones or the town’s peculiar breakfast sausage, spiced with a secret Dardrad would take to his grave. For now, though, it was the travelers, and the way they watched him work as if waiting for a trick or a confession.

The shop itself was unchanged since the day he’d moved in. The floor, dusted with saw and bone meal, never stayed swept for long. The display case stretched the length of the main room, its thick glass etched with patterns of antler and leaf. On cold mornings like this one, frost formed on the inside, creeping in from the corners in crystalline veins that made the meat look even more inviting. Hooks lined the far wall, each occupied by a different kind of knife—some long and thin as a memory, others broad and mean, their handles worn smooth by generations of use.

Above it all, the ceiling beams were strung with strips of drying meat, every one tagged in Dardrad’s careful script. The air up there was warmer, so the flavors changed as the strips aged, picking up

sweetness or smoke depending on the weather outside. Even with the door open, the scents mingled, forming a cloud that drifted through the square and drew in anyone hungry or homesick for the taste of what lay beyond the mountains.

Today, though, the shop's whisper was louder than the clamor outside. It called to him with a need that pressed behind his eyes, making each customer's request feel like a stone in his boot.

You're behind, the voice seemed to say. *You're late*.

He tried to ignore it, but each order brought the urgency sharper. There was a tension in the knives—a sense that the metal itself was waiting, not for the next cut, but for the right one.

It wasn't until the last of the travelers departed, arms loaded and faces flushed, that Dardrad allowed himself to listen.

The whisper became a shape, a pressure: *Glimmer-Goat Flank, aged precisely two moons, for a night hunter with the shakes*. Nothing else would do.

He checked the case. There was no Glimmer-Goat in the bins, no fresh side on the hooks, not even a scrap in the curing room. He grunted, annoyed with himself, then scrawled a note on the order pad and slid it beneath the salt box where Dalossalda would find it.

He could feel the shop's judgment—disappointed, but patient. There was still time.

Dardrad swept the counter, set the knives in their order, and hung the towel on its peg. Then he bolted the front door, turned the sign to Closed, and stood for a moment in the stillness. He pressed his palm flat on the countertop, letting the faint hum of the magic seep up through his bones.

The flaw was there, just below the surface: thin, tight, and angry. But it held. For now.

He exhaled, then made his way to the rear, past the cold bins and the casks of brine, to the cellar door. The steps down were worn from generations, each tread dipped in the middle where the stone had yielded to the weight of the world. At the bottom, Dardrad lit a stub of candle and followed the passage to the transit chamber.

The chamber was a marvel of old craft: a perfect circle, the floor polished so smooth it reflected the candlelight in dizzying spirals. The

walls were lined with a mosaic of split quartz and basalt, each piece cut to a tolerance so fine that even water would not find a seam between them. At the center, the floor dipped, forming a shallow basin no wider than Dardrad's arm span.

He knelt at the edge, apron folded under one knee, and set the candle at his side. The flame cast shadows that danced along the walls, turning the quartz veins into flickers of blue and white. Dardrad ran his hands over the stone, feeling for the pulse of the earth beneath.

It was slow today, almost reluctant. He pressed harder, willing the memory of the day's work into his fingertips, letting the warmth of muscle and marrow melt into the chill of the floor. For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, slowly, the stone softened. The edges of the basin blurred, the surface going slick and glassy as the earth decided whether to permit his passage.

Dardrad exhaled, closed his eyes, and let the weight of himself settle. The trick, always, was to think of the rock as water—not a barrier, but a sea with a thousand currents, each one just waiting for the right touch to unlock. The first time he'd tried it, as a boy, he'd fought the stone and nearly suffocated. Dallossalda had laughed at him, then shown him how to let the world do the work.

Today, though, the world was not eager to help.

He pressed both palms to the floor, splaying his fingers until he could feel the seams of the quartz. The sensation was always strange: not cold, not quite pressure, but a sense of being both contained and welcomed by the rock itself. He imagined the way the tunnels ran below the town, weaving through the bones of the mountain, and let his mind follow the old paths down and out.

The stone responded, at first just a whisper, then with a shiver that ran up both arms and down his spine. His knees tingled, and he felt the floor yield by the smallest fraction. Dardrad concentrated, pushing his senses outward, trying to map the journey before it began.

Something was wrong.

The way was not smooth. The passage ahead was mottled, patched with zones of tension and resistance—like a vein shot through with old scars. He had felt it before, when the tremor ran

through the shop, but not like this. This was organized, almost deliberate.

He gritted his teeth and leaned into the sensation. The stone began to pull, drawing his arms forward and his torso down, compressing his ribs in a slow, cool embrace. He flexed his feet, then his calves, letting the magic pass through him as it always had. But instead of slipping into the rock with ease, he found himself fighting—pushing against a current that grew thicker the deeper he went.

It felt like swimming in honey, the world going thick and bright at the edges. The air in his lungs became a memory, and for a moment, he wondered if he would surface again.

Then the stone shifted, opening just enough to let him drop through. He went, not with relief, but with a sense of violation—like a guest unwelcome in his own home.

As he sank, Dardrad let his earth-sense expand, hunting for the flaw that had troubled him all morning. It was there, running parallel to his route, a hairline crack so thin it barely existed, but perfectly straight, as if scribed by a craftsman's chisel. It didn't pulse with the magic of the place. Instead, it felt cold—absent, almost hungry.

He followed it, running his mind along its length, searching for an end or a cause. The line snaked down through the under-layers, cutting across old quarry veins and the roots of the town itself. In places, it widened just enough for Dardrad to sense the faintest drift of air, the way a wound breathes after a fresh cut.

He traced it with a growing sense of dread. If the crack reached the foundation, the shop above could go at any time—not in a collapse, but in a slow, inexorable rot that would eat away at the walls, the shelves, the memory of every sausage and jar ever packed away.

The flaw did not end. It ran deeper than the transit chamber, deeper than even the memory of the clan that built it.

Dardrad shivered, feeling the stone's resistance against his skin as he passed. It clung to him, pulling at his beard and the folds of his shirt, as if trying to drag him back to the surface. The compression grew tighter, until he could barely flex his fingers.

Still, he pressed on, following the line until it vanished into the roots of the world.

He wondered, for the first time in a long time, if he would ever return.

He did not know how long he traveled. The stone's embrace made time meaningless—only the slow pulse of his own heart counted, and even that grew dim after a while.

When at last he broke through to the far side, he did so not with relief, but with a bone-deep ache that lingered in his joints and the back of his eyes.

He opened them, blinking away the darkness, and found himself in the echo chamber at the edge of the Old City.

The floor here was dust, packed by centuries of footsteps. The ceiling arched high above, lined with glimmering quartz and streaks of black stone. The scent of the air was different—drier, less sweet, as if the world above had never learned the taste of rain.

Dardrad knelt for a moment, letting his body adjust. The flaw was gone, or at least invisible here, but the memory of it lingered in his bones.

He stood, dusted his hands, and checked his satchel. The old lantern was still there, along with the tools he would need to finish the job. He exhaled, then turned toward the passage that would take him to the surface.

Behind him, the stone shivered—just once, just enough to remind him that the flaw was not finished with him yet.

He would have to hurry.

But for now, there was work to do. He squared his shoulders, set his feet, and marched forward into the belly of the world.

The wind on the plateau had a voice, and this morning it was not kind. It shrieked over the rim of the world, yanking at Dardrad's beard and finding every gap in his coat. He crouched just inside the mouth of the

tunnel, blinking away grit and the last flecks of dust from his passage, trying to let his eyes adjust.

He was higher than expected—so high the sunrise hit before it reached the valleys below. The air was thin, sharp, and blue enough to ache. When Dardrad stepped out, boots grinding through frost-bleached gravel, the world dropped away on three sides.

It was a long time since he'd stood on the bones of the Old City. Even at this distance, the scars were unmistakable. The vault that had once crowned the dwarven stronghold was gone, its capstone blown outward and scattered, the supporting columns snapped like twigs. Ruins spilled down the mountainside: broken domes, shattered arcades, the distinctive angular archways that marked his people's pride in stubborn geometry. Here and there, stonework persisted in forms nature would never have chosen—octagonal wells choked with snow, staircases leading to nothing but sky, fragments of wall still standing, even as the mountain worked to reclaim them.

Time had softened the outlines but not the shame. Dardrad felt it in his bones as soon as he looked down: the memory of the breach, the echo of voices raised in alarm, the slow, awful realization that the structure had failed not from war or neglect, but from a flaw in the foundation—a flaw that wore his own name.

The air caught in his throat, and he hunched his shoulders, wishing for an extra layer or the chance to turn back. He could imagine the wind's voice as the voice of the old council: a harsh, dry rasp that never forgot, never forgave.

He remembered every detail. The moment the lintel above the vault split—not all at once, but with a drawn-out, almost musical groan. The silence afterward, as the gathered clan stared up, waiting for the next sound. The splintering, then the thunder, as the keystone slid and the arch fell in slow, perfect horror.

He remembered the elders, faces gone gray. He remembered the ledger, the red mark by his name, the ceremonial hammer taken from his hands by an aunt whose disappointment stung more than any blow. Most of all, he remembered the walk out—past the stunned apprentices, past Dalossalda, whose hand reached for his and then fell, uncertain, to her side.

He'd never been back. He would not be here now if the job hadn't demanded it.

He closed his eyes and tried to steady his breathing. The air didn't help; it seemed thinner every time he tried.

You don't have to go down there, he told himself. You could turn back. You could find a different path, a safer cut, and tell the customer the truth: there's no Glimmer-Goat in the bins, not for any price.

But he saw the order slip, saw Dalossalda's handwriting in the margin—You're the only one who knows how to find it—and he knew there was no escape.

He looked again at the city below, the way the light of the new day painted the ruins in gold and purple. Here and there, tufts of alpine grass found a foothold in the cracks. New growth had started to soften the wounds, green and stubborn against the dead stone.

For the first time in many moons, Dardrad wondered if that could be him.

He squared his shoulders, then started down, moving slow and careful along the old switchbacks. With every step, he felt the wind at his back, whispering censure, but also—fainter—a kind of hope.

Dalossalda believed he could do it. For her, and for the city that had once been his world, he would try.

The route down from the plateau was a trial, even for legs made for mountain work. Dardrad kept his pace steady, knees bent and soles flat, every step calculated to avoid a tumble. The grass grew thick here, a cold-season breed that rasped against his shins and left a bitter sap on his hands when he braced himself. The sun crept higher, painting the slopes in alternating ribbons of gold and shadow, and with every turn, the ruins behind him seemed smaller, less significant. The feeling in his chest was not relief—never that—but something closer to a stubborn peace. There would always be scars; at least here, they blended into the living world.

It took the better part of a bell to reach the line where grass gave way to slate and rubble. Here, in the shelter of a spur, stood a cluster of human cottages, all built from the castoff bones of the city above. The walls were rough-hewn, stones stacked and mortared with a recklessness that would have made any dwarf weep, but they held fast

against the wind, and the slate roofs caught the light in a way that made the whole village shimmer at a distance.

A set of pens circled the far side, their fences reinforced with chunks of old column and the odd arch fragment. Inside, sheep jostled for space with a flock of goats so peculiar they stopped Dardrad in his tracks: their coats, though thick and shaggy, were laced through with strands of silver, and their horns curled in odd, asymmetrical spirals, as if no two animals had agreed on how to grow up.

He watched for a moment, waiting for the shepherd. He didn't have to wait long.

A figure emerged from between two stone sheds, stooped at first, then rising to a height nearly equal to Dardrad's own. The man's face was a patchwork of tan and old scars, eyes bright and quick beneath a battered hat. He wore a shirt that might once have been red, now faded to the color of brick dust, and his boots looked to have been stitched and restitched until only the shape remained from the original hide.

"Back again, stone-brother?" called the shepherd, voice booming in the thin air. "It's not even a full moon since you cleaned us out last."

Dardrad grinned, shaking his head. "You know what they say. The best customers are the worst for your stock."

The shepherd barked a laugh, then started toward the pens, boots kicking up frost with each step. "Well, you've come just in time. The old nanny dropped twins, both more trouble than they're worth. Take your pick, I'll see them dressed and packed."

Dardrad followed, eyes still on the goats. Up close, the silver in their fur glimmered not just in the sun but in the shadow, a faint, cold radiance that made them look like they belonged to a different world. The creatures themselves were restless, stamping and butting at each other, eyes too bright and almost calculating.

The shepherd reached into the pen, grabbed one by the collar, and lifted it bodily over the fence. The animal squalled, legs flailing, but settled at once when pressed against the shepherd's chest.

"Look at him," the man said, holding the goat up for inspection. "Not a full sennight old, but already planning his escape."

Dardrad ran a practiced hand down the creature's spine, feeling for flaws or thinness. "You ever see one without the shimmer?"

"Once," said the shepherd, lowering his voice. "Didn't last the season. The silver keeps them sharp. Too sharp, sometimes."

Dardrad nodded. "I'll take this one, if you've got the time."

"Always for you, stone-brother." The shepherd set the goat on a makeshift table, then drew a blade from his belt. The knife was dwarven make, thin as a willow leaf and wickedly sharp; Dardrad recognized it as one of his own, traded moons ago for a round of cheese and a promise of discretion.

The slaughter was quick. The shepherd worked without flourish, hands steady, blade moving in precise, economical arcs. Blood pooled in a shallow trench below, channeled away from the animal's body so the meat would stay clean. As he worked, the man kept up a steady stream of chatter, half gossip, half news:

"You hear about the old trader up at Crossroads? Lost his leg to a gully rat. Wife's running the store now, and she's got the patience of a snapped cable."

"Crows have started nesting higher than usual. Can't tell if it's a bad omen or just a cold spring."

"Had a pack of city folks come through last sennight, all dressed in silk and looking for the ruins. I told them it was haunted. They paid double to camp on the edge of the field, then ran off before dawn."

Dardrad listened, mostly grunting in response, but filed every detail away. The mountains didn't change much, but the people did, and it always paid to know who had wandered in or out since his last trip.

When the goat was dressed, the shepherd rinsed the carcass with a scoop of clean snow, then wrapped it in a double layer of waxed hide. He tied the bundle with a twist of vine, knotted off so tight it would take a knife to open.

"Anything else?" the shepherd asked, wiping his hands on his coat.

Dardrad considered, then shook his head. "Just the flank. There's a hunter needs it back at the Point. And the usual coin for your trouble."

The shepherd's eyes glittered, but he didn't haggle. Dardrad pulled

a folded pouch from inside his shirt, counted out the silver and copper, and placed it in the shepherd's palm. The man weighed it, then pocketed the coins and clapped Dardrad on the back.

"Tell Dalossalda I said hello. And if you ever get tired of meat work, there's a spot here for a man who can tell a goat from a sheep."

"I'll keep that in mind," Dardrad said.

He hoisted the bundle to his shoulder, feeling the weight of it settle against his collarbone. The chill of the waxed skin seeped through his coat, but the burden was nothing compared to the tension he'd carried all morning.

The way back was shorter, somehow. The sun had crested the highest peaks, and the wind—though still harsh—had lost its cruel edge. Dardrad moved quickly, boots finding the old switchbacks by memory. At the entrance to the tunnel, he paused, listening for any sign of pursuit or trouble. There was nothing. Just the cold, the rock, and the steady rhythm of his own heart.

He set the bundle at his feet and knelt beside it, steadying his hands on the ground. This time, when he pressed his palms to the stone, the passage opened with less resistance—a grudging respect, perhaps, or the stone's own relief at seeing him leave.

He let himself sink, the cold growing softer, the world dimming around the edges. The pressure was still there, but it no longer threatened to break him. Instead, it was like a hand at his back, guiding him down and through.

He surfaced in the transit chamber, lungs burning, head ringing with the memory of sunlight and wind. For a long minute, he just knelt, letting the sweat cool on his forehead.

The bundle of meat was intact, not a single leak or blemish. Dardrad checked it, found the seal perfect, and set it on the counter with a thud.

The job was done. For now.

He wiped his hands, then stood, bracing himself for the return to the shop above. It was easier, somehow, knowing that the flaw in the stone—though still there—was not enough to stop him.

He would deliver the order. And if the mountain had more to say, he was ready to listen.

The surface world slept, but under the square, Dardrad Pebbleblade moved as if haunted.

He'd expected the day's labor and the cold-walk back to wear him out, but sleep did not come, even as Dalossalda's breathing went slow and even beside him. The warren was darker than the shop above, but not silent: every seam, every capstone, every polished shelf of basalt had a voice, and tonight the voices would not let him rest.

He slipped from the bed without a sound. The floors—polished obsidian, veined with a line of blue-white quartz—made no complaint under his weight. He paused at the threshold, letting his eyes adjust, then took up a small lamp from the wall. The flame inside was nothing but a thumb-sized twist of burning crystal, but it filled the halls with a pale, unwavering light.

He walked, slow and barefoot, letting the cold of the stone bite through him. The first room was the gallery: a corridor long enough to hold three wagons end to end, its ceiling lost in shadow. Dardrad let his palm slide along the wall as he passed, reading the grain of the rock the way a farmer might read the sky.

The wall vibrated. Not a tremor, not a flaw, but a faint, nervous shudder—like a harp string plucked too soft for human ears. Dardrad pressed harder, and the pulse quickened. He pictured the tunnel above, the new cracks he'd found, the way they radiated out and then curved, always, always back toward the center. Toward him.

He moved on.

The second chamber was his favorite: a workshop hollowed out of living granite, the walls carved with reliefs of mountain scenes—herds of goats, rivers plunging into mist, even the likeness of the Old City, rendered with an accuracy that made his chest tight. The workbench was a single slab of saltstone, sanded until it shone. Above, the ceiling arched, supported by ribs of iron-streaked feldspar, each joint locked in place by the oldest trick in the mason's book.

Dardrad ran his hand over the workbench. The stone there was still, at first. Then, as if embarrassed to be caught, it twitched. A

microfracture, invisible to any eye but his. He tapped it with a knuckle, felt the dullness behind the ring.

He grunted, then walked to the far wall and touched the base of the nearest column. This time the echo was slower, but present. The flaw had found its way even here, to the most sacred of his places.

He left the lamp on the bench and entered the third chamber.

It was the warren's grandest room, reserved for guests they never had. The ceiling soared, a cathedral of fire quartz, and the floor was tiled with hexagons so perfectly joined that Dardrad once spent a full candlemark counting them. Along the walls, benches and chairs cut from single blocks of rock, set with cushions of dried moss and goatskin. In the center, a low table gleamed with inlaid pyrite, catching and splitting the crystal lamp's light into a hundred shifting patterns.

Here, the stone felt different. It was not fear, not exactly—more like anticipation. Dardrad circled the table, running a finger along the join where two tiles met. The seam vibrated, then stilled, as if waiting for a verdict.

He sat.

The seat was cold, but he did not care. He pressed his palms to his knees, closed his eyes, and listened. This time, he let the stone's voices in.

The flaw was everywhere now, a web of lines running just beneath the surface. Some were old, filled and healed long ago; others were new, raw and restless, feeding off the tension he'd carried back from the Old City. The more he searched for them, the more they multiplied, curling around each other in patterns as complex and familiar as the memories he'd tried so hard to bury.

He remembered the collapse: not just the noise or the dust, but the silence that followed—the way every dwarf in the city had turned, for a moment, and looked to him for an explanation he could not give.

He remembered exile, the first night alone in a new tunnel, counting the stones as if the sum could change his fate. He remembered the relief when Dalossalda found him, arms crossed, jaw set, but with a look in her eyes that said: You are not lost. Not if I can help it.

He remembered building this warren, every block set by hand,

every seam checked and rechecked until even the memory of failure could not find purchase.

But it had.

He opened his eyes. The room was unchanged, but the web of flaws was thicker, brighter. They traced the air like spider silk, converging on the bench where he sat. It would be easy, he thought, to give in—to let the flaw spread, to become nothing more than a cautionary tale for the next generation.

But that was not what Dalossalda had taught him.

He stood, steadier now, and walked to the wall. He pressed his hand flat against it and willed the flaw to show itself. The pulse came, sharp and clear, and this time Dardrad did not flinch. He nodded, as if to say: I see you. I hear you. I will not turn away.

He traced the line, mapped its path, and imagined how to set it right—not with force, but with patience. With the same care he gave to a side of goat, to a jar of brine, to the perfect cut that turned meat into memory.

He walked the warren again, this time with purpose, touching each flaw and making note. Some would take days to fix. Others might never heal, but he would at least know their name and location.

When he finally returned to the sleeping chamber, the lamp was nearly spent. Dalossalda stirred as he slid in beside her, but only enough to press her back closer against his chest.

He watched the lamp burn down to a coal, the last light flickering over the lines of his hands. They were not the hands of a hero, nor a builder without flaw. But they were his.

He breathed deep, felt the pulse of the stone, and let the hope of repair settle over him like a blanket.

Above, the world was still. Below, the flaws waited. But for the first time in many moons, Dardrad Pebbleblade was not afraid to face them.

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DAWN CREPT in slow and colorless, as if the sky itself were unsure whether to bother with another day. The first rays found Dardrad Pebbleblade already at work, though “work” this morning mostly meant moving his body from place to place while his thoughts fought to stay upright. He’d slept, technically—he had the fogged mind and crackling joints to prove it—but the rest was as thin and unsatisfying as the crust on a day-old loaf.

He lifted the shop’s front shutter with more force than necessary. The hinges shrieked, and so did his left shoulder. He swore at both and let the spring catch hold before he ducked back inside. The air of the shop was as always: two degrees colder than the street, dense with brine, sawdust, and the rich, slightly metallic perfume of well-aged blood. Some days it soothed him, the way the cold pressed in and set boundaries against the softer world outside. Today, it just made his knees ache.

His hands moved by memory, unwrapping knives, laying them on their oiled cloth, checking each edge against a scrap of kid leather. He arranged the display case, filling the gaps with careful piles of sausage and cutting the fat from a slab of Ridge-boar until the marbling looked just so. It was the kind of labor that should have calmed him, brought

his mind in line with the rhythm of muscle and bone, but every motion felt just slightly off. Even the knives—his pride, each one kept sharper than a boast—felt heavy, as if the world were lending extra gravity just to spite him.

He was still fighting with a stubborn bit of sinew when the bell above the door gave its warning ring. He turned, expecting one of the regulars, and nearly missed the bundle of warmth and motion that was Makota.

She came in headfirst, as usual, a cascade of pale fur and trailing skirts, her arms full of a steaming tray balanced on her hip. The moment she crossed the threshold, the scent of honey and hot flour broke through the cold and lanced straight to the base of Dardrad's skull.

He grunted, half in greeting, half in gratitude.

Makota grinned, ears flicking with satisfaction. "Thought you could use something with sugar in it," she said, setting the tray down on the counter. "You look like you've been wrestling with the bedrock again." Her voice was light, but the concern in her eyes was not.

He eyed the pastries—rock-pastries, they called them, a joke that never got old and never changed. They were thick, round things, baked until the outside went glassy and the inside stayed molten, each one filled with enough honey to gum up a full set of teeth. They were his favorite, and Makota knew it. He tried to summon a smile, but the best he managed was a twitch of the mustache.

"Didn't figure you for an early riser," he said, tearing off the corner of a pastry and burning his fingers on the steam.

Makota's tail whipped, a sure sign she was about to say something clever. "I'm not. But the twins are. They started a flour fight at third bell. If I don't keep them busy, they'll turn the whole bakery upside down by lunch." She tilted her head, eyes narrowing. "You sleep at all?"

Dardrad shrugged, mouth already half full. "Enough."

Makota watched him chew, then produced a second tray from behind her back, this one smaller and arranged for display. "One for the shelf?" she asked. "Payment for last night's grill."

He gestured at the empty spot in the case, and she slotted the

pastries in with the care of someone handling priceless relics. They looked out of place among the slabs of meat and jars of pickled organs, but the color and scent gave the whole display a little more life.

Makota lingered, folding her hands over the counter. "The picnic was good," she said, voice softer now. "You could tell the town needed it."

He grunted agreement. "Folk like free food."

"Folk like seeing each other," Makota corrected, then dropped her voice to a near-whisper. "Dalossalda said you haven't been yourself."

Dardrad wiped his hands on a towel, trying not to meet her gaze. "She says a lot."

Makota nodded, undeterred. "If you ever want to talk—about the crack, or about Alred, or about the dreams you keep pretending not to have—you know where to find me."

He hesitated, a thousand possible responses bottling up behind his teeth. In the end, he chose the safest. "Thanks for the pastries."

Makota's smile came back, just for a second. "Take care of yourself, Dardrad." She left the same way she'd come: quick, efficient, and with a last flick of the tail.

The cold returned to the shop, a little softer for the honey still clinging to the roof of his mouth.

He'd barely refilled the brine bin when the next customers arrived. The first wave was always travelers—strangers from the east road, boots still muddy and eyes half-shut from the night's walk. They lined up at the counter, three deep and growing, each clutching an order or a list, each radiating the kind of need only hunger could generate.

Dardrad took them in, noting the details without thinking: the cut of a coat here, the calluses on a hand there, the way one woman flinched from the cold more than her companions. He listened for the shop's whisper—the gentle nudge that always told him what each customer needed, even if they didn't know it themselves.

Today, though, the magic was quiet, almost reluctant. The guidance came in fits and starts, as if the shop were fighting through the same fog that muffled his own head. Still, it was enough.

He moved down the line, serving each in turn:

To the trio of surveyors bound for the northern ridge, he offered

long strips of smoked venison, perfect for eating on the march. They took them gratefully, one of them offering an extra coin for the “secret seasoning.” Dardrad didn’t bother to explain that the secret was salt and just enough juniper to sting the nose.

To the scholar with the worn leather satchel, he packed a pouch of dried mutton and a slab of fatback. The scholar protested at first, claiming she didn’t need so much, but Dardrad recognized the look of someone who would forget to eat for days if left to her own devices. He slipped in a small jar of pickled eggs, just in case.

To the merchant and his two guards, he sold half the shelf’s worth of hard sausage and three loaves of Makota’s bread. The guards eyed the pastries with suspicion, but the merchant scooped up two and bit into them without a word.

Each transaction was brief, a pattern Dardrad found comfort in. He wrapped, weighed, tied, and set coin in the box, all with the economy of a craftsman who never wasted a motion. Still, every now and then, his hands trembled—not enough for the customers to notice, but enough that he had to pause and steady himself before reaching for the next order.

The line thinned, then thickened again as the locals began to drift in. Cole came by with a bundle of carrots to trade, followed by Jen, who needed two pounds of sausage for the constable’s midday stew. Makota’s twins appeared, faces dusted with flour and eyes alight with mischief, hoping for a sample of the day’s special. Dardrad tossed them each a pastry and watched as they darted away, already plotting the next adventure.

Through it all, the shop’s whisper persisted, faint but stubborn. It told him which cut to offer the old woman with the trembling hands (*Goat liver, thin-sliced, easy to chew*), and which jar to recommend to the boy nursing a fresh black eye (*Pickled onions, strong enough to make you forget the pain*). It was less certain than usual, as if the magic behind the whisper was tired, or wary.

He didn’t blame it.

By the time the sun cleared the roof of the bakery, the rush had slowed. Dardrad leaned against the counter, wiping the last flecks of brine from his hands. He looked around the shop, checking for any

sign of another tremor—any hairline crack, any bottle out of place. There was nothing, not even a hint of movement in the air.

He let out a long breath, then closed his eyes and listened.

The shop was quiet, but not silent. The magic was there, somewhere beneath the fatigue and worry, a promise that as long as he kept the doors open and the knives sharp, the foundation would hold. For now, that was enough.

He opened his eyes to find Dalossalda standing in the doorway, hands on her hips, watching him with a mix of amusement and something like pride.

“You going to stand there all morning?” she asked.

He grunted, then straightened his apron. “Only until the world stops spinning.”

She laughed, the sound warm and unhurried. “Come downstairs when you’re ready,” she said. “There’s something you need to see.”

He watched her go, feeling the world settle a little more with each step. Then he took another pastry from the case, bit into the sweetness, and let the morning slip away, one small comfort at a time.



Dardrad finished the day’s cleaning in a state of autopilot. He swabbed the counter, wiped down the blades, and set the towel just so on its hook before pausing to study his own hands. They were red and lined, calluses crisscrossing the knuckles, blue veins visible under the skin. He flexed them once, as if expecting something to break.

Dalossalda was waiting. He could feel her presence under the shop, a kind of silent pull that tugged at the soles of his feet and the pit of his stomach. He stood for a full minute, debating the merits of going down or just walking out the front door and not stopping until he hit the river. But the cold logic of the warren always won in the end.

He unlocked the trapdoor and took the stairs down, boots echoing in the narrow chute. The air below was a different kind of cold—denser, sharper, with the faintest tang of iron and a whisper of something sweet, almost floral. He breathed it in, and for a moment, the ache in his joints faded.

The steps opened into the first hall, a vaulted tunnel lined with slabs of obsidian veined in quartz. The floor had been polished until it reflected the ceiling's faint light in smudged, swirling patterns. Dardrad moved through it quickly, counting the steps as he went. The ritual calmed him.

The second chamber was brighter, thanks to the clusters of crystal lanterns that Dalossalda had set in geometrically perfect intervals along the walls. The lanterns glowed with a steady, golden light, their shapes all perfect octagons, the kind of precision that made dwarven architects weep with envy or frustration. The walls here were carved with reliefs—mountain ranges, rivers, animals in migration—and the artistry was so fine that the trout seemed to shimmer and the elk seemed ready to step off the wall and wander into the next room.

He followed the gentle slope to the heart of the warren, a central space wide enough to hold a dozen people, though it rarely needed to. The ceiling soared above him in a self-supporting arch, its weight held by a network of flying ribs and tension bands so delicately placed that even Dardrad, who'd seen the inside of a hundred stone vaults, felt humbled.

Dalossalda was hunched over a stone table at the far side, her thick braid unbound and trailing across one shoulder. The lamp at her elbow cast a pool of warmth over her work, and her hands moved with the certainty of someone who'd never doubted a single measurement in her life. Chalk dusted her fingers and smudged the sleeve of her shirt.

She didn't turn when he entered, but said, "Come look," in a tone that brooked no argument.

He crossed the room, his boots surprisingly silent on the mosaic floor. As he drew closer, he saw that the "table" was in fact a slab of basalt propped on two makeshift trestles, and on it was a slate nearly as wide as the table itself. The diagram sketched there was unlike anything Dardrad had seen.

It was a geometric blueprint, every line drawn with a precision that made his teeth itch. At the top, in block letters and in the old tongue, was written: "DWARVEN KEYSTOCK." The rest of the slate was filled with annotated diagrams—hexagonal prisms interlocked in a complex

web, each segment labeled with runes and numbers. Some lines were drawn over in red, others in blue, as if Dalossalda had been testing permutations late into the night.

He stared, not trusting his voice. Dalossalda finished a calculation with her ruler, made a mark, and finally looked up at him.

"See the flaw?" she asked.

He looked harder, trying to spot the telltale signs: a line out of parallel, a curve where none should be, an overlap in the bands. He found nothing.

"No," he admitted.

"Exactly." Dalossalda set down the ruler and tapped the center of the diagram with one broad finger. "It's perfect. I checked it twenty times. Ran the sequence all the way through to the foundation—there isn't a single misalignment, not even at the boundary. This will hold."

Dardrad grunted, but it came out more like a groan. "You want to set that under the town?"

"Not want. Need." Her eyes were clear and unyielding. "You felt the tremor. And you know as well as I do: the last one wasn't an accident. The flaw in the old city was deliberate. This one is the opposite."

He tried to look away, but she caught his wrist and made him look again. "You see it, right? If we can get the keystone set, if we can get it to resonate with the foundation, it'll stabilize the whole point. Maybe the whole valley."

He ran a hand over the edge of the slate, feeling the faint grooves where the stylus had bit deep. "Even if it works," he said, voice thick, "I don't think the rock will take me back. Not after the last time."

Dalossalda's fingers tightened on his wrist. "You are the only one who can do this," she said, low and fierce. "That's not flattery. It's what the foundation wants. It never asked for the others—it always wanted you."

He shook his head, searching for some flaw in her logic, some reason to walk away. "If I mess up again—"

"You won't." She picked up the ruler, checked a measurement, and made another mark, as if that settled the argument. "You learned from the last time. You learned from the exile. We both did. You know where to look for the cracks now."

Dardrad stared at the diagram. The precision was intimidating. There was no forgiveness in the lines, no margin for error. The smallest deviation would mean the whole structure would fail, just as the old vault had failed, just as he had failed.

He flexed his hands, feeling the ghost of the old injury in the left thumb. It throbbed, as if the bone itself remembered what it was like to shatter.

Dalossalda finished the last mark, then set the chalk aside. "I spent a full moon working out the pattern," she said, softer now. "I went through every archive I could find. I even wrote to your aunt—she sent back six pages of corrections." She smiled at the memory, but it was a hard smile, the kind that came only after a long, slow defeat. "There is no other way."

He studied the center of the blueprint, where all the forces converged. It was a single hexagonal plug, a keystone meant to absorb and redirect any tension in the vault. The annotations around it were in Dalossalda's hand, but the concept was pure old-world thinking: make one thing perfect, and the rest would fall into line.

He swallowed. "It'll take more than just setting it," he said. "I'll have to go all the way in. Let the foundation close behind me."

She nodded, not looking away. "I know."

He tried to make a joke, but the words caught in his throat. Instead, he traced a finger along the outer ring of the diagram, following the path as it looped back on itself, over and over, each time getting closer to the center.

Dalossalda saw the motion and set her hand on his. "If anyone can do it, it's you," she said. "And if you don't—" She let the sentence dangle. They both knew the answer.

He remembered the crack in the shop, the way it had run straight and deep, as if searching for the flaw in himself. He remembered the vision of the old city, the moment the vault gave way, the silent accusation in every face. He remembered the exile, the feeling of never belonging.

He closed his eyes, then opened them again, sharper this time.

"You'll set the guide marks?" he asked.

Dalossalda nodded. "I'll map every line. I'll be with you the whole way."

He grunted, this time with a little more strength. "Then let's get started."

She grinned, not with joy but with the relief of a problem finally moving toward solution. She swept the chalk from the table, then started rolling up the blueprint, careful not to smudge the markings.

They worked in silence, preparing the tools and laying out the path. Dalossalda set out the survey sticks, each tipped with a sliver of silver to catch the light. Dardrad checked the calibration on the old compass, making sure it spun true. They packed torches, rations, a flask of something stronger for the return.

When everything was ready, Dalossalda folded the blueprint and tucked it under her arm. She looked at Dardrad, waiting for him to say something, anything.

He cleared his throat. "You still want to live above ground when this is over?"

She rolled her eyes, but her voice was warm. "Only if you promise not to bring work home every night."

He snorted, then turned toward the far wall, where the entrance to the root tunnel waited. The air there was colder, and the draft coming up from below felt like the breath of a sleeping giant.

He set his hand on the wall, felt the pulse in the stone.

This time, it felt almost welcoming.

Dalossalda fell in beside him, and together they started down the tunnel, each step echoing a little less as they went.

At the bottom, the world waited—flawed, unfinished, but still willing to be made whole.

eleven

. . .

DARDRAD PEBBLEBLADE PRIDED himself on two things: the sharpness of his knives and the orderliness of his mornings. This dawn, neither was fully under his control. The butcher shop pulsed with bodies and noise, every footfall on the pine floorboards sending a fresh draft of sawdust into the air. The big front window glowed with the bleary gold of the first bell, and the row of cleavers behind the counter caught every ray, each blade showing off its mirror finish.

The customers were travelers, mostly: the sort who carried trail-dust in their seams and the memory of better bread in their eyes. They queued up in rows that bent and bled into one another, some clutching written orders from a camp cook or a fussy trail boss, others just standing silent, nostrils flared, letting the scent of smoke-cured shank and pickled brisket decide for them.

Dardrad worked the counter like an orchestra conductor, hands moving so fast his beard sometimes caught the wind of them. He wore his apron as a badge—a deep blue thing, oilcloth and canvas, lined with pockets for his favorite implements. His beard, never less than immaculate, was a single black-gold braid that reached his sternum and stayed there, even when the morning’s rush threatened to overwhelm every other system in the shop.

The butcher block was a fortress, and he ruled it with a casual efficiency that might have seemed effortless to someone who'd never tried to fill two dozen orders at once. He could quarter a fowl and wrap it in paper in under ten breaths; he could identify every customer by the second word out of their mouth.

The only thing he could not control was the whisper.

It had been with him for as long as he'd owned the shop. Sometimes it was a literal whisper, as though the bones in the ceiling and the hooks on the wall had opinions about the work. Most days, it was just a sense—a gentle nudge, a feeling that this slab of rib should go to that customer, or that a certain jar of marrow would suit the woman with the pinched smile and the blue gloves. Today, it was louder than usual, surfacing for every customer, insistent as a fly at a feast.

He tried to ignore it. He failed.

To the three cavers with matching lantern scars on their faces, he offered a cold rack of Ridge-boar, the fat trimmed close and the bones scored deep. The whisper told him these men needed more than just calories—they needed something to keep the nightmares away. He cut the rack with a flick of his wrist, papered it, and sent them off with a muttered, "For the shadows, eat with salt."

Next in line, a family of four—two grown, two kits—each with the long, hungry look of river guides in lean season. He sold them a whole trout, deboned and stuffed with sprigs of river sage and a half-fist of black mushrooms. The smallest of the kits caught Dardrad's eye as he weighed the fish, and the whisper nudged him again: *offer the marrow pudding.*

He did. The child grinned, showing a mouthful of growing teeth. Dardrad let the satisfaction last for a second before moving on.

The morning blurred into a haze of orders, each one a small problem to be solved, each one softened by the gentle friction of community. Locals slipped in and out between the travelers: an old woman with a cane who demanded only soup bones, a baker's boy who needed "just the rind, nothing with lean," a pair of fire-watchers who purchased three feet of sausage and then stood at the end of the counter, eating it raw, one slice at a time.

When the candle on the far wall had burned to its first notch, the hunters arrived.

They came as a group, bristling with gear and self-importance. Five men, two women, all in leathers patched with fur and brass. Each carried a parcel, some wrapped in green canvas, others simply slung over a shoulder. They laid their kills on the counter with a thunk and a flourish, as if daring Dardrad to find fault.

He did, but only to himself.

The first parcel was a brace of forest birds, skinned and trussed, still flecked with blood. The second was a length of hindquarter from a mountain deer, the flesh dark and rippled with vein. The third—presented with an extra dose of pride—was a river otter, gutted but not yet skinned, its wet fur slick with the stink of marsh.

Dardrad eyed the pile, letting the whisper do its work. It came through clear as a bell: *One of these is tainted.*

He set the birds aside, noting the neatness of the plucking. “Clean work,” he said to the woman who’d handed them over. She nodded, face unreadable.

The deer went next. He peeled back the canvas, sniffed the joint, and nodded again. “Shot clean. Through the heart?”

The man smiled, showing a pair of teeth too white to be natural. “You know it, Master Pebbleblade.”

The otter was last. Dardrad lifted it by the tail, letting the body dangle. The whisper surged, a warning—sickness, wrongness, something off in the way the muscles hung loose from the bone.

He laid it down. “This one’s no good,” he said, voice flat.

The hunter who’d brought it—a young man with a beard that hadn’t yet learned discipline—bristled. “It’s fresh. Shot it myself, less than two bells ago.”

Dardrad shook his head. “It’s sick. You see the color in the eyes?” He pointed. “That’s fever. It’ll spoil the whole lot.”

The young man leaned in, crowding the counter. “You calling me a liar, dwarf?”

Dardrad matched his gaze, unimpressed. “I’m calling you an amateur. If you knew how to field dress, maybe you’d have caught it before you dragged it into my shop.”

There was a beat of silence, the kind that usually ended with someone throwing a punch.

Instead, the woman with the birds cleared her throat. "Put it outside, Paul. We're here for trade, not a scene."

Paul grumbled, but he scooped up the otter and stalked out, his boots stomping the boards hard enough to make the cleaver rack rattle. Dardrad watched him go, then turned back to the others. "What'll you have for the rest?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

They haggled, of course. Hunters always did. But Dardrad stood firm, and in the end, they took half a round of jerky, two jars of pickled root, and a length of boar sausage in exchange for the birds and the deer. The woman counted the coins twice before handing them over.

"Don't mind Paul," she said as she pocketed the change. "He gets touchy when he thinks he's been shown up."

"He should get used to it, then," Dardrad replied, and the woman laughed, low and genuine.

When the hunters left, the shop felt a shade quieter. The last of the morning's crowd trickled out soon after, leaving Dardrad alone with the meat and the whisper and the tick of the clock-candle as it melted down toward midday.

He wiped his hands on the apron, then swept the counter with a few quick strokes. The whisper was softer now, more a comfort than an annoyance. He set the birds aside for plucking, trimmed the deer, and hung it in the cold box with a sense of satisfaction that would last exactly as long as the next rush.

He was about to step into the back room when the front door swung open without ceremony.

Jen Darne, the constable, filled the doorway as if she'd been waiting outside for half the morning. She wore the town's blue-and-grey, sleeves rolled up, the corded muscles in her forearms visible even in the soft morning light. Her hair was pulled into a single tail, streaked with grey, and her eyes were the color of wet iron.

She said nothing at first, just let the door close behind her and took stock of the shop. Her gaze missed nothing. Dardrad watched as her eyes flicked to the hooks overhead, the freshly-swept floor, the still-

quivering feather on the edge of the counter. She took it all in, then stepped forward, boots making less noise than they should have.

"Busy morning?" she said.

He grunted, setting the knife down. "Busier before the hunters started fighting."

She nodded, lips pursed. On her right wrist, a wide band of metal caught the light—heavy, dull grey, a piece of jewelry that looked out of place on someone who hated ornament. Dardrad knew what it was, though; everyone in town did. Hellsting, the constable's sword, dormant and wound into a cuff until needed.

Jen rested her arm on the counter, the bracelet front and center. "I heard raised voices," she said, "but nothing broke."

"Not for lack of trying," Dardrad replied. He went back to cleaning the knife, but kept one eye on her.

She let the silence draw out, then leaned in a hair closer. "You feel that tremor last night?"

He grunted. He'd lurched out of bed at the first small rumble, fell to the rock floor, and tried to stop it. "Felt it. Fixed the worst of it in the cellar. There's still a hairline in the foundation." *Multiple hairlines*, a voice in his head—his own, this time, and not the shop's—muttered.

"Anyone else mention it?"

Dardrad shook his head. "If they did, they kept it to themselves." A small lie: his wife had noticed it, of course, although she'd caught herself before suggesting they being working on the keystone right then and there.

Jen nodded again, the way someone does when adding a new piece to a puzzle. She tapped her finger on the metal cuff, a quiet rhythm. "It's happening more. Not just here."

He looked up, met her eyes. "Then you'll have your hands full soon enough." *If the entire town caves in*, the sullen voice in his mind added.

She smiled, thin and humorless. "Just as long as nobody panics."

Dardrad doubted anyone would, at least not before lunch.

She straightened, then glanced toward the door. "You mind if I check the back?"

He shrugged. "Nothing to hide." *Except everything.*

She moved past him, careful to avoid brushing the apron or the counter. He watched her go, then picked up the knife and resumed his work, cleaning the blade with slow, deliberate strokes.

The shop stayed quiet, and for a time, Dardrad let the rhythm settle him. Then, just as he was folding the cloth back into its pouch, the whisper surged.

Warning.

The first sign was a shudder in the floor—small, but enough to make the jars on the shelf tremble. Then, in quick succession, the hooks overhead began to sway. Dardrad grabbed the edge of the counter to steady himself. He heard the familiar shriek of the front window as the frame twisted, then the louder, more alarming sound of bottles smashing in the back.

He swore, then turned just in time to see Jen burst back into the main room, her left hand on the counter, her right already unwinding the bracelet from her wrist.

The tremor lasted just long enough to upend a row of spice jars, then faded as quickly as it had begun.

Dardrad steadied the display, righted the jars, and waited for his heartbeat to catch up with the world.

Jen gave a low whistle, examining the metal band in her hand. "That was a good one," she said, flexing her fingers. "Did you feel the direction?"

Dardrad shook his head, more rattled than he wanted to admit. "Not exactly. Down, maybe. Or sideways." *Or all of them.*

Jen wound the bracelet back onto her wrist, the metal slithering into place with a series of soft clicks. "I'll check with Makota. If it's the bakery, too, we'll know it's spreading."

He grunted. "Good luck with her. She's been up since third bell—she'll have opinions."

Jen actually smiled at that, a real smile this time. "So do you," she said, and then she was gone, the door closing behind her as quietly as it had opened.

The shop was still again. The only sound was the soft, persistent whisper, telling Dardrad that everything would hold, at least for now.

He wished he could believe it.

The day never really settled, not even by the time the sun had drifted to the far side of the square. Dardrad sat at his own counter, the shop for once emptied of customers, and stared through the haze of dust motes that danced above the display case. Across from him, Cole perched on a stool with all the comfort of a man who had never known real discomfort. They were midway through a tray of Makota's rock-pastries—the ones with honey pockets that burst, molten, at the slightest provocation.

The only sound was the lazy thump of Cole's boot against the case and the faint, wet hum of a fly navigating the labyrinth of jars and bottles above.

The afternoon light was thick, nearly syrupy, slanting through the butcher shop's single window and settling in the streaks on the glass. It made the meats in the display shine like museum pieces. If Dardrad squinted, he could almost pretend the last sennight hadn't happened, that things were as they'd always been: a friend across the counter, the end of a long day, the promise of a sweet snack and a cold drink to follow.

But the meat said otherwise.

He nudged the tray of pastries toward Cole, then used the edge of his thumbnail to point out a cut on the display's top shelf—a knuckle-thick slab of Ridge-boar, perfectly marbled, perfectly red, not a hint of crust or oxidation to be found.

"That," Dardrad said, "has been in the case for a fortnight."

Cole blinked, then grinned. "Still looks like it just walked in yesterday."

"That's the problem." Dardrad leaned in, lowering his voice as if the shop itself might take offense. "It's not just this cut. None of it is turning. Not the sausage, not the salt pork, not even the offal. You could let the best part of a moon pass and it wouldn't rot."

"Isn't it always like that?"

Dardrad ground his thick molars. "Yes. But this is... different."

"How so?"

"It just is. Usually the meat... *settles*. Then it stays. This could have come in this morning."

Cole considered, then tapped his fingers on the glass. "Same at my

place. Carrots, turnips, even greens. Used to have to check the bins every night or they'd sprout on me. Never rot, but you know. Now I leave them and it's like time stops. Or... goes backwards." He shrugged, picking another pastry. "Not complaining, mind you. But it's strange."

Dardrad wiped his hands on a rag, then folded his arms over the counter. "It's not just food. Alred's been selling lengths of rope that don't fray, candles that never gutter. I heard a merchant in the square say the shirt she bought from him never creased, even after four days of hard road. That isn't his shop's gift."

Cole laughed, and for a moment the air seemed lighter. "You ever think we're just getting better at what we do? Maybe the town wants us to win for once."

Dardrad's lips twitched, but he did not smile. "Or maybe the town is scared," he said. "Maybe it's trying to fix something that broke."

The words hung in the air, heavier than he intended.

Before Cole could answer, the front bell tinkled—a sharp, delicate sound that never failed to draw attention. Leota Harbinger entered, all in black as always, her hair loose today and framing her face in a way that made her look even paler. She stepped inside, closing the door behind her with a care that bordered on reverence.

"Gentlemen," she said, inclining her head. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

Cole straightened on his stool, brushing crumbs from his shirt. "Not at all. There's still pastry if you're quick."

Leota smiled, the barest ghost of it. She crossed to the counter, pausing to examine the case. Her fingers hovered above the glass but never touched. Dardrad watched as she scanned the meats, the sausages, the jars of blood pudding, then finally settled on the tray of pastries.

She picked one up, broke it in half, and let the honey thread between her fingers before popping a piece into her mouth. For a long moment, she just chewed, eyes closed.

When she swallowed, she looked at Dardrad. "The preservation is not natural. Not to this degree."

He grunted. "Figured as much. Is it you, or the town?"

Leota licked a spot of honey from her thumb, then set the pastry down. "A little of both, but mostly the latter. I can feel the edges of the pattern—every shop, every home, even the grass in the square. The town's magic is... overcorrecting."

Cole leaned in. "Like how?"

Leota gestured to the display case. "It isn't just that food won't spoil. Tools won't rust, nothing breaks or fades. Makota's bread won't go stale. My own spells—" she paused, then tapped her chest, "—work twice as well as before. But only if I use them to reinforce what's already here. Anything that tries to change the pattern, or push the magic outside the boundaries, meets resistance. Or fails."

Dardrad frowned. "So what broke it?"

Leota shook her head. "I don't know. But it's not just a crack in the stone. It's in the whole fabric of the place."

Cole whistled, low and slow. "You ever seen something like this before?"

Leota's eyes grew distant. "Only once, in a city that's gone now. When too many things change at once, the magic tries to freeze the world. Like a pond over ice. It holds until the weight is too much, and then—" She made a sharp, snapping gesture.

Dardrad looked down at his hands, flexed them, then let them curl into fists. He didn't like the way that sounded.

The bell chimed again.

Alred stood on the threshold, the light from outside framing him in silver. He looked... different. Not just tired, but empty—like someone had scooped out all the worry and left only the husk behind.

He entered with a slow, measured step, closed the door, and walked to the counter. He wore his best shirt and had even bothered to comb his hair, but his eyes were glassy, the edges raw and pink.

"Afternoon," he said, and his voice was too bright.

The three at the counter said nothing.

Alred reached into his pocket, withdrew a folded slip of paper, and set it on the glass. "Makota sent me to pick up the lamb she ordered. And the marrow pudding, if there's any left."

Dardrad nodded, hands moving before he knew what to do. He

wrapped the lamb, added a pot of the pudding, and set them on the counter. The whisper in his head was silent, for once.

Alred glanced at the bundle, then looked up at Leota. "I'm not afraid, you know."

Leota didn't flinch. "I know."

Cole shifted, unease bleeding into his voice. "You all right, Alred? You look—"

"Like a ghost?" Alred finished for him, smiling. "That's all right. I feel better than I have in a moon." He set both hands on the counter, steady as stone. "I just wanted to say thank you. To all of you."

Dardrad swallowed, throat dry. "Don't talk like you're leaving."

Alred's smile was gentle, almost pitying. "I have to. I was invited to dinner at the restaurant tonight. Llewel said it was important. That it would be the meal that ends this life and begins the next."

Silence. Even the fly on the jars seemed to pause.

Alred gathered up the lamb and the pudding, tucked the bundle into the crook of his arm, and nodded to each of them in turn. "Makota will be over later, I think. There's something she wants to show you. You too, Leota."

He turned, but then hesitated, glancing over his shoulder. "I left most of my inventory with Cole," he said. "The smaller stuff. In case anyone needs it."

No one spoke as he walked out. The bell chimed once, and then he was gone.

The three of them stared at the door. The room felt colder, or maybe just emptier.

Cole was the first to find words. "He said 'ends this life.' Does he mean—?"

Dardrad didn't answer. He watched the dust motes above the case, the slow and perfect way they refused to settle.

Leota exhaled, long and tired. "The pattern is collapsing," she said. "The magic doesn't want anyone to leave, but if it can't hold them, it makes their leaving easy."

Cole blinked, trying to keep up. "You think Llewel—?"

Leota shook her head. "I don't know. But Alred was ready. He chose it."

They sat like that for a while, the sun now a thin line across the counter, the pastries growing cool. Finally, Dardrad got up, crossed to the window, and watched as Alred made his way across the square, steps so light it was as if he'd left the weight of the world behind.

He turned, saw the way Leota and Cole watched him, and felt, for the first time in a long time, the urge to speak. But he did not know what to say.

So he just stood there, hands resting on the counter.

twelve

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NIGHT CAME to the warren slow and absolute, the deeper levels far removed from any breeze or errant beam of moonlight. Down here, the air was heavy, layered in a stillness older than most names in North Pointe. Dardrad moved through it by instinct, boots making a soft shush-shush over the glass-smooth obsidian tiles. The lamps Dalossalda had set were all crystal—his own hand had carved the brackets, but she had set the crystals, arranging them so their pale blue light bathed the corridor as if the warren were cut from some great slab of arctic ice.

He liked to make these rounds when sleep would not stick, or when the shop's whisper grew too loud and insistent to ignore. Tonight, both were true. He walked without haste, hand trailing the wall, feeling the grain of the stone and the faintest tremor that hinted at flaw or change. It was a skill older than his apprenticeship, as much sense-memory as gift.

The first turn brought him to the long hall, where the veins in the wall ran diagonal, almost playful, a feature Dardrad had permitted at Dalossalda's request. Here, the light made the quartz veins ripple, and his shadow doubled and redoubled, like he was being followed by a

jury of past selves. He stopped, pressed his palm to the seam where wall met floor, and waited.

A pulse. Barely there, but real—a microfracture in the quartz, nothing that would bring down the roof, but enough to annoy anyone who prided themselves on tight joints and better luck. Dardrad grunted and kept moving.

In the workshop, he paused longer. The room was immaculate, every tool in its cradle, every surface free of dust. Dalossalda's rule, though she herself had the creative chaos of a collapsing mine shaft. He ran a thumb along the edge of the saltstone bench. The flaw from yesterday remained, but it had not grown. He tapped it—soft, then harder—until the vibration settled into his bones.

"Hold steady," he whispered, not sure if he meant the stone or himself.

The third chamber was Dalossalda's, more than his. Here, the walls were covered in her charts and patterns, the floors lined with tiny markers set to catch the faintest shift. He didn't enter, just stood at the threshold, counting the lights, noting which ones had dimmed and which still glowed fierce.

The stone here was anxious—he could feel it—but not hostile. It wanted him to do something, to patch or set or anchor. He wished it could just say so in words.

He wandered the warren for a while, tracing the same loops until he lost count. Each pass, he found something new to dislike: a line that drifted out of true, a set of steps that squeaked (they should never squeak, not in obsidian), a bracket that seemed a finger-width off, though he knew the measurements by heart. He even began to spot issues in Dalossalda's own design choices—places where the lines curved when they could have been straight, or where a vault rested on decorative ribs instead of a load-bearing arch.

It made his skin prickle. He clenched and unclenched his fists, each time imagining how the correction would feel under his hands.

"Blasted fool," he muttered at last, stopping in the main gallery to glare at the octagonal ceiling. "You've been at this long enough."

He stood there, jaw tight, for a count of thirty. The cold worked its way through his sleeves, bringing clarity if not comfort. At the far

end of the gallery, the little door to their sleeping chamber stood cracked open, blue light from the corridor seeping in around the edges.

He considered waking Dalossalda—just to talk, or maybe to drag her out and make her feel the subtle shift in the far wall. She'd be angry, but she'd listen. The thought was tempting. He started down the hall, steps nearly silent, and paused at the door.

Inside, she was curled in their shared bed, the braid she never bothered to untie at night thrown across the pillow like a lazy snake. Even in sleep, her brow was set in the line of someone running calculations. He watched her for a long moment, his hand pressed to the doorframe to keep from reaching out.

He loved her more than the stone. That was the problem, and the only reason he hadn't started chipping away at the warren until nothing of the original was left. The urge to fix was always there, but sometimes fixing meant ruining something someone else had found beautiful.

He pulled back from the doorway, let the silence gather around him. A memory surfaced: Dalossalda, laughing at him as he fussed over a misaligned tile in their first flat. "It's only home if it's a little crooked," she'd said. "Otherwise, how do you know you built it?"

He smiled, the motion rusty. The blue light flickered on the walls, echoing in the crystals she'd set there, and for a moment, Dardrad saw the warren not as a list of defects, but as a lived-in place, a place with history and argument and repair.

He closed the door softly. The shop above was empty, the bell stilled, but the warren pulsed with the memory of his own stubbornness and Dalossalda's patience. Maybe it was enough, for tonight, to let it be.

He thought about walking the tunnels again, but instead he crossed to the tiny alcove where Dalossalda kept her tea. He poured a measure of cold tea into a mug, drank it, and watched the way the light caught in the liquid, turning it blue at the rim.

For the first time in many nights, he let the tension bleed away. The problems would be there tomorrow, and the day after. For now, he could allow himself the small mercy of rest.

He returned to the gallery and sat, boots planted on the hex tiles, and waited for the stone's whisper to fade.

When it did, it left behind a hollow, hopeful space. Not perfect, but maybe—maybe—enough.

Dardrad could count on one hand the number of times he'd entered the Broken Claw after last bell, and still have fingers left to check the edge on a cleaver. Even in a town that prided itself on late suppers and longer debates, the Claw usually drew its shutters tight once the sky turned indigo and the wind swept in cold from the Mistral. Tonight, though, the door was not only unlocked but cracked open, letting out a spill of warm air and the distant, enticing perfume of ale and firewood.

The door's bell gave a single note as he slipped inside, careful to keep the noise to a minimum. The place was emptier than he'd ever seen it—three tables pushed together at the center, an abandoned tankard at one, a scattering of crumbs at another. The hearth was low but still lively, casting a long ribbon of light across the floorboards and up the legs of every stool.

Behind the bar, Sam polished a line of mugs, each handled with the careful affection reserved for reliable friends and reliable weapons. Her white hair was pulled back in a knot tonight, and the scar running from brow to jaw looked less severe in the soft orange glow. She noticed Dardrad at once, but instead of the usual bear-hug or ribbing, she just smiled—small, real, a little tired.

To her left, half-turned from the bar and cradling a cup in both hands, sat the Enchantress of the Mountain, Elspeth. Dardrad had seen her perhaps a dozen times in the past moon, but never like this: in a plain blue dress, boots kicked off under the bar rail, her eyes shut as she breathed in steam from her mug. It was not what he expected, but the strangeness was comforting.

"Thought you'd be in bed by now," Sam said, finishing her mug with a twist and setting it on the drying rack.

"I tried," Dardrad replied, and realized it was the most honest thing he'd said all day.

"Could say the same for most of the town." Sam wiped her hands on her apron and poured a dark ale, sliding it down the bar with a confidence that suggested she'd done so for every living being in North Pointe. "Dragon's Breath, right?"

Dardrad nodded, then took the mug and raised it to his lips. The first sip was heavy, spiced, and so perfectly bitter that it made him want to weep. He glanced at Elspeth, who still seemed half-asleep, and wondered if she was awake enough to notice.

Sam, sensing the lull, leaned forward, elbows on the counter. "You get that crack sorted?"

Dardrad managed a grunt. "For now. The rock's holding. But it's not... right."

Sam made a show of rolling her eyes. "Stone never is, unless you shape it yourself. Don't let it keep you up. You look like you haven't slept in a moon."

Dardrad shrugged. "Not for lack of trying."

Elspeth set her mug down, eyes opening at last. She fixed Dardrad with a stare that was equal parts grandmother and winter storm. "The tremors reached my place, you know," she said. "You should be proud—few can send a shiver through the whole of North Pointe."

Dardrad flushed, embarrassed. "Didn't mean to."

Elspeth smiled, softening. "No one ever does."

A quiet fell over the bar, filled only by the spit and crackle of the hearth. Dardrad let the silence sit, drinking in slow sips, letting the ale build a wall between his thoughts and the day. After a time, Sam spoke again, her voice gentler.

"You want to talk about it, or just drink until it's tomorrow?"

He weighed the choices, then set his mug down and folded his hands in front of him. "It's the flaw," he said. "The one in the old city. It's back, only this time it's... everywhere. I feel it in the rock, in the shop, even in the tunnels under the town."

Sam's eyebrows went up. "You have tunnels under the shop?"

Dardrad grunted, sheepish. "More like a warren. We built it ourselves, after... everything." He left the rest unsaid, but Sam

nodded anyway, as if she'd guessed the details. "Sleeping above ground doesn't feel right," he mumbled.

Elspeth's gaze sharpened. "It's spreading, then?"

"I think so," Dardrad said. "But it's not just the rock. It's the gifts, too. The shops, the way they work. Everything's getting tighter, sharper. Like the town's holding its breath."

Sam topped off his mug, then poured herself a finger of something clear and mean. "What's it mean for us?"

Dardrad shook his head. "Don't know. Maybe nothing. Maybe... something."

Sam knocked back the liquor in one go, then thumped the glass on the bar. "Nothing in North Pointe breaks easy, least of all you." She gave him a crooked grin, the kind she used to settle bar fights before they even started. "You'll figure it out."

Elspeth chimed in, quieter. "North Pointe gives you all gifts, and it's easy to think of them as magic. But they're not. They're Nimarith's power, which means you've all been touched by the God of the Mistral Mountains. That's a very personal thing."

Dardrad considered this. "Then the flaw...?"

"...is yours to bear," Elspeth finished, not unkindly. "And yours to repair, if you choose."

Sam set a hand on Dardrad's, her grip iron and warm. "We're here if you need help, stone-brother. You know that, right?"

He managed a smile, thin but true. "Thanks. But this is my mess."

Sam nodded, satisfied. "Just don't do anything stupid. And if you're going to tear down the town, let me know first so I can move the beer."

The night blurred a little after that—more drinks, a few jokes, even a round of quiet singing when Sam found her old voice. Elspeth offered small wisdoms, nothing more than hints, but each one found its mark. Dardrad let the warmth sink in, and for the first time in days, he didn't feel entirely alone.

When he finally stood to leave, Sam insisted he take a loaf of bread for Dalossalda. "She'll be up early, and you'll want her in a good mood," she said, stuffing the loaf into a rag and tying it off with a practiced snap.

Dardrad accepted, then hesitated at the door. “Thanks,” he said, not just for the bread. He saw the understanding in Sam’s eyes, and in the soft set of Elspeth’s shoulders.

He stepped out into the blue-black night, the cold bracing but not cruel. Above, the stars pulsed with a clarity only found in places like this—places where the stone ran deep and the sky felt close enough to touch.

Dardrad walked home slow, the bread tucked under his arm, the weight of the flaw lessened, if only by a measure. He knew the problems would wait for him, but for now, he let himself enjoy the quiet. Each step rang true against the frost, and as he neared the shop, he realized he was humming the same old tune Dalossalda always used when laying a tricky line of mortar.

Maybe, just maybe, he thought, it would all hold together for one more day.



Dawn inched its way across the butcher shop, filling the place with a cold, clear light that made every glass surface sparkle and every edge stand sharp. Dardrad rose before the bell, as was habit, and started his morning rituals: apron tied, hair pulled back, knives checked, counters wiped with brisk, even strokes. He moved with a precision that would have made his old master proud, but there was a new tension in his fingers, a slight tremor that grew with every step.

The shop’s whisper, usually no more than a friendly nudge, pounded in his skull like a hammer on an anvil. It was impossible to ignore. The voice was not just insistent—it was demanding, desperate. It wanted Stone-Ram Flank, from the high slopes east of the Mistral, aged a full moon and seasoned with a handful of bitter seeds. For the first time in years, the request came with a memory attached: the way the mountain looked in the sunrise, the wind slicing over the ridges, the sound of his own heart pounding as he watched the capstone crack and fall.

He set the knives in their order, then stood back, waiting for the first customer. He tried to steady his hands by gripping the edge of the

block, but the tremor persisted. He let out a breath, slow and shaky, then forced himself to smile as the door creaked open.

The woman who entered wore her armor like a second skin, the plates dented and scarred but polished to a dull sheen. She stood a head taller than Dardrad, with hair braided close to the scalp and a nose that had clearly been broken and reset more than once. Her eyes were pale as frost, and she scanned the shop with a soldier's quick assessment before stepping up to the counter.

"Master Pebbleblade?" she said.

He nodded, setting both hands flat to hide the tremor. "You need travel rations, or are you here for something special?"

She considered, then said, "Both." Her voice was like gravel under a wagon. "I'm headed to the North Wall. There's a tomb there, old as the first clans. We're to re-seal it, but the last man who tried... didn't come back the same. They say the air makes you forget your own name, if you're not careful."

Dardrad felt the whisper surge, almost a physical shove. "Stone-Ram Flank," he said, before she could finish her order. "Cut thick. Salted, but not cured. It'll keep your body anchored when the mind starts to wander."

The warrior smiled, surprised but not displeased. "I've heard of your talent," she said, "but not that you were a reader of minds."

Dardrad shrugged, uncomfortable. "Just good at what I do."

"You have some?"

He shook his head.

"Can you... obtain it?"

He sighed and nodded. "Come back tomorrow."

"I was planning to—"

"Tomorrow."

She hesitated, then nodded. "Thank you, Master Pebbleblade."

He watched her leave, the bell on the door chiming twice in the sudden quiet. He stood there for a moment, the weight of the memory settling on his shoulders like a yoke.

Below, in the warren, Dalossalda had already started breakfast. She moved like she was part of the stone, every step deliberate, every

motion designed for efficiency. When Dardrad entered, she was setting out mugs and a pot of black tea, her braid tucked up in a loose knot.

He sat across from her, hands folded. She poured him a mug, then waited.

"It happened again," he said, voice low. "The shop wanted Stone-Ram. From the old mountain."

Dalossalda's brow creased. "The one you swore never to go back to."

He nodded. "That's where the flaw is. I can feel it. It's not just in the stone, or the shop, or even in me. It's in everything."

She sat back, weighing him with her eyes. "Then we fix it," she said.

He looked up, surprised. "You'd come with?"

She laughed, the sound bright and sudden. "You think I'd let you wander off alone, with that much guilt riding you? Not a chance." She poured herself tea, then sipped, eyes steady on his.

He felt the old shame rise, but this time, something else rose with it—pride, maybe, or just the stubbornness that had always seen him through.

"I can't let it beat me again," he said, jaw set. "I need to see the place. Fix what I broke."

Dalossalda reached across the table, took his hand, and squeezed. "Then we go together. And this time, we don't look away."

He smiled, the tension in his shoulders easing. "I'll pack supplies after the morning rush."

She nodded, satisfied, then pushed a basket of bread toward him. "Eat first. You'll need your strength."

He laughed, and for a moment the world felt solid beneath his feet. They sat together, drinking tea, breaking bread, and making plans.

Later, as he set out the day's meats and wrote a note for Cole to mind the shop, Dardrad found his hands steady, his mind clear. The flaw waited, but so did he.

And this time, he would not run.

They left the warren in the brisk half-light of morning, the chill sharp enough to bite at nose and cheek but not enough to keep a determined pair indoors. Dardrad had never liked leaving the shop untended, even for a single bell, but he'd left a note for Cole ("If any trouble, use the big cleaver") and trusted that North Pointe's few malcontents would be too busy with their own work to bother a closed sign.

Dalossalda strode ahead, cloak thrown over one shoulder, the cut of her stride precise as a mason's line. They walked the frost-laced path to Tyran's, where every step snapped and sang under their boots. The outfitter's shop stood at the corner of the square, flanked by a pair of ice-locked barrels and the faint, sweet whiff of lamp oil from the morning's first light.

Inside, it was warmth and order—shelves of gear stacked so neatly they looked like a blueprint drawn by hand. Tyran himself stood at the counter, sorting a pile of catalogues with the distracted focus of someone not quite awake yet. He looked up as they entered, his smile quick and practiced.

"Master Pebbleblade! Missus!" he called, voice booming enough to wake the dead, though the shop was empty but for them. "You need spikes, or just warming up?"

Dalossalda was already scanning the walls, eyes sharp. "Both," she said. "We're going to the old city. Need something for ice, something for rope, and something to break through stubborn stone."

Tyran's face changed, just for a second—the easy smile slipping, the blue of his eyes narrowing. "Dangerous trip," he said, more quietly.

Dardrad shrugged. "Just a job."

"Best jobs are the dangerous ones," Tyran said, then gestured to the wall. "Take anything you like. This mark—" he pointed to a set of iron spikes with blue paint at the heads, "—is new. Made for the frost. Won't snap in a freeze, no matter how long you set it."

Dalossalda took three, testing the weight and flex, then handed them to Dardrad without a word. She moved on, pulling down a coil of rope that looked, at first glance, too thin to support a child, let alone two dwarves and their gear.

Tyran saw the doubt. "That's a new weave. Dwarven, but with silk from the southern valleys. Holds like steel. Never frays."

Dalossalda nodded, satisfied, then added it to their bundle. Last, she pointed to a pick hung near the ceiling, its handle wrapped in dark leather. Tyran took it down and handed it to her with care.

"Best in the shop," he said, reverent. "Won't break, even if you want it to."

They gathered the rest—a lamp, a box of tinder, two packets of rations—and brought it to the counter. Dardrad reached for his coin, but Tyran pushed the pile back with a shake of his head.

"No need," Tyran said. "If you're going where I think you are, you'll need it more than I do."

Dardrad hesitated, then tucked the coin away. "Thank you," he said, unsure how else to fill the silence.

Tyran looked him up and down, then smiled again, smaller this time. "Come back when you're done. I want to hear how it went."

"We will," Dalossalda said, her voice steady as bedrock.

They left, the bundle heavier than it looked, and walked back toward the shop. The sun was higher now, the frost turning to water on the stone. Dardrad looked at his wife, saw the resolve in her step, the calm in her eyes.

He thought of the flaw, waiting in the mountain. He thought of the years he'd spent running from it, hiding behind routine and the soft comfort of the warren. He thought, too, of the warrior who'd come that morning, trusting him to anchor her soul with the right cut of meat.

Maybe the flaw was part of him, but so was the will to fix it.

They reached the door to the shop and paused, the town quiet around them. Dalossalda smiled, just a hint, and said, "Ready?"

Dardrad nodded. "Ready."

The next step was into the unknown, but he was not afraid.

Not anymore.

thirteen

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DARDRAD WAITED until the morning bell had rung twice before taking the descent alone. He'd told Dalossalda it was easier that way, less fuss if only one of them had to wriggle through the trapdoor behind the salting bins. She'd let him have the illusion, but her skepticism had followed him down the narrow, stone-cut passage, echoing off the walls in silent footfalls.

He reached the base of the transit chamber, fingers numb where the cold had crept in through his cuffs. The circle in the floor, polished so smooth it drank the candlelight, waited like a held breath. Even in the close air, there was a tremor—a faint, subsonic buzz that had not been there before, like the warning purr of an animal just out of sight.

Dardrad set his hands flat on the stone and closed his eyes, summoning the memory of how it used to feel. The give of the rock, reluctant but yielding, a slow slide into the sublayers as if the world itself were an old friend making room on the bench. Today, the surface was cold and dry, with none of the subtle warmth that had always greeted him.

He pressed harder. The stone's hum spiked up his arms, searing through tendon and bone. The skin on his palms tingled, then burned,

as if the rock were coated with biting nettles. He breathed through his teeth, muscles tensing, and felt the first flicker of panic.

Not yet, he thought, digging his fingers into the quartz seams. Not until I say so.

He bent his weight into the floor, shoulders bunched, willing the world to open. The floor did not yield. Instead, the cold became an ache in his elbows, then a full-body crush. His chest compressed as if a boulder had rolled onto his sternum, the pressure relentless. Each breath drew less air; every attempt to push deeper brought a red haze to the edges of his vision.

He bit his tongue, refusing to whimper. This was not how it went. He'd done this a thousand times, in cellars and tunnels and the old city ruins. The trick was to think of the stone as water—just another current to slip into, if you found the right angle. Now, it felt like he was trying to dive into packed clay. It felt personal.

Dardrad fought back with stubbornness. He forced his breathing shallow and regular, focused every scrap of willpower on the spot beneath his palms. The stone shuddered, then bit back—an electric pulse up his wrists, so sharp he yanked his hands away and nearly toppled onto his side.

The echo in the chamber was deafening. His pulse hammered in his ears, and behind it was a deeper sound, a growl that vibrated the stones and made the walls seem to breathe.

He pressed his palms to his eyes, jaw clamped so tight his teeth ached. "Not good enough," he muttered. "Never good enough."

He opened his eyes and tried again, slower this time, palms pressed not flat but at a slight angle, as if asking permission instead of demanding access. The stone vibrated under his hands, the hum now a high whine that made his scalp prickle.

He pictured Dalossalda above, pacing the kitchen in that measured way she had when she was angry or afraid. He could almost see her hands, strong and capable, unspooling blueprints on the counter and tracing the lines with her thumb. He needed that steadiness now, the clean geometry of her mind.

But the stone would not have it.

He tried again and again, each attempt more desperate than the

last. At one point he felt himself slide a fraction of an inch into the floor, then snap back as if the rock had spat him out. Sweat ran down his spine, cold and sticky; his beard was full of grit and the taste of metal filled his mouth.

By the time the candle had burned down to a stub, Dardrad was slumped at the edge of the basin, arms trembling and head bowed. The shame was a physical thing, dense as the stone that refused him. He scraped his knuckles on the rim, half-hoping for blood, but the skin held.

He sat like that for a long time, ears ringing with the aftershock of the struggle.

You're a flaw in the stone, he thought, the phrase as bitter as it was familiar. You never fixed anything. You just moved the cracks around.

He considered trudging back up the chute, inventing some story for Dalossalda, but the idea of her seeing him like this made his guts churn. He'd rather die in the dark than go up empty-handed.

He wiped his palms on his pants, dust rising in lazy clouds. Every surface in the chamber was gritty, as if the stone itself had started to shed under the strain. He looked at his hands—red, lined, and beginning to blister. It would be a miracle if he could even hold a knife by the end of the day.

He leaned back, let his head rest against the cold stone wall, and tried to remember the last time he'd truly been afraid. Not of monsters or ruin, but of failing at the one thing he was meant to do.

The memory came, sharp as a knife: Dalossalda, the night she'd drawn the keystone design, showing him the blueprint by candlelight. The lines had been clean, no wasted motion, every force balanced and channeled to the center. "It's perfect," she'd said, and for a moment he'd believed her.

He blinked, the image burning in his mind. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe he'd spent too long thinking like a thief in his own home, always sneaking through the cracks, always asking for what he needed instead of just taking it.

Maybe the stone was waiting for him to act like he belonged.

He took a slow breath, let it settle in his belly, then set his hands on the floor again. This time, he didn't push. He didn't even ask. He just

imagined the perfect line, the one Dalossalda had traced on the slate. He pictured it running through the world, straight and true, no cracks, no fear.

He let the memory fill him, warmth chasing out the cold.

When he was ready, he opened his eyes and looked at the stone, not as an enemy, but as a problem to be solved.

"All right," he whispered. "Let's try it your way."

He gathered himself, set his hands, and prepared to begin again.

The difference, when it came, was less a shift than a surrender.

He set his palms against the basin's edge and imagined the keystone arch, the one Dalossalda had drawn with such care. Not a tunnel bored by brute force, not a thief's passage, but a corridor shaped for balance, every force met and harmonized. He pictured the stone not as an obstacle, but as his own best work—fitted, finished, inevitable.

The rock trembled beneath his hands, the vibration higher now, almost eager. He pressed forward and felt, to his shock, the quartz veins around his fingers melt into something softer, more yielding. There was no burning this time, only a cool, tingling rush as the stone drew him in.

He let himself slip downward, mind tracking the line of the imagined arch. The walls closed around him, but not in menace; they cradled him, supporting every rib and muscle, the way a mother steadies a child's first step. The air was thin, but clear, every breath carrying the memory of rain and deep time.

He moved forward, arms outstretched, and the stone shaped itself to his will. The rough edges fell away, leaving behind a metaphorical passage so true he could feel the grain of his own work in every inch. The way was smooth, the curve of the edge precise to the finger-width. The noise of grinding rock faded, replaced by a silence so perfect it hummed in his ears.

Dardrad slid through the corridor, slow at first, then faster as confidence built. His hand brushed the substrate, and where his palm passed, the surface was momentarily glass-smooth, cold but without the bitterness of rejection. He dared a smile, just a twitch at the corner of his mouth, and felt the old pride flare in his chest.

When he reached the end, the world opened up all at once. The stone spat him out onto a ledge high above the valley, the dawn just beginning to smudge the sky with blue. The air was so cold it bit through his beard and found the skin beneath, and the wind caught the edge of his cloak, snapping it like a banner.

He blinked, then laughed—quiet, but real. The transition had left him dizzy, but he found his footing and stepped out onto the ancient flagstones.

The plateau stretched before him, a sweep of broken walls and tumbled columns dusted in frost. But the ruins were not what drew his eye. On the far side, just where the grass began again, a herd of Stone-Rams grazed in a loose semicircle. Their coats shimmered in the low light, each hair laced with the same quartz that ran through the mountain. Their horns curled back in perfect spirals, catching the dawn and throwing it in bright shards across the slope.

Dardrad let the sight sink in. He had not seen a herd so healthy in years—most had been hunted out, or starved when the old city fell. These looked strong, bellies full, hooves kicking up scraps of ice as they rooted for shoots beneath the crust.

He set off down the slope, boots crunching in the scree. The way was longer than it looked, and by the time he reached the low wall that bordered the grazing ground, the sun had burned off enough cloud to show the valley in full. It was a hard beauty: every surface raw, every plant adapted for a lifetime of cold and wind. He felt at home here, more than anywhere since the exile.

Near the base of the plateau, he found what he was looking for—a hut, built into the lee of a shattered pillar, its roof patched with hides and slabs of slate. Smoke curled from a vent in the back, and the fence around the hut was strung with bones of smaller rams, each one polished and set with bits of bright glass.

He approached, announcing himself with a hard rap on the door-frame. It gave a little, but held. From inside came a shuffling, the sound of boots against dirt.

The shepherd who answered was nearly as wide as Dardrad, but a head taller, hair shot through with frost and eyes as clear as the lake in spring. He wore a patchwork of hides, and a necklace of

ram's teeth hung from his neck, each tooth bound with a twist of blue wire.

"Back for more, are you?" the man said, voice rough but not unfriendly.

Dardrad nodded. "Need one for a special purpose."

The shepherd squinted, measuring him. "Most who come want the horns, or the marrow. What's the job?"

"Town business," Dardrad replied, setting his jaw. He never shared what he knew about his customers.

The shepherd considered, then stepped aside and gestured for him to enter. "Best talk inside," he said. "Wind'll freeze your teeth off."

The hut was warmer than it had any right to be, the air thick with the scent of wool and a stew left simmering on the back wall. The shepherd poured him a cup of something sharp, then set out a slab of hard cheese and a knife that had seen better days.

Dardrad accepted both with a grunt of thanks. He explained, as best he could, the trouble in the stone, the way the town's gifts were tightening like a snare, and the recipe the shop's whisper had demanded. The shepherd listened, silent, then nodded at the end.

"You want the best," he said, "you'll have to get it yourself. They won't come easy, not with the rut coming on."

Dardrad grunted.

The shepherd smiled, showing a row of uneven but healthy teeth. "You want to bait it, use the lichen from the north slope. They'll fight you for it, but they can't resist."

"Price?"

The man shrugged. "Take a share of what you cut. And a new blade, if you've got one."

Dardrad considered, then unclipped the smallest of his knives from his belt and set it on the table. The blade was thin, but keen, the handle wrapped in layered birch for grip. The shepherd weighed it, then smiled wider.

"Deal."

They planned the rest with the efficiency of men who had spent their lives on hard jobs: where to bait the ram, how to take it down clean, how to pack the meat for the trip back through the tunnels.

When everything was settled, the shepherd clapped him on the shoulder, and they shook on it, firm and quick.

Dardrad finished the drink, let the burn settle in his belly, and stepped out into the wind again.

He looked up at the sky, saw the sun bright and clear against the blue, and let himself feel, just for a moment, the pride of work well done.

He ran his hand along the perfect arch of the corridor he had made, traced the line from entrance to exit, and thought of Dalossalda's blueprint, waiting for him back home.

They made their move at dawn, when the rams were still sluggish from the night's freeze and the slopes ran slick with melt. The shepherd led the way, his steps sure even in the shifting scree, while Dardrad lagged a half-dozen paces behind, scanning the ground for the right patch of earth.

He found it on a shallow saddle between two outcrops, a depression where the soil ran thin and the bedrock below sat close to the surface. The grass here was yellow and stunted, but tough as wire—perfect for what he needed.

He knelt, fingers splaying into the grit and lichen. The earth was cold, but receptive, the hum of the stone softer now, almost a purr. He closed his eyes and let the shape of the space settle into his bones.

In the blueprint in his mind, he set the ring first—six stones, each arm's length apart, set flush with the ground. He dug at the frost with his bare hands, then pressed his palms to each chosen point, feeling for the grain of the rock below. It took a dozen tries to find the rhythm, but when he did, the ground yielded with a satisfying snap.

One by one, the stones rose: slow at first, then faster as his confidence grew. He willed them up, not as barricades, but as parts of a whole—each stone angled to curve the line inward, each joint set to lock against the next. The effect was subtle, a low circle barely knee-high, but it would do the job.

When the last stone settled into place, Dardrad stood and wiped

the sweat from his brow. The sun was up now, turning the frost to diamond on every blade of grass. In the center of the ring, the ground glowed faintly, as if the earth itself approved.

He heard a whistle from above, sharp and urgent. The shepherd was waving from the ridge, his staff raised high, and behind him a single Stone-Ram plodded down the slope, head low and eyes wary.

Dardrad crouched beside the nearest stone and waited.

The shepherd drove the ram with care, never rushing, always leaving space for the beast to choose its path. The animal was a giant—shoulders nearly up to Dardrad's chest, horns twisted in a perfect double helix. Its coat shimmered in the sun, a living mirror for the quartz in the walls behind.

The ram picked its way toward the ring, nostrils flaring at the scent of fresh earth. It circled once, then twice, testing the boundary but not pressing. When it reached the low point in the ring, it stopped and stared straight at Dardrad.

The moment stretched.

He met the ram's gaze, refusing to look away. There was an intelligence there, a flicker of something that went beyond hunger or fear. He felt, more than saw, the way the animal measured him, judged the purpose behind his presence.

He waited, heart thumping.

After a long, tense breath, the ram stepped over the ring and into the center.

The stones hummed, not with violence, but with acceptance. The air inside the circle stilled, and for a moment, it was as if the world itself paused to watch.

Dardrad approached, hands open and slow. The ram did not shy; it stood, muscles bunched and ready, but unmoving. He reached out, pressed his hand to the beast's flank, and let the heat of it pass up his arm.

He felt no fear—only respect.

The shepherd's voice, low and reverent, carried down: "Never seen one do that before. You're blessed, stone-brother."

Dardrad grunted, unwilling to break the quiet.

He set his knife, the second-best from his belt, and worked with the

skill of a lifetime. The cut was clean, the blood quick to clot in the cold. He dressed the beast quickly.

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

He took the flanks, wrapping them in hide, sealing them tight, then stood back and surveyed the ring. It was as good as anything he'd built in the old city—better, maybe, for being done in the open, with only the mountain and his hands for tools.

He touched the keystone at the circle's head, feeling the line of force run through it and down into the bedrock below.

He grinned, slow and genuine.

The shepherd clapped him on the back when he reached the top. "You've got the gift again," the man said, voice gruff with approval.

Dardrad shrugged, but the words lodged somewhere deep. "Just doing what needs doing."

They walked back to the hut, the wind now at their backs, the shepherd carrying the remainder of Dardrad's harvest. The sun climbed higher, painting the ruins and the fields in shifting gold. As they passed the corridor he'd carved, Dardrad paused, running his hand along the perfect arch, feeling the cold smoothness under his fingertips.

He looked back once, just to see the ring, and found the ram already returned, head bent to the earth, grazing as if nothing had happened.

He shouldered the bundle, feeling its weight settle evenly across his spine.

He was ready to go home.

fourteen

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THE WALK back to the shop took the rest of the morning, and Dardrad arrived with the sun full in the sky, sweat cooling his forehead and the fur of his beard matted from effort. His arms ached, and every step up the path was a negotiation with the mountain—one more, then one more after that. When he finally reached the door, he paused with his forehead pressed to the cold wood, letting the sharp, homegrown chill of the stone drain the last of the fatigue from his skin.

The shop was silent when he entered. Not empty, but caught in a moment of stillness: the dust motes hanging in perfect suspension, the jars of brine and salt undisturbed, and the old block at the center gleaming faintly where Dalossalda had waxed it the night before. The only sound was his own breathing, a little heavier than usual, and the muffled clink of bone as the bundle of Stone-Ram flank thudded onto the counter.

He unwrapped it with care, hands trembling a bit more than he'd have liked. The hide peeled back to reveal the prize: a length of muscle that shone with an inner luster, every grain shot through with lines of silver and rose, the fat marbled and clean. He let his fingers linger on

the surface, feeling the slight give and the promise of flavor waiting inside.

The whisper began before he'd even finished the unwrapping. *Not that way. Turn the grain, cut crosswise. No, not like that, you'll bruise it.*

He grunted, but obeyed. The shop's voice was sharper than usual, demanding perfection for this job, and he didn't dare question it. He drew his best blade from the rack—freshly honed, the handle still slick with oil—and sliced a thin sliver from the edge, just to test. The meat gave without complaint, and the scent that rose was wild and sweet, like moss after rain and iron under thunderclouds.

He closed his eyes and let it fill him.

The next step was seasoning. The shop guided his hands with a confidence that bordered on impatience: the coarse salt first, flaked by hand and dusted in a thick crust. Then the black pepper, cracked under the heel of his palm and scattered to form a fine, aromatic blanket. Dried mountain herbs followed—rosemary, sage, and the bitter snap of tiny, pale thyme leaves. He worked it all in with slow, even pressure, turning the slab until his hands ached from the cold and the effort.

Garlic. Crushed, not chopped. It needs to bleed.

He grunted again, this time with something like respect. He smashed the cloves with the flat of the blade, watching as the sticky white paste oozed out and clung to his fingers. He scraped it into a bowl, then smeared it across the surface of the meat, rubbing it in with short, careful strokes.

Next came the ale—a dark, local brew, thick enough to stain the cutting board. He poured it over the flank in a slow, deliberate stream, letting the foam hiss and dissipate before massaging the liquid into every crease and seam. The aroma that rose was intoxicating, equal parts sweet and sour, with a sharp edge of yeast that made his mouth water.

He set the flank aside, covered loosely in a cloth, and turned his attention to the vegetables.

The shop had its opinions there, too. *Bright colors, it insisted. Crunch to match the tenderness.* He pulled a basket from under the counter and examined its contents: bell peppers in red and yellow,

thick mushroom caps, and a bundle of young spring onions. He trimmed the ends with the same knife, then tossed the pieces together in a wide ceramic bowl, dusting them with the leftover herbs and a drizzle of the olive oil that Dalossalda reserved for special customers.

He worked in silence, letting the rhythm of the chopping and the steady pulse of the shop's whisper carry him through. There was a peace to it, even with the nerves running high and the weight of expectation sitting heavy on his shoulders. Each step, each motion, felt like a promise kept.

When the prep was done, he set the vegetables aside and reached for the old cast iron skillet, its bottom blackened and warped from years of faithful service. He placed it on the counter, then checked and rechecked the alignment of the meat, the placement of the salt, the readiness of the tools.

The shop was satisfied. Not pleased, exactly—its approval always came laced with critique—but content that he'd done right by the ingredients and the day.

He looked down at his hands, caked in pepper and oil, and for a moment, he let himself feel the quiet pride of a job nearly finished. The hardest part was yet to come, but he was ready for it.

He washed up, then stared out the window at the town square, watching as the sun slanted down and the people began to gather in small, hungry clusters near the inn. He pictured the warrior who'd come for the Stone-Ram, imagined the look on her face when she tasted the finished meal, and felt, for the first time in a long while, the anticipation that made his work feel like more than just routine.

The meat rested, the vegetables gleamed, and Dardrad Pebbleblade stood at the heart of his shop, hands folded and eyes bright, listening to the whisper that had always been there, guiding him home.

He was ready to cook, but this would require something different than his usual grill.

The Broken Claw was full by the time Dardrad arrived, arms loaded with the crate of vegetables and the precious cut of Stone-Ram. He

could see the haze of lamplight and the glint of tankards through the frosted windows, and the dull roar of conversation rolled out to meet him the moment he pushed open the door. The place looked, as always, like the inside of a well-loved boot: battered, scarred, but still holding the warmth of a hundred evenings and a thousand stories.

Sam was behind the bar, sleeves rolled and eye already on him. She lifted her chin in greeting, her scar a red line in the gold of the hearth. "Heard you were bringing something special tonight," she called, voice carrying over the din.

He set the crate down on the nearest table, then wiped his hands on his apron. "Just a little something from home," he said, loud enough for the crowd to pick up the joke. The regulars whooped and clapped, some with empty mugs, most with the kind of smile that meant they'd be back for the next round.

Minnie flitted over, her curls barely contained under the white cap. "You need anything, Dardrad?" she said, all business but with a bright, eager gleam in her eye.

He nodded. "Biggest pan you have. And a spare board. Maybe some extra towels."

Minnie vanished, and in less than a minute she'd returned with everything he needed and more—a gleaming iron skillet, a battered but clean cutting board, a stack of cloths, and a small jar of what turned out to be her own pickled mustard seed. He raised an eyebrow, and she just grinned. "Makes the flavor sing," she said, then darted away to tend to a knot of children in the corner.

Sam had cleared a space by the hearth, moving two low tables together so he could work with the fire at his back. A crowd gathered in short order, drawn not just by curiosity but by the sharp, animal sense that something unusual was about to happen. Dardrad saw Makota and Galhani stake out seats right at the edge, their ears and eyes both angled to catch every move.

He set out his ingredients with ceremony, lining up the vegetables, the jar of oil, the salt and herbs, and then—last—the Stone-Ram. The crowd went quiet when he unveiled it. Even Sam paused, tankard in hand, her expression somewhere between envy and respect.

He took up the meat, then set the knife to it. The first slice drew a

gasp from someone near the back; the grain of the muscle shone almost metallic, shot through with lines of silver and deep, living red. He worked quickly but with care, cutting the flank into thick, even slabs, each one ringed with a halo of fat.

He salted the meat, dusted it with pepper, then pressed the crushed garlic into the surface until it glistened. The herbs went on last, and as he worked the oil and seasoning into the flesh, the room seemed to close in around him—a tide of anticipation, pressing in from every side.

He set the skillet over the fire, let it heat until the iron began to smoke, then laid the first piece of meat in with a sizzle so loud it startled even him. The scent followed instantly, wild and sharp: the garlic burning off, the fat caramelizing, the rosemary and thyme turning dark and aromatic. A cloud of steam shot up, catching the lamplight and turning the air above the table into a stage.

He worked the meat, turning each piece only once, letting the surface brown and the edges crisp. The rendered fat pooled in the pan, and he spooned it over the top, basting each cut until the flesh was glossy and perfect.

Next, he set a smaller pan on the coals and added the vegetables, tossing them with a practiced flick of the wrist. The peppers and onions hissed and jumped, the mushrooms soaking up the oil and releasing their own earthy perfume. He watched the colors bloom in the heat, the reds and yellows of the peppers growing deeper, the spring onions curling in the firelight.

Behind him, the crowd had gone silent. Makota leaned forward, tail wrapped tight around her knees; Galhani was already sketching something on a napkin, eyes wide and unblinking. Even Sam, who'd seen every spectacle a pub could offer, stood with her arms crossed and a look of genuine anticipation.

The warrior sat at the end of the bar, armor removed but sword within easy reach. Her hair was still damp from a wash, and her arms were crossed over her chest, but her eyes never left the food. She tracked every motion, every turn of the knife and tilt of the skillet, with the focus of someone preparing for battle.

When the meat was done, Dardrad let it rest for a moment, then

sliced each piece against the grain, laying the cuts in a neat fan across a broad plate. The juices pooled beneath, mingling with the oil and herbs. He arranged the vegetables alongside, peppers and mushrooms stacked in careful piles, the onions draped over the top like ribbons.

He wiped his hands, then set the plate in front of the warrior.

The pub held its breath.

The first bite was a ritual. The warrior lifted her fork, studied the meat as if it might vanish, then sliced off a piece and set it on her tongue. She closed her eyes, let the flavors settle, and breathed out through her nose. The entire pub watched, silent and still, as if their own fates depended on the verdict.

She chewed, slow and thoughtful. The lines of tension in her face softened; her shoulders, hunched from a lifetime of armor, lowered just a fraction. She took another bite, and another, each time pausing to taste, to evaluate, to catalog the changes in herself.

At last, she set her fork down, wiped the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand, and looked up at Dardrad, who stood watching from the fire.

"It's earthy," she said, voice steady, "but bright, like mountain air after a storm." She tapped her breastbone. "It settles here, then warms. I can feel it working already."

The pub erupted, a thunder of applause and laughter. Sam banged a mug on the bar; Minnie squealed and hugged the nearest patron. Even Makota clapped, her tail whipping the table with delight.

Dardrad let himself breathe again. He wiped the sweat from his brow, then watched as the warrior dug in with real hunger, each bite slower than the last, as if savoring the memory even as she made it.

The rest of the plates vanished in short order. Sam took a piece, then another, then shouted down anyone who dared call her greedy. Galhani and Makota split a serving, the Felis licking her lips and the gnome dissecting every flavor in a rapid-fire whisper. Even the children, lured in by the scent, lined up for samples until the last scrap was gone.

When the feeding frenzy subsided, Dardrad stood at the edge of the tables, hands folded, watching the crowd. He felt the exhaustion in

every muscle, but also the slow, steady glow that only came when a job was done right.

The warrior caught his eye, then raised her fork in salute. "You do the old ways proud, Master Pebbleblade," she said, her voice softer now, but with a weight that made the words linger.

He bowed, just a bit, and the crowd went quiet again.

He let the moment last, then packed away his knives, wiped the boards, and left the hearth behind, the scent of the feast clinging to his beard and the memory of applause echoing in his chest.

Dardrad Pebbleblade was not one for pride, but tonight, in the heart of the Broken Claw, he felt every bit as strong as the Stone-Ram that had carried him home.

The warrior took a few more bites, alternating with the vegetables, which she ate with almost as much concentration. Every color on the plate, every texture, drew a different reaction: a slight tilt of the head, a widening of the eyes, a small hum of satisfaction at the aftertaste.

The room gradually relaxed, the tension fading into a low current of approval and, for some, envy. Minnie brought over a fresh mug of ale, setting it at the warrior's side with a quiet word of encouragement. Makota and Galhani, though pretending not to watch, never once let their gaze stray from the table.

As the warrior ate, something changed. Her posture, so rigid and wary at first, straightened until she sat tall and balanced, as if the food had rebuilt her from the bones out. The pale color in her cheeks deepened, the clarity in her eyes grew sharper, and her hands, so used to trembling after a fight, stilled to perfect calm.

Halfway through the plate, she set her fork down and turned to face the room. "When I was a child," she said, her voice loud enough for all to hear, "my grandmother told stories of the heroes who'd gone before. She said their strength was not in their arms, but in their memory—in the way they carried every battle with them, every victory and every loss."

She looked at Dardrad, then at Sam, then at the whole of the Broken Claw. "I no longer fear the tomb's despair," she said. "I carry instead the burden of respect for the hero."

The crowd let the words sink in. Sam, behind the bar, caught Dard-

rad's eye and gave him a slow, approving nod. He nodded back, the satisfaction settling somewhere deep, in a place where even the stone couldn't shake it loose.

The warrior finished the meal in silence. When it was gone, she stood, paid her tab with a crisp stack of coins, and bowed first to Sam, then to Dardrad. She picked up her sword, slung it over her shoulder, and walked from the pub without a backward glance.

The room didn't erupt this time. Instead, it exhaled—a long, contented breath, as if some ancient spell had been lifted.

Makota came over first, setting a gentle paw on Dardrad's arm. "You made it look easy," she said, tail flicking with approval. "But I know what it took."

Galhani, trailing close behind, offered him a wrapped biscuit from her pocket. "For later," she said. "You'll need the sugar. You look half done in."

Dardrad accepted both, managing a tired smile. The other regulars chimed in with small gestures of thanks: a lifted mug, a slap on the back, a wordless salute from Sam at the far end of the bar.

When he left the Broken Claw that night, the sky was clear, the stars so close he felt he could pluck them out of the air. He walked the short distance back to his shop, the cold slicing through his shirt but not reaching the place inside that now burned with the memory of the meal, and the words the warrior had left behind.

He slept better that night than he had in a moon, the quiet of the shop settling around him like a promise kept.

That evening, the world seemed to contract into the square outside the butcher shop—a stage for comings and goings, for small dramas played out under the eye of the last, smoky light. Dardrad stood in the shadows just inside the doorway, Dalossalda at his side. They didn't speak, each aware of the weight that had settled in the air.

The light of the sun was nearly gone, but the lamps around the square picked up the slack, casting everything in a soft orange and blue. Shops had closed their doors; even the bakery was shuttered, the

only sign of life the faint silhouette of Makota and her kits cleaning up behind steamed glass. The calm felt artificial, as if the town itself were waiting for something to end or begin.

They saw the movement at the same time. Alred emerged from his store, not in work clothes but in his best—a deep blue jacket, buttoned tight, and a white shirt so clean it nearly glowed in the twilight. His boots, black and polished, struck the stone with a measured, certain sound. He paused at the threshold, checked the buttons on his cuffs, then stepped out into the square with a posture that was proud, but not self-conscious.

Dardrad watched him cross the empty space. There was no hesitation, no pause; every step was purposeful, as if rehearsed a thousand times before. He made for the far side, where the faint sign of Llewel's restaurant flickered with a single, steady lamp.

But halfway there, Alred stopped in front of the butcher shop.

He bent at the waist, careful as always, and reached into his pocket. From it, he drew a stone—not just any stone, but a piece of granite, cut and polished to a perfect oval. Even in the dusk, Dardrad could see that the surface was unblemished, the colors chosen for harmony and balance. It was the kind of thing a master mason might use to check the trueness of a line, or a clan might give as a symbol of trust and departure.

Alred knelt, set the stone on the doorstep, and pressed two fingers to its top for a count of three.

Dardrad's breath caught. He reached out, hand finding the edge of the doorframe for support. Dalossalda, sensing the shift, squeezed his arm, her fingers digging in just enough to ground him.

Alred straightened, dusted the knees of his trousers, and looked up—just once, just long enough for his eyes to meet Dardrad's through the glass. He smiled, a small, tired gesture, then turned and continued across the square.

They watched him go. He took the long path around the fountain, then circled to the back of the restaurant, where a service door waited. He knocked, was admitted by a tall, pale figure—Llewel himself, dressed all in black, his hair pulled back into a severe braid. There was

a moment of conversation, too far for even Dalossalda's sharp ears to catch, then Alred vanished inside.

The world seemed to relax, all at once. The lamps guttered in the wind, the silence of the square returned. Dardrad looked down at the stone on the step, then at Dalossalda, who nodded once, her mouth set but her eyes soft.

He bent, picked up the granite. It was warm from Alred's hand, heavy and perfectly balanced. He ran a thumb over the surface, reading the story in the veins and the polish. It was a goodbye, and a blessing—a promise that what mattered would not be forgotten, even if the teller was gone.

He tucked the stone into his pocket, then closed the door. Inside, the shop felt smaller, the chill more present.

Dalossalda wrapped both arms around him, pulling him in until his chin rested on her hair. They stood like that, holding the silence together, letting the weight of the day settle in their bones.

Outside, the lamps of the square burned on, waiting for someone to bring the story to its end.

They waited a full candlemark, watching the square grow colder and more empty. The only sound was the click of the cooling hearth behind them and the distant sweep of the wind curling around the eaves. No lights came on in Alred's shop. The windows stayed dark, the door unopened.

Dardrad couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong—not just with Alred, but with the square itself. It was as if the ground had shifted, the line of the stones no longer true. Dalossalda sensed it too; she moved through the evening with a carefulness that Dardrad had only seen when a fault threatened to open in the tunnels below.

Just before the town bell marked the next candle, Dardrad stepped out and crossed the square. The sky was clear, the moon a thin blade above the rooftops. He kept his eyes on the dry goods store, searching for any sign of Alred inside.

Nothing.

He tried the door. It was locked, the handle cold and unyielding under his fingers. He cupped his hand against the glass and peered through, but the inside was pitch black. Not even the usual lamp by

the register, which Alred left burning as a beacon for late travelers, was lit.

A small sign had appeared in the window, written in Alred's neat, looping hand:

"Closed for Renovation. —A.G."

Dardrad read it twice, then pressed his palm to the wood just below the sign. The familiar tingle of magic—the quiet, humming line that ran through every stone and joint in the square—felt faint here, diminished, like a song played on broken strings.

He closed his eyes, let his earth-sense drift outward, and mapped the pattern of the town in his mind. The lines that had always converged on Alred's shop were thinner now, the pull weaker. It felt, in a way that was hard to put into words, as if the square had lost one of its nodes—a vital point in the shape of the world.

He pulled his hand away and stood in the quiet, letting the realization sink in. By morning, the shop might be gone entirely. Or maybe it would just be... changed. Someone else behind the counter, or a new facade on the same old bones, with nothing left of Alred but the memory of a sign in the window and the echo of his name.

He turned, the cold cutting sharper now, and walked back to the butcher shop. Dalossalda waited at the door, her face unreadable in the lamplight, but her hands held open for him.

He took them, the granite stone still tucked in his palm. The weight of it was both comfort and curse—a reminder of what was lost, and of what might still be saved, if he could only keep the lines from drifting further apart.

Inside, the shop was silent. Dardrad sat at the old block, turning the stone in his hands, the veins of the granite catching the light and twisting it into a map of the world as it was, or as it could be.

He set it on the counter, a marker for the future, then looked up at Dalossalda.

"We'll hold," he said, and hoped it was true.

Outside, the square waited, empty and patient, ready to begin again.

fifteen

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THE SUN ROSE with a sullen reluctance that morning, the sort of dawn that made every edge in the square look sharper and every shadow twice as long. Dardrad was up before first light, not because he wanted to be but because the stone under his feet had hummed him awake, a dull pulse like the memory of a bruise. He'd swept the shop and checked the cellar twice, counting hairline cracks and finding nothing new, but the unease refused to budge.

He was just finishing a third circuit—this time with a mug of cold tea and less hope—when he noticed it through the window. The patch of grass in front of his shop and Cole's was lower than it should have been. Not by much, but by enough that it made his beard prickle. He stepped outside, squinting against the flat, overcast glare, and saw that the ground had settled into a neat, rectangular depression perhaps four fingers deep. The lines were straight, the corners precise, as if someone had measured them out with a builder's square and then pressed a giant thumb into the earth.

Dardrad poked the edge with his boot. The soil crumbled away, revealing not black loam but a clean slice through to the sublayer—a pale, almost blue-gray band of clay. He grunted, set his mug down, and crouched for a closer look. The depth was even all the way

around, just shy of the length of his thumb from surface to bottom. He dug at one corner with a calloused finger, expecting the walls to collapse, but they held, crisp as new-cut cheese.

He was still kneeling there when Cole appeared, arms full of produce and worry.

"Morning, Dard," Cole said, breathless, the "r" rolling out as if it wanted to be anywhere else. "You see this? You see what's happening?"

Dardrad looked up. Cole's basket brimmed with wilted carrots, a few frostbitten squash, and what looked like the world's saddest pumpkin, its orange skin shriveled and puckered as if it had been left out on the roof for a fortnight. The gardener himself looked little better—shirt untucked, hair a mess, hands trembling around the handle of the basket.

"I see," Dardrad said, voice even. "You try lifting it?"

Cole set the basket down, wiped his nose with the back of his hand, and knelt at the edge of the depression. He ran a finger along the cut, then shook his head. "It's not just here," he said, eyes darting to the field beyond. "Half my vegetable beds are sunk. Like the ground got tired and just gave up."

The two of them stared at the sunken patch in silence, the only sound the creak of the butcher shop's sign as the morning wind picked up.

It wasn't long before the square filled with spectators. The Púca were the first to arrive, as always. The door of their shop opened with a burst of energy, and a stream of little white-haired men poured out, each with a different implement slung over their shoulder: spades, trowels, a gleaming magnifying lens, and in one case, a coiled garden hose that unspooled in a wobbly line behind him.

They clustered around the depression, forming an immediate council of mutters and gesticulations.

"Mind yer boots, now!" called Gardener Púca, a round fellow in an apron stained green from neck to toe. He dropped to his knees at once, examining the wilted carrot with a forensic intensity.

"Smell that?" he said to no one in particular. "That's rot, that is. But

it's not a natural rot—no, no, this is advanced. Engineered, if you ask me.”

Earthmover Púca, taller than most and wearing an orange bandana, stepped up and flicked the tip of his brass measuring tape into the depression. “Exactly two inches. You don’t see precision like that outside a dwarf funeral or a Púca pie-eating contest.”

A third, Speculator Púca, waved his lens over the square, catching the morning light and splashing it in Dardrad’s eyes. “It’s the magic in the ground, boys. Bound up tight and drawn off at the corners, just like I said it would be.”

Cole watched them, slack-jawed, as the Púca bickered and debated in a whirlwind of Irish brogue and wild gesticulation.

Dardrad cleared his throat. “You see anything like this before?” he asked, directing the question to the bandana’d one, who looked most likely to answer straight.

Earthmover Púca clicked his tongue, considering. “Aye, and no,” he said. “Seen sinkholes, sure, but not ones that lay so tidy. Nature’s messy. This—” He snapped the tape back into its case. “—this is tidy. Artificial.”

The other Púca nodded solemnly, then immediately started arguing about whether “tidy” was really the right word, or if perhaps “fussy” or “finicky” better suited the situation.

Just then, Warren and Wilem strolled into the square, arms full of long wooden planks.

“Nice of you to join us,” Dardrad called, straightening up.

Warren grinned, the effect somewhat unsettling on a face as broad as a barn. “If I’d known you were digging, I’d have brought my own shovel.”

“More like patching,” Wilem said, dropping the ends of the planks with a hollow thud. He wore his usual smirk, and his fingers tapped out a rhythm on the nearest board.

Cole, who had been worrying a frostbitten squash between his palms, looked up in alarm. “You’re not going to cover it, are you? What if it gets worse?”

Warren shrugged, the motion rolling up from his knees all the way

to the tip of his white hair. "Then at least we'll have something to stand on," he said.

The Púca, who by now had multiplied to a baker's dozen, began to organize themselves into an impromptu work crew. Two of them rolled out a line of bright blue twine, marking the perimeter. Another brought over a toolbox almost as big as himself and dumped it open, scattering wrenches, hammers, and something that looked suspiciously like a slingshot.

Earthmover Púca hopped onto the depression and began barking orders. "Right, lads! We'll shore it up with these here planks, and then we'll see if the ground is set or if it's just playing at being solid. Someone get me the heavy mallet!"

A half-dozen Púca tripped over themselves trying to retrieve the mallet, each getting tangled in the legs of another and starting a domino chain that ended with all of them in a pile at Dardrad's feet.

He stepped around them, crouched by the edge again, and ran his palm along the cut. The line was so clean he could almost shave with it.

"We'll need nails," he said, more to himself than anyone.

"Nails?" said Cole, voice rising. "Where do we get nails now? Alred's shop is closed, he's gone, he's—" Cole's hands shook harder, and for a moment, Dardrad thought he might drop the basket.

Wilem grunted. "I have plenty in the cartwright's shop. I can bring a box back in two shakes."

Warren thumped him on the back. "Or one, if you stop talking."

The two strode off, leaving the Púca to their mayhem and Dardrad to his thoughts.

He glanced at Cole, who was staring at the frost spreading over the pumpkin in his basket. It crept from the base upward, delicate at first, then gaining speed, crystal lines fanning out like veins.

"Never seen it do that," Cole whispered. "It's not cold enough. Not by half."

Dardrad said nothing, but watched as the pumpkin's skin hardened, then split with a faint, brittle crack. Inside, the flesh had turned the color of old snow.

A shout from the Púca brought his attention back. They had

finished measuring, argued about the results, then measured again “just to be sure.” Now Gardener Púca stood at the center of the depression, holding aloft a single, wilted carrot like an offering.

“If the rot spreads, it’ll take the whole bed by tomorrow,” he declared, shaking the carrot for emphasis. “We need to treat the boundary, or else!”

“Or else what?” called someone from the back.

“Or else we’ll have square holes up and down the lane, and nothing for stew but soup made from dirt and old string!”

This pronouncement set off a new round of Púca argument, during which several tripped over the blue twine and rolled into the depression, landing in a heap atop the carrot-wielding leader. The crowd roared with laughter—except for Cole, who looked like he might faint.

Dardrad scanned the square. Across the way, Alred’s shop was still dark. The “Closed for Renovation” sign hung askew in the window, and not a single lamp burned behind the glass.

He found himself missing the quiet, calming presence of the dry goods master more than he’d expected. The square, for all its noise, felt hollow in Alred’s absence.

Wilem and Warren returned, arms now loaded with a battered box of nails and a mallet the size of Cole’s head. They set the box down, and the Púca descended on it in a cloud of white beards and flying elbows, each determined to take exactly the right number of nails and none for anyone else.

“Go on,” said Wilem, clapping Dardrad on the shoulder. “Take the lead. You know more about holes than anyone.”

Dardrad grunted, took the mallet, and started setting the first of the planks along the edge. He worked methodically, letting the rhythm of hammer and wood settle his nerves. The Púca argued over which end was up, and Cole paced a tight circle near the depression, wringing his hands and muttering.

After the first row was set, Dardrad stood and surveyed the work. The depression was still there, still neat and tidy, but now it looked less like a threat and more like a problem to be solved.

He looked at Cole, who was hunched over the ruined pumpkin,

fingers trembling as he tried to pry out the seeds. "We'll fix it," Dardrad said, softer than before.

Cole glanced up, eyes red. "What if it comes back?"

Dardrad looked at the depression, the line of planks, the Púca still fighting over the last of the nails, and then at the dark, empty window of Alred's shop.

"We'll fix it again," he said.

Above, the sun rose another inch, and the frost on the pumpkin began to melt, leaving behind a puddle the color of defeat and the smell of cold, bitter earth.

The Púca, having exhausted their supply of nails and patience, launched into the construction of a "temporary safety barrier," which looked less like a fence and more like an obstacle course designed by a very determined squirrel. They bickered and tripped, each blaming the others, but slowly, surely, the work progressed.

Dardrad watched them, jaw clenched, and wondered how many more holes would open before the day was done.

He set his hand on the edge of the depression, feeling the line of force run through the wood, the dirt, the bedrock below. It was all holding, for now. But he knew that the real problem waited beneath.

He turned and caught Dalossalda watching from the shop door. She gave him a nod—approval, encouragement, or maybe just a reminder that there was more work to be done.

He nodded back, picked up the mallet, and drove the next nail deep.



The day gathered heat by increments, as if the sun were trying to bake the square back into place after the morning's disruption. Dardrad watched the Púca swarm recede into their shop, trailing sawdust and the echo of their arguments, then turned to find Cole at his elbow, still holding the ruined basket.

"You going to see him?" Cole asked, voice low.

Dardrad didn't answer, but Cole followed anyway, the two of them making a slow circuit of the square as the rest of the town settled into

its routines. At the edge, the entrance to Llewel's restaurant gleamed, the door's glass freshly wiped, the brass handle catching the sunlight with a clarity that made Dardrad's teeth hurt.

Inside, the hush was so total it took a moment to realize the room was not empty. Llewel stood behind the bar, his hands moving with practiced grace as he polished a row of crystal wine glasses. He wore the same immaculately tailored suit as ever, silver hair drawn back and pinned with a barrette of matte obsidian. If he noticed the dried mud on Dardrad's boots or the way Cole's eyes darted to every corner of the room, he gave no sign.

"Master Pebbleblade. Mister Coleson." Llewel's voice was warm but perfectly even, every syllable placed as deliberately as a brick in a wall. He set down the towel, arranging the glasses in a precise arc before him.

"Need a table?" he asked, though the place was empty, and it was clear no one would be served until dusk.

Dardrad shook his head, walking up to the polished oak counter and planting his hands on its surface. "Just looking for answers," he said, letting the calluses of his palms catch the light.

Llewel's eyes—deep blue, almost cerulean in the sun—shifted to Cole, then back. He smiled, but the motion never reached the rest of his face. "Then you have come to the right place," he said.

Cole sidled up next to Dardrad, setting the basket of ruined vegetables on a barstool with the care of someone presenting a legal exhibit. "You know Alred's shop is shut?" he said, the words coming out more accusation than question.

Llewel's smile widened a fraction. "Indeed. He left quite suddenly after last evening's meal." He picked up a silver fork and began to arrange it, parallel to the stem of a crystal goblet. "He had a lovely dinner—something suitable for a dry goods proprietor. Rye bread, honey, a pot of the black tea he favored. There was no indication of distress."

Dardrad grunted. "You serve him yourself?"

"As always," Llewel said, inclining his head. "We have never kept a staff. Too much risk of error. Alred was a creature of habit. He took his bread with a thin layer of butter, never jam. He preferred the

second-cut of honeycomb, never the first. And he sat at the table closest to the east window, for the morning light."

"He didn't mention anything?" Cole pressed, the anxiety in his voice climbing. "No plans, no travel, nothing at all?"

"He asked after the quality of the season's grain," Llewel replied. "We discussed the current price of barley. He complimented the cleanliness of the glassware." He gestured to the shining rows of glass, and Cole's eyes followed as if he expected to see Alred's face reflected there.

Dardrad tried a new angle. "You see what happened in the square?" He jerked his chin toward the door, where the neat line of boards stood sentinel over the morning's wound.

Llewel regarded him for a moment, the way a jeweler inspects a flawed gem. "I saw the activity," he said at last. "But I did not interfere. The Púca are more than capable of patching small structural defects."

Cole's hands flexed on the basket, the motion so tight a carrot snapped in two. "It's not a defect," he said. "It's like something's eating the town from below."

The Mountain Elf blinked once, slow and deliberate. "That is certainly possible," he said. "Such things have happened before, elsewhere."

Dardrad felt the tremor of irritation rising. He leaned in, letting his weight settle on the bar. "You want to say what you mean, or do we have to guess at it?"

Llewel wiped an imaginary speck from the rim of a glass, then set it down with a faint, ringing note. "Alred is not the first to move on," he said, voice dropping a shade. "Nor will he be the last. The world has a way of balancing itself when the patterns grow too strong, or too fragile. When a node is no longer needed, it is excised. Painful, but necessary."

Cole shook his head, not understanding. "He was needed. More than anyone."

Dardrad felt the same, though the words stuck like gristle in his throat. He fixed Llewel with a glare. "You sound like you planned it."

Llewel's smile returned, colder now. "I only observe. I do not

decide. The town decides. The Pattern decides.” He gestured to the door, where the sunlight cut sharp angles across the floor. “You should watch the square at noon. You may find what you are missing.”

They left without another word, the door closing behind them with a soft snick.

Outside, the square was almost painfully bright. The makeshift planking cast harsh shadows, and the air tasted of sawdust and sour earth. Dardrad and Cole walked to the edge of the depression and stared down, not sure what they expected to see.

Nothing had changed. The planks held. The earth below was flat, pale, and perfectly still.

Dardrad’s hands curled around the handle of the mallet he’d left by the hole. He hefted it once, then set it back down.

Cole shuffled his boots, kicking up a small spray of dirt. “You think it’s over?”

“No,” Dardrad said, feeling the answer in his bones. “Not even close.”

They turned toward Alred’s shop, unable to help themselves. The new sign in the window read “Permanently Closed,” the letters stenciled in black and underlined with a single, unbroken line. Through the glass, the shelves were bare; even the old ledger that usually sat on the counter was gone.

At the doorstep, the granite stone Alred had left for Dardrad caught the sun, splitting the morning into a thousand tiny prisms. He picked it up, weighing it in his palm. It was heavier than he remembered. He ran a thumb along the surface, feeling the cold, unyielding perfection of it.

Cole reached out, touching the stone with one finger. “We’ll hold,” he said, echoing Dardrad’s own words.

Dardrad nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Behind them, the Púca had started another round of repairs, arguing over the merits of pine versus oak, or whether twine could be substituted for proper nails in a pinch. Dardrad watched them for a long moment, then tucked the stone into his pocket and stepped away from the door.

The town would keep going. It always did. But every step on the

Don Jones

path felt just a little less certain, as if the ground itself were waiting for something else to be removed.

He headed back to the butcher shop, Cole at his side, both of them walking a little slower than before.

In between all the shops, the square's silence pulsed, deep and expectant.

Dardrad paused, hand drifting to the stone in his pocket. He pressed it hard, willing the edges to bite, to mark him, to remind him that what was gone was still, in some way, part of the whole.

Above, the sun inched higher, laying new lines across the square.

Below, the stone held.

For now.

sixteen

. . .

IT STARTED with the faintest click—like a glass jar settling on a stone shelf—and then, with the cruelty of a prank, the ground in the town square gave way. The neat rectangle from the morning, carefully measured and fussed over by the Púca, dropped again, sharp and final. The planks shuddered, the blue twine snapped, and the depression deepened by a full six inches in a single, embarrassing moment.

Dardrad felt it before he saw it. He'd been at his counter, weighing a coil of sausage against his palm and calculating whether the casing had tightened in the dry air or if he'd simply been measuring wrong all his life. The tremor hit and traveled up through the soles of his boots, through the block, through his forearm. It was the kind of vibration that set every tooth in your head ringing.

He ducked out the door in time to see the Púca scatter like marbles. They tumbled over each other in a cloud of white beards and startled shouts, some rolling clear of the depression, others riding the platform down with the grim determination of beings who'd spent a thousand years engineering controlled disasters.

The sunken patch, now an almost a foot below the rest of the square, looked less like a worksite and more like a trap for the inattentive or unlucky. Two Púca had already set up warning cones (tiny,

orange, shaped like hollowed-out carrots), and another was unspooling a tape measure and frantically comparing notes with his neighbor. A fourth, whom Dardrad recognized as Grumpy Púca, stood at the edge with arms folded and muttered, "Knew it would do that. No one listens to Grumpy. But does anyone ever listen? No."

Wilem Cartwright arrived at a trot, outpacing most of the humans who'd gathered at the first shout. He made straight for the edge, squinted at the depth, then spat into the hole as if he expected it to spit back.

"Was four inches this morning," Wilem said to no one, and then to everyone. "Now it's ten. Any bets on sundown?"

"Fourteen," said Dardrad, not missing a step. "If it keeps at this pace."

Wilem nodded, already unwrapping a coil of thin, flexible reed from his belt. He crouched beside the nearest Púca and began rigging a simple lever-pulley system to check the stability of the plank layer.

Next out was Prudence. She emerged from her tailor shop at full speed, her skirts a burst of carnation pink and chartreuse green. Even in the half-panic of the moment, her posture was regal, and she made straight for the Púca council without hesitation.

"What's the safety margin?" she called, ignoring the growing crowd. "Can we reinforce, or is this a total collapse?"

"Safe enough if you weigh less than a peapod!" Grumpy Púca barked. "Otherwise, better hope your mother packed you wings."

Prudence didn't miss a beat. "Then we'll have to mark the boundary until a more permanent fix is found. Dardrad, do you have any spare flags? And, Wilem, will the reed hold a crossbar if we lash it to—"

She caught sight of Warren lumbering in from the trade road, and paused long enough to raise a hand in greeting.

Warren had the kind of stride that made the ground feel smaller in his wake. He was shirtless, as usual, his enormous arms the color of an old willow and speckled with soot from the forge. Over one shoulder he carried a neat bundle of spear shafts—six feet each, sharp at one end, and bristling with the promise of intimidation. Over the other, he balanced a full barrel of water, evidently as an afterthought.

"OGRE HELP!" he boomed, at a volume guaranteed to freeze every Púca in their tracks.

Then, as if remembering his audience, he dropped his voice to a refined baritone and said, "I brought posts for a barricade, and some water to settle the dust. Hope it's of service."

Prudence, never one to be intimidated by bulk, clapped twice in approval. "Perfect timing! If you and Dardrad can plant them at the corners, I'll work with the Púca to string flags around the hazard."

Dardrad nodded and took the nearest spear shaft from Warren. The weight felt familiar in his hands, like the handle of a favorite mallet. Together, they circled the depression, driving the points deep at each corner and along the sides. Warren favored the showy method—two-handed, overhead, with a theatrical grunt at the end—but Dardrad's approach was subtler, using the side of his fist to tamp the shaft in with tight, rhythmic blows.

The Púca swarmed behind them, trailing scraps of paper and blue chalk, marking each post with a rune or a number or, in one case, a detailed sketch of a cat playing banjo. Prudence shadowed their progress, plucking strips of fabric from her dress as she moved. In less than a bell, she'd turned the border into a rainbow of streamers, each tied with a sailor's knot and flickering in the breeze.

"Is this your best work?" Wilem called, eyeing the newly-installed flags with mock skepticism. "I once saw you wrap the entire bakery in ribbon for a birthday. This seems—understated."

"It's not a party, Wilem," Prudence replied, her voice sharp as scissors. "It's a warning."

Warren, who'd finished the final post, set his massive hands on his hips and surveyed the perimeter. "Looks like an ogre's birthday party," he observed, deadpan.

Dardrad snorted, then waved him over. "Here," he said, "help me level this one."

Together, they leaned in, Warren pressing down with a thumb the size of a bratwurst, Dardrad wedging a pebble under the base until it stood perfect and plumb.

As they finished, a ripple of commotion rose from the far side of the square. Tyran came barreling down the lane with a spool of yellow

rope clamped under his arm and a look of furious satisfaction plastered across his face.

"My blasted shop nearly refused to give me this!" he shouted, the rope held high like a captured banner. "Had to argue with it for a quarter-candlemark before it'd cough up even a yard. Apparently, it thinks this is an 'improper use of Adventure-Grade Gear!'" He glared at the rope, as if it might sprout lips and argue back.

Wilem, never slow with a comeback, called, "Maybe your shop knows something we don't. Maybe we're about to get invaded by lawn gnomes."

"That would at least be interesting," muttered Dardrad.

Tyran reached the depression, skidded to a halt, and began stringing the rope between posts with a ferocity usually reserved for climbing expeditions. The line glowed in the sun, a warning as bright and final as a lightning bolt. He cinched the last knot and, apparently satisfied, let out a satisfied, "Ha!"

Prudence eyed the boundary, then turned to Dardrad. "Do you think it's done moving?" she asked, low enough that only he could hear.

He considered. "I don't know. Feels like it wants to, but it's not up to me. Or the Púca, or any of us."

She nodded, lips pressed into a thin line. "I suppose we just watch, then."

"OGRE CAN WATCH," Warren said, stepping up with a grin that looked like it belonged on a carnival mask. "Ogre can also smash, if that helps. But ogre prefers to watch."

"OGRE CAN READ," muttered Grumpy Púca, not quite under his breath.

Warren's ears twitched sideways, but he let it slide.

For a moment, the square went quiet. The depression, flagged and fenced, looked almost festive. The townsfolk, gathered in a loose half-circle, seemed relieved but also faintly embarrassed at the fuss. The Púca council huddled near the edge, making notes and sketches and, in Grumpy's case, carving a line of hashmarks into a tiny wooden stick.

Dardrad felt the air shift—just a little. Not enough to call a wind,

but enough that he could smell the bakery two doors over, the heat of Prudence's fresh-dyed fabric, the sharp tang of Tyran's rope. The silence was deep, full of the kind of unspoken worry that only came from doing all you could and knowing it still wasn't enough.

Dalossalda stepped up beside him, arms folded. "You see the Púca's measurements?" she whispered.

He nodded.

"They're not consistent," she said. "Every time they check, the depth is different. By less than a thumb, but still—different. I think it's breathing."

Dardrad looked at her, and for the first time all day, felt a cold knot of fear work its way up from his gut. "Living stone," he said, voice barely more than a breath. "The worst kind."

Dalossalda smiled, a small, private thing. "It's not trying to eat the town," she said. "Just wants someone to notice it's here."

"Someone already did," Dardrad said, eyes on the depression. "We all did."

They stood together, watching as the others set the last of the warning markers and retreated a safe distance. Prudence re-tied her makeshift hem with a pin she kept behind her ear. Warren poured the barrel of water over the fresh dirt at the edges, smoothing the line between old ground and new. Tyran and Wilem debated, briefly and heatedly, whether it was better to leave the rope tight or with a little slack for the next drop.

The Púca, spent and grimy, gathered their gear and marched back toward their shop, singing a song that was half complaint, half celebration. "Another job done, and done well," said the one with the carrot-cone hat. "Maybe tomorrow, the world will hold still for a minute."

Dardrad watched them go, then turned to Dalossalda. "You think it'll hold?"

She shrugged. "It'll hold as long as it needs to. Until the next shift."

He grunted, and felt the ground beneath his feet—solid, for now, but never truly settled.

Above, the sun started its slide toward afternoon. Below, the square's new scar pulsed faintly, waiting.

Dardrad let the others drift away before he walked to the edge of the depression. The late sun angled through the ropes, striping the grass in neat, cautionary bands of yellow and shadow. He waited until the noise had faded—until Tyran’s laughter was a memory and the Púca’s chorus just a rumor behind shuttered windows. Only then did he kneel, hands steady, and press his palm to the line where old turf met new void.

It was colder here, a trick of the air or maybe just the nature of such wounds. He measured the width, then the depth, fingers walking along the drop with the reflex of a man who’d spent years learning to feel what stone was hiding. The floor of the depression wasn’t loose dirt or even compacted clay. It was smooth, perfect, like the floor of a tomb or a vault—an architectural joke only a dwarf would notice.

Dalossalda had been right. It was breathing, but not in the sense of a monster sucking at the roots. It was the measured, patient inhale of something waiting for the next piece to drop.

He shifted his weight, peering into the shadow. There, along the bottom, he saw a trace of blue: not the usual color of town magic, but the deeper, truer blue of bedrock when it’s been forced, cracked, and then fused again by something that doesn’t want to let go.

The pattern was unmistakable. He’d made that pattern, once, in the old city.

He closed his eyes, letting the memory spool out. Years ago, in a place that no longer had a name, he’d run the lines for a vault beneath the council square. He’d been young, certain, and—he could admit it now—just a little drunk on the thrill of making something that would last longer than any of its creators. There’d been a flaw, of course. A hairline in the keystone, invisible until the final set. He’d patched it, sworn no one would ever know, and moved on.

But the flaw had known. It had waited, patient as only stone can be, until the world above demanded more than it could hold. Then, all at once, it had let go.

He could still hear the sound, sometimes, in the crackle of a cold fireplace or the snap of a fresh-cut bone on the block. He had never fixed anything, he’d told himself. Only moved the cracks around.

But this—this was the flaw, and it had followed him.

Dardrad ran his thumb along the edge, feeling for imperfections. None. The line was perfect. Too perfect.

"It wants a keystone," he said, half to himself, half to the air. "It wants what I should have given it the first time."

A shadow fell over him. He looked up to see Warren, standing just inside the new rope fence, arms crossed and face set in an expression that could have meant anger or concern or just the effort of thinking.

"Nice fence," Warren said, voice low and careful. "I'd give it three days before the town's children turn it into a game."

"Two, if the wind keeps up," Dardrad replied.

They stood there for a long beat, the silence between them deeper than the hole at their feet.

"Warren," Dardrad said at last, "you ever wonder what it's like to make a mistake so big it keeps echoing after you're gone?"

Warren considered, eyes narrowing to pale slits. "Ogres don't have the luxury of mistakes. Our stories end with a bad decision."

"Not the way I heard it," Dardrad said, not looking away. "I heard ogres are the reason there's still a bridge across the Firewater Gorge."

Warren's ears did their side-flop thing. "If you believe the stories."

"Don't you?"

Warren smiled, just a twitch of white in the green. "Stories are important. Even the ones that never happened."

Dardrad grunted, then shifted back to the depression. "This isn't a story. It's a flaw. I left it behind, and now it's taken root under the whole town."

Warren set his knuckles on the ground, lowering himself until they were eye to eye. The effect was less comical than usual. Maybe it was the light, or maybe it was just the weight of things. "You know," Warren began, and Dardrad braced for the change in voice, "I once heard a tale about your ancestors. Dwarves from the Forbidden Continent."

Dardrad snorted. "We were never that interesting."

"Shut up and listen," Warren said, but not unkindly. "These dwarves, they tunneled beneath the sea to escape wild ogres. They dug and they dug, and when the salt water broke through, they had a choice: swim for the surface, or hold the line while the last of their

kind made it out. So the bravest dwarves—the stonecrafters, the ones who loved the work more than their own beards—they built a temporary keystone. Knowing it would only hold for a short while, but hoping it would be enough.”

He paused, as if waiting for Dardrad to protest. Dardrad didn’t.

“The tunnel collapsed, of course,” Warren continued. “But not before the last of the dwarves reached the shore and found new stone to call home. That’s why, when you cross the sea, the first thing you see is a chain of broken islands. They’re the bones of your ancestors’ best work.”

He let the silence settle again, then leaned in close. “You see, sometimes the only job is to hold it together long enough. Even if it means taking the weight yourself.”

Dardrad laughed, sharp and a little bitter. “That’s a good story, ogre.”

Warren shrugged. “I heard it from a dwarf, so it must be true.”

They watched the depression for a while, listening to the distant calls of evening birds and the not-so-distant argument of two Púca over whose turn it was to fetch supper.

Dardrad shifted to his feet, brushing the dirt from his hands. “You’re right about one thing,” he said. “It’s time I stopped running from what I am.”

Warren stood too, rising so fast the grass bent away from his boots. “You’ll need help,” he said.

“I know,” Dardrad replied. “But this time, I’ll make the flaw perfect.”

Warren clapped him on the shoulder, nearly driving him back into the hole, then strode off with the peculiar lightness that only came from knowing you’d done what needed doing.

Dardrad stayed a moment longer, tracing the line of the depression with his eyes. He could see the pattern now, not just in the ground but in himself.

He would fix the flaw, or he would hold it together as long as he could.

Either way, it was better than moving the cracks around.

He set his jaw and turned for home, the plan forming with every step.

The stairs to the warren were never easy, but tonight they felt like a gentle slope. Dardrad ducked through the trapdoor at the back of the butcher shop, Dalossalda right behind, and the wood panel closed overhead with a muffled, final thump. The first steps down were stone, then polished obsidian, each one carved to catch the light in a way that made the descent feel like falling through liquid midnight.

By the second landing, the air changed. Cooler, more still, with the faintest whiff of tea and the lingering salt of sweat on stone. Dardrad let his hand run along the wall, feeling the grain of the black quartz and the lines he'd set himself in those early, frantic days after the exile. Down here, the world made sense: every force balanced, every load carried, every tension diffused.

He glanced over his shoulder. Dalossalda was smiling, the expression so rare it made him want to freeze the moment for study. "You realize," she said, voice low and amused, "that ogre's story was pure fabrication."

He snorted, then kept moving. "Every ogre story is. That's why they're worth telling."

She made a sound—part laugh, part cough—and the sound bounced down the stairwell, fracturing into a thousand tiny echoes.

The warren opened into the main gallery, then narrowed again into the corridor that led to the transit chamber. Here, the walls had been worked to a glass finish, and the ceiling arched so high that even the echo of footsteps seemed to get lost on the way back. The floor underfoot had no seams, no joints—just a single run of blue-black stone, smooth as butter and cold as truth.

At the door to the chamber, Dalossalda paused. She pulled her hair back with one hand, then pinched her earlobe as if reminding herself it was still attached. "You sure you want to do this tonight?" she said, the mockery replaced with a note of real concern. "We could wait a day. Think it over. Make a plan."

Dardrad shook his head. "If I think about it, I'll lose my nerve." He pushed the door open, and together they stepped inside.

The transit chamber was a cylinder, perfectly round, just wide enough for two dwarves and a workbench. The only light came from a bank of crystals embedded high on the far wall, glowing with the cool, honest blue of untapped bedrock. At the center of the room was a plinth, less a pedestal than a lump of unfinished stone, and at its heart—visible even before they crossed the threshold—was the flaw.

It was a line, a crack so fine you couldn't feel it but you could see it, running from floor to ceiling, never quite matching up with itself at either end. Dardrad stared at it, the way you stare at an old scar on your hand, half proud and half ashamed.

Dalossalda was already in motion, crossing to the alcove where they kept their tools. She selected a handful of the best: a broad chisel, a tuning hammer, and a set of crystal wedges. She handed Dardrad the hammer, then set the rest in careful order on the lip of the plinth.

"You ever regret leaving the old city?" Dardrad asked, just to fill the silence.

Dalossalda cocked her head. "Not since I found you. And not since I saw the mountain at sunrise, either. Why?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes I wonder if the flaw wasn't in the stone, but in me. Maybe I never wanted to finish it."

She didn't answer, but her hand settled on his wrist for a moment—a tiny gesture, but enough.

She circled the plinth, tracing the crack with a fingertip. The blue light intensified, as if the flaw was hungry for attention. Dardrad watched, his own hands sweating against the handle of the hammer.

At last, Dalossalda placed her palms flat on the top of the stone and closed her eyes. When she spoke, her voice was the voice of a craftsman at work, not a wife or a friend or a lover. "You need to brace the seam. Draw the force to the center. But if you overdo it, the whole thing could shatter."

Dardrad nodded, understanding the geometry without needing to see it. "Do you want me to start, or do you want the honor?"

She opened her eyes. "It's your flaw," she said. "But I'll hold the line."

He set the first wedge at the base of the crack, then tapped it gently with the tuning hammer. The sound it made was not musical, but it was true—a single note that ran up the shaft of the tool and into the marrow of his bones. He set the second wedge higher, and the note doubled, the two vibrations merging into a chord that was, for the first time in years, in tune with itself.

Dalossalda braced the plinth, her hands steady, her feet planted just so. As Dardrad worked, she sang—not a song, exactly, but a series of numbers and angles, old measurements from the city below the city, reminders of the way the world could be if you cared enough to set it right.

Dardrad added wedges, tuning each one until the crack began to close. The blue light at the heart of the flaw grew brighter, then softer, then bright again. Sweat stung his eyes, and every strike of the hammer hurt, but in a way that felt honest, even redemptive.

When he reached the top, the crack was still visible, but it no longer looked dangerous. It looked like a seam in fine leather, or a healed bone.

He stepped back, and Dalossalda withdrew her hands.

The chamber was silent. The blue light pulsed, slow and sure, then faded into a gentle, living glow.

Dardrad let out a long breath. "That's it," he said. "It's done."

Dalossalda touched the seam, tracing its new line with a pride she didn't bother to hide. "It'll hold," she said.

He looked at her, really looked, and saw not the old apprentice, not the exile, but the master she'd become. "You've been fixing things for years," he said, wonder in his voice. "You just never stopped."

She shrugged. "Someone has to." She tilted her head, a sly smile creeping in. "Besides, I love the work."

He laughed, the sound echoing off the walls like rain on slate.

They cleaned the chamber together, brushing away the fine dust, setting the tools in their cradles. When they left, Dardrad paused at the threshold, running his hand along the wall one last time. It felt warm, as if the stone was thanking him.

On the way up, Dalossalda said, "If Warren asks, tell him the story was right all along."

Dardrad grinned. "Never lie to an ogre. They remember."

She took his hand, and together they climbed back toward the surface.

Above, the world waited. But below, in the heart of the warren, the flaw was mended, the line made perfect, and the memory of old failures set to rest—if only for a while.

And that, Dardrad thought, was all anyone could ever ask.

seventeen

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THE DAY BEGAN beneath the land, where time measured itself in silence and the fine drift of dust. Here, the air was so still it seemed to magnify every sound—the distant drip of water, the slow tick of a cooling forge, the echo of their own steps across the transit chamber floor.

Dardrad stood in the blue light of the chamber, staring down the length of the main gallery toward the plinth at the center. The new Keystock, fresh-chipped and still sweating from last night's finish, waited there—angular, perfect, so flawless it almost offended him.

Dalossalda circled the stone once, checking the set of the wedges and the orientation of the grain. She ran her fingers over the seams, face unreadable. "It's ready," she said, voice barely above the hush of the air. "Or as ready as anything will ever be."

Dardrad grunted. The sound felt too small for the room.

He stepped up to the plinth. The Keystock's surface was cool, but not cold—more like a living thing at rest than inert matter. It fit the basin so tightly he could see his own reflection in the polish of the obsidian rim. He laid his palms flat atop it and let the chill seep into his skin.

He could almost hear the flaw in the old dwarven city, the sound it made as it split: a soft, disappointing sigh before the world collapsed. The memory twisted in his gut, threatening to drag him down with it. This time would be different, he told himself. It had to be.

Dalossalda set a steadying hand on his shoulder. "You're shaking," she said, not judging.

He shrugged, but the motion nearly set his teeth rattling. "Just the weight of it," he managed. "Never sunk one this deep before. Not for good."

She squeezed, just enough to remind him she was real. "You'll do it. That's what we do. We fix the world. Solidify its foundations."

He wished he could believe her as easily as she spoke. He stared at the Keystock until his vision blurred.

"Here goes nothing," he said, and it was meant to be a joke, but his throat caught on the last word.

Dalossalda leaned in close. "Remember your training. Feel the grain of the stone. Let it guide you. Don't force it." She paused, then added: "And don't hold your breath like an idiot, or you'll pass out halfway through and leave me to explain to the Púca why the town cracked in two."

He snorted, which helped. His hands steadied.

He closed his eyes and tried to picture the blueprint, the one she'd drawn for him years ago—lines running straight and true, every force met and balanced. Not just a fix, but a cure. A thing that would last.

The silence stretched, broken only by the slow, even cadence of their breathing.

He spoke, not to her but to the Keystock itself. "If you're going to break me, do it clean this time."

Dalossalda let go of his shoulder, but stayed close. "You've got this, love. I believe in you."

He opened his eyes. The stone waited.

He spread his fingers, feeling for imperfections, for the smallest hitch or tremor. There were none. He set his weight, rolling his shoulders the way he always did before a hard job. Then, with a force that was more surrender than effort, he pushed—not down, but in, letting himself sink into the memory of all the rock he'd ever shaped.

The Keystock trembled under his hands, and for the briefest moment he felt the old fear bite at him: the terror that the flaw would open, that everything he touched would turn to ruin. But Dalossalda's words echoed in his mind—feel the grain, let it guide you—and he followed the line, steady and sure, even as the edges of the world began to slip.

He felt the shift, the way the stone softened, opening itself to his will. He let himself fall—not fast, but with purpose, each layer of earth giving way in a long, slow spiral. The air thinned, his vision blurred, and the only thing that kept him from flying apart was the memory of her hand on his shoulder, the sound of her voice calling him home.

When the bottom came, it came gentle. The chamber around him faded, replaced by a darkness so complete it hummed in his bones.

Dardrad opened his mouth, found he still had breath, and whispered, “Now, we begin.”

The Keystock answered, the vibration running up his arms and settling in his chest. It was not the voice of failure. It was the promise of something holding, at last.

And above, he could almost hear Dalossalda's soft, approving laugh.

He pressed harder, ready for what came next.

The descent into stone was supposed to be gentle—a steady, slow-mounting pressure, the world thinning around you until the only thing that mattered was the line you carried from the surface. But today the bedrock met Dardrad like a closed fist.

At first it was just the weight of the air above, thickening as he pressed into the Keystock. Then came the squeeze: joints popping, ribs groaning, the sense that every inch of him was about to buckle. The blue-black grain of the obsidian rim blurred at the edges, tunneling his vision. He set his teeth and gripped harder.

The Keystock pushed back. *You don't belong, it seemed to say. You aren't worthy. You aren't skilled. You can't do this.*

The flaw was not in the stone, he realized now, but in himself. That was the lesson the world kept teaching him. He'd always been too quick to force, too stubborn to yield. It was why he'd made good arches, and bad friends.

A flash—a memory so sharp it sliced: the council in the old city, faces gray with dust and fear, their eyes on him as the capstone failed and the ceiling came down. The cold hand of Censure on his shoulder, the boot to his back as they cast him out. The walk to the new town, every step an admission that he'd never fix what he'd broken.

He forced the memories away, but the stone held onto them, grinding them up and pressing the grit into his eyes.

His knuckles whitened. The sweat on his brow turned cold, then vanished as the air was squeezed from his lungs. The stone's hum rose, a pitch just high enough to make his teeth ache. Every part of him wanted to recoil, to snap his arms back and let the Keystock shatter under the strain.

Not this time.

He ground the thought through his jaw, forcing it into the stone. "Not this time," he said, but there was no sound, only vibration. He wasn't running.

He took a breath—raw, scraping, but real. Then another. He eased his weight, remembering what Dalossalda had always said: "Don't fight the grain, Dardrad. Let it take you, then make it yours."

He shifted, not down, but out, spreading his presence across the whole of the Keystock's face, letting it draw him in. The tension changed—less the threat of breaking, more the risk of being lost, a quicksand of memory and will.

And in the swirl, he heard her.

"Ease your weight," Dalossalda called, her voice so near he could smell the lye in her hair. "Even across the surface. That's it. The stone remembers you, Dardrad. Make it remember you right."

He did as she said. Not by thinking, but by letting his hands, his bones, do the work. He pictured the arch—her arch—line after line running through the stone, every force balanced, every joint true.

The Keystock sang, the note climbing, then plateauing as he reached the seam at the heart of the flaw. Here, the resistance was a living thing: a wound that refused to close, a scar that remembered the pain of opening. He pressed into it, not as a cure, but as an apology.

He let the guilt in. All of it—the ruined vault, the lost city, the look

in Dalossalda's eyes the first time he'd told her what he'd done. He poured it into the seam, and waited.

The chamber vibrated, dust motes swirling in slow, lazy spirals. Light from the wall crystals stuttered, then came back doubled, refracted in thousands of tiny tears. The pressure spiked, but Dardrad held on, feeling the crack soften, then close.

He could almost see the line of force, running from his hands into the Keystock and down through every layer of rock beneath the town. He followed it, and found it waiting at the bottom—the flaw, the patch, the scar. He let himself merge with it, not as a fixer, but as part of the flaw itself.

The hum dropped to a low, warm purr. The pain eased.

Above, Dalossalda's voice echoed: "You're almost there, love. Bring it home."

He reached for the last wedge, the one that would set the arch for good. He drove it in—not with a hammer, but with the memory of every time he'd failed and tried again. The seam closed, the line held.

The world went still.

For a moment, he thought he'd blacked out. The darkness was absolute, and there was no sensation at all—no pain, no sound, not even the beat of his own heart. Then, faintly, a warmth: Dalossalda's hand on his shoulder, just like before.

He opened his eyes.

The Keystock was beneath his hands, solid and steady. The flaw was gone.

He looked up, and Dalossalda was there, kneeling beside him, face flushed with pride and relief.

"You did it," she said, and the words were a balm.

He let himself rest, hands still pressed to the stone, feeling the echo of what they'd made.

Above, the dust drifted down, settling over the whole of the transit chamber in a soft, shimmering film.

And for the first time since the city fell, Dardrad Pebbleblade felt whole.

He smiled, then let the darkness take him, just for a moment.

Then it began.

It started as a slow, low groan—a sound so deep it shivered the walls of the warren and made every lamp flicker. Dardrad felt it first in his elbows, then in the roots of his teeth, and finally in the marrow of his spine: the old city's death-rattle, echoed here, now, as the flaw healed.

The Keystock vibrated under his hands, the hum rising to a bone-shaking tremolo. For a dizzy moment, Dardrad thought he might break apart—every regret, every hidden weakness, pulled to the surface and spun into a tight, trembling line.

Sweat soaked through his shirt. His arms locked, every muscle cramping. The stone's glow—faint at first—spread outward, pulsing in time with his own battered heartbeat. He pressed on, jaw set, refusing to yield. This was the work. This was the test.

He saw the surface of the town as if he hovered just above it, the sunken square bordered by its riot of warning flags and Púca handiwork. He felt every flaw, every seam in the rock, every memory of failure held in the ground below North Pointe. He saw them—thousands, each a hairline, none alone enough to matter, but together making a map of everything he had ever been afraid to admit.

He sent himself into those cracks, not as a force to erase them, but as a will to draw them inward. One by one, the flaws closed, the pressure building with each seam that found its mate and locked tight. The resistance fought him, then yielded, then clung to him like the last breath of a dying storm.

He reached for the center—the point where the flaw began, where the world gave way and never quite repaired itself. He pushed harder. The glow in the stone swelled, light filling the chamber, running down the old transit lines in a flood of blue fire. The hum broke, became a shout, and then—

CRACK.

The sound split the warren from base to ceiling, echoing in the transit chamber and up through every shaft and vent to the surface above. It was the sound of something breaking, yes, but also the sound of something finding its final shape.

He felt the ground shift. In his mind's eye, the sunken patch in the square jerked upward, snapping back to level with the rest of the world. The posts and flags and Púca barricades toppled in a wild spray of colors and curses. He felt the crack lines vanish, every wound in the earth drawing itself shut and sealing behind him.

Dardrad slumped forward, breath rasping, arms refusing to let go of the Keystock. The stone was cool now, the glow faded to a soft, contented hum. He sagged there, letting the stillness creep back in.

A hand found his shoulder—Dalossalda, solid and reassuring. She helped him up, careful with his ribs, then steered him toward the stairs.

"You're a mess," she said, but her eyes were shining.

He grunted, too tired to pretend otherwise.

It took three tries to get up the first step, and by the third he was cursing the world, the town, and every dwarf who ever thought stonework was worth the trouble. Dalossalda laughed, the sound bright and bouncing off the obsidian, and pulled him along until he managed a rhythm.

They climbed, passing through the gallery and into the cool hush of the main hall. The air above ground smelled different now—like bread, and green things, and the living world.

When they reached the trapdoor, Dardrad paused, hand braced against the stone. He felt the world through it—solid, true, holding. The flaw was gone. Not just patched, but part of the new line, stronger than before.

He opened the door and squinted into the morning light.

The square was chaos, but not the bad kind. The sunken ground had popped up flush with the rest, leaving the fence posts leaning in wild confusion. The blue rope snaked across the grass like a child's drawing, and the Púca were everywhere—dozens of them, racing around with tape measures and notepads and, in one case, a tiny can of orange paint.

Gardener Púca ran in a circle, measuring the newly-level grass and arguing with a neighbor about whether it had always been that height or if the world was playing tricks. Earthmover Púca lay face-down on

the turf, ear pressed to the ground, listening for aftershocks. Speculator Púca climbed a post, looked out across the square, and declared, "The miracle's taken, boys! She's as tight as a barrel of pickles in a blizzard!" Even Grumpy Púca seemed pleased.

Warren strolled in from the bakery, a hunk of fresh bread in one hand and the other shading his eyes. He saw Dardrad on the stoop and gave a thumbs-up, then broke into a grin so wide his pointed ears nearly met behind his head.

Dardrad took a single step onto the square. The ground was perfect—better than before, even. He stomped once, twice. It held.

Dalossalda came up beside him, arm around his back, and said, "You did it."

He said nothing, but let his hand fall to the stone at his feet. It was smooth and cool, the seam invisible, the work invisible except to those who knew how to look.

A parade of Púca converged, swarming around his boots and up the steps. The first three congratulated him in unison, the next two argued about the sequence of events, and the last just patted his calf and offered him a carrot.

He took it, because why not.

The rest of the town gathered in, not all at once, but in the way of places where good news travels as quickly as trouble. Cole ambled across the green, arms folded, eyes flicking from the ground to Dardrad and back. Wilem and Prudence arrived together, bickering softly about whose flags had survived the miracle, but both looking at Dardrad with the sly respect of people who knew how hard it was to hold anything together for long.

He was tired, but it was a good tired—the kind that said the job was done right.

For a while, he just watched. The sun rose, the square filled, the world went on.

He looked at Dalossalda and saw pride. Not the noisy kind, but the quiet, lasting sort that ran like a seam through good stone.

He stood straighter, and for the first time in a moon, the weight on his shoulders was gone.

They watched the Púca argue and rebuild, watched the children turn the fallen flags into capes, watched the day begin again.

He leaned over to Dalossalda and whispered, "If Warren ever says I told you so, I'm moving us to the next mountain."

She smiled. "We could do worse."

And together, they walked into the square, hand in hand, part of the world that held.

eighteen

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BY THE NEXT MORNING, the warren felt smaller, and Dardrad's whole body ached in a way that could only mean success. There was a different hush to the place—a fullness in the air, as if the walls had drawn in and the floor remembered every step he'd ever taken. When he rolled out of bed (and grunted, because sleeping on a stone shelf was not for the soft-boned), he found Dalossalda already dressed and sipping the last of the black tea from the night before. She met his eyes, smiled, and said, "You snored. Like a band saw."

He smiled back, a little crookedly. "That's how you know I'm alive."

She set her mug down. "We should go up. See how it held."

The steps to the surface felt like a climb out of history. They moved in tandem, hands brushing over the polished obsidian railings, feet landing with careful certainty. At the trapdoor, Dardrad paused, listening—half for trouble, half for the familiar sound of Púca mischief. He heard only the wind and the gentle knock of signboards in the square.

He pushed the hatch, and the morning light poured down in a spill of gold so thick it stung his eyes. The town square gleamed, the repaired earth level as a tabletop, still marked by the confusion of

yesterday's flags and the odd angle of a fallen fence post. It all looked exactly as it should, which meant everything was a little bit off.

Dalossalda surfaced behind him, face set but soft at the eyes. They stood at the edge of their own doorway, letting the air bite at their cheeks and the sun do its best to bleach the tired out of their bones.

Across the square, Cole Coleson stood frozen, half a basket of winter greens in one hand and the other hand limp at his side. He wasn't moving—wasn't even breathing, by the look of him. Dardrad followed his line of sight, and for a moment his heart dropped somewhere behind his ribs.

Alred's dry goods store was closed. Not just closed, but changed: the old, familiar sign gone, replaced with a single sheet of paper in the window. The script was large enough for even the most stubborn Púca to read at a hundred paces.

Permanently Closed.

The two words pulsed in the morning light, black as stone and final as a gravestone. Dardrad felt the weight of it, and for a second he forgot the ache in his arms and the pounding in his head. He just felt cold, all the way through.

Dalossalda made a quiet sound, then nudged him. "Come on. We should go to him."

They crossed the square together, boots crunching over yesterday's work. As they passed the patched depression, Dardrad couldn't help but stomp once, just to see if it would give. It didn't.

Cole didn't seem to hear them approach. He just stood there, staring at the paper in the window, lips moving as if he was trying to make the words mean something else. He wore his best shirt, but there was a smudge of dirt on the collar, and his hair stuck up in wild arcs like he'd run hands through it too many times.

"Cole," Dardrad said, soft as he could manage.

Cole flinched. The basket dropped, vegetables rolling across the stone in a scatter of pale green and bitter white. He bent to pick them up, then stopped, hands hanging useless at his knees.

"He's gone," Cole said, voice empty. "Just gone. I came for barley flour, I thought maybe he'd come back since the stuff was still here, and—" He gestured helplessly at the sign.

Dardrad crouched beside him, careful of his knees. "Did you try knocking?"

"Of course I tried knocking," Cole said, and for a moment he was himself again, indignant and alive. "The door's locked. There's nothing inside. Not even the cat."

They both looked, as if expecting to see Alred behind the counter, polishing a scale or reading one of his ledgers. But the shop was hollow, the glass inside the window reflecting only the street and the emptiness behind it.

Dalossalda ran her hand over Cole's shoulder, anchoring him. "Maybe he left something for you. He always said you were like a son."

Cole's face folded. "He never said that. He said I was as stubborn as an unripe turnip. That's not the same."

Dardrad stood, feeling the stiffness in his back and the way the world wanted to tilt. He pressed his palm to the glass. It was cold, and behind the window, nothing. No shelves, no inventory, no ledgers—just blank, whitewashed wall.

He thought of the stone Alred had left him, the perfect oval now tucked away in his apron pocket. A marker, a goodbye, and maybe a guide for whatever came next.

Above them, the sun brightened. A strange hush fell, and for the first time, Dardrad realized that not a single Púca was visible in the square. Even the bakery was shuttered, the morning's bread left cooling in tidy, lonely rows behind the glass. The only sound was the wind and the distant clatter of a cart somewhere down the trade road.

Then, just as suddenly, a pulse. It wasn't a sound, or a movement, exactly, but a feeling: a slow, deliberate thrum that passed through the soles of Dardrad's boots and up into his jaw, making his teeth click together. The glass in the shopfront shivered, just a hair, then settled. Dardrad jerked his hand back.

Inside the shop, something flickered. It was as if the world behind the window had turned to water for a moment—whitewashed walls swirling and then evaporating, replaced by a ripple of blue light. Shelves, bins, jars, all wavered, then collapsed inward and vanished.

Even the dust on the sill was gone. The shop was not just closed, it was erased.

Cole swore under his breath, a word so sharp and unfamiliar Dardrad nearly smiled.

The magical aftertaste lingered—a sweet, ozone scent that mixed with the bread and made his tongue tingle. The air in the square grew heavy, then thin, as if the world had taken a breath and was waiting to exhale.

Across the square, Leota stood in her doorway, framed in the black trim of her house, hair wild and eyes glassy with the shock of the moment. She lifted her hand to her chest, the gesture halfway between panic and wonder. She was watching the same nothing, but her gaze seemed to go deeper than the shop. She stood perfectly still, then closed her eyes and drew a sharp, deliberate breath. When she opened them again, she looked straight at Dardrad.

He met her gaze, and for a moment it was like they were the only two awake in the world. She nodded, slow and solemn, then vanished back into her house.

Cole still knelt in the street, surrounded by spilled vegetables. Dalossalda bent over him, not speaking, just a steady presence at his side.

Dardrad found himself staring at the shop, the paper sign in the window now unreadable against the blank wall behind it. The sense of magic—of things shifting and locking into place—was everywhere, like the pop and crackle of a new log settling into a fire.

He pressed his palm to the stone at his feet, feeling the echo of what he'd done, and what had been taken.

"We did it," he said, not sure if it was meant as comfort for Cole, for Dalossalda, or for himself. "It held."

Dalossalda looked up at him, a line of worry cutting across her brow. "But there's a cost," she said.

Dardrad nodded. He felt it in his bones. "There's always a cost."

For a long moment, the square was silent except for the sound of Cole's breathing and the distant, determined song of a single morning bird.

Then, as if cued by the universe, the Púca emerged from their shop.

One by one, they spilled out in a procession—hats adjusted, beards combed, faces solemn. The leader, Gardener Púca, carried a tiny wreath of braided rye, which he hung on the handle of Alred's door with great care.

They formed a line, hats off, and stood in the sun, facing the empty shop. It was a kind of memorial, and for the first time since Dardrad had met them, none of the Púca said a word.

Cole pushed himself up, wiped his face on his sleeve, and picked up his basket. He stood with Dalossalda and Dardrad, the three of them watching as the Púca honored what had gone.

The light of the day felt sharper, truer.

And for a while, they just stood, and let it be.

The magic had changed the town, maybe for good. But the world held, and so did they.



The sun had shifted by the time anything else happened—maybe two bells, maybe less, but enough for the tension in the square to settle into something almost normal. The wreath on Alred's door gleamed with dew, and the Púca had dispersed, leaving behind the faint, spicy scent of rye and the promise of a thousand tiny feet ready to re-measure the world if it so much as dared to move.

Dalossalda and Cole lingered in the shade, talking in low voices that carried just enough to let Dardrad know they weren't talking about the shop anymore. He leaned against the old block in front of his door, letting the exhaustion soak through him and into the stone, and tried to remember the last time the world had felt this still.

The answer was never, and he knew it.

It was the rear door of the restaurant that broke the moment. Not a slam, or a bang, but a deliberate, measured click, like the sound of a tool returning to its place. Out stepped Llewel, the Mountain Elf, dressed as always in starched black and white—but today, he wore a new apron. It shimmered, faintly, in the afternoon light, a blue so pale it almost looked like water. The apron clung to him like a spell, and every seam was set perfect.

What changed wasn't the clothes. It was the man inside. Llewel's eyes, usually a cool, unbothered blue, now held a depth that made Dardrad's skin crawl: a kind of double vision, as if there were two of him standing inside the same space. He walked with his usual grace, but the steps seemed to pull at the world, the way a lodestone draws iron from the air.

He made his way across the grass in a straight line, not even glancing at the empty shopfront or the wreath. He nodded once to Dalossalda and Cole, then fixed Dardrad with a gaze that had no humor in it at all.

"Master Pebbleblade," Llewel said, voice clean and sharp. "I will require a standing order."

Dardrad blinked, twice. "For the restaurant?"

"For the new menu," Llewel said, as if this explained everything.

He recited, without pause, a list of ingredients. Three Stone-Ram flanks, fresh. Six lengths of braid-sausage, the kind only Dardrad made. Root vegetables, nothing pickled or brined. Three dozen eggs. And—here he paused—"A single cut of the oldest beef you have. Hung at least a moon, bone in. Unseasoned, but not unadorned."

Dardrad felt the shop's whisper before he even registered the words. The cut, the age, the precise request: it was not just a meal, but a marker. The kind of food you served at a wake, or to honor a memory that you didn't dare let go.

He swallowed. "I have it," he said, and the words felt heavier than they should.

Llewel nodded, but did not smile. "For tomorrow, if possible. I anticipate...guests."

Dardrad nodded back, automatic. "Of course."

Llewel turned to leave, but then paused at the edge of the step. "And Master Pebbleblade?"

"Yes?"

"I will also require a stone," Llewel said, voice pitched so only Dardrad could hear. "The kind Alred would have chosen. For the counter."

Dardrad felt his throat close. "I know the one," he said.

Llewel inclined his head, then vanished back into the restaurant, the new apron glinting one last time before the door shut behind him.

Cole broke the silence. "He's not the same," he said, not quite a question.

"No," Dardrad replied. "He's not."

Dalossalda pressed her hand over his, just for a second. "Go get the meat," she said. "We'll be here."

He let himself rest against her for one more moment, then turned for the shop.

The town might have lost its history, but it still needed to eat. And someone had to feed it.

He stepped inside, feeling the cold stone under his feet and the slow, familiar warmth of the shop settle over him. The voice was still there, whispering old secrets, promising that if he listened, he could make anything last a little longer.

He hoped it was enough.

He was halfway through sharpening the cleaver when Cole's shadow blocked the light. He looked up, expecting the usual nervous shuffle, but instead found Cole's face set in a hard, unfamiliar line.

"Come with me," Cole said, voice taut as bowstring.

Dalossalda was right behind, her braid tight and her jaw tighter.

Dardrad set the knife down and followed, confusion outweighing fatigue. He expected to see the wreath knocked over, or maybe a line of Púca up to fresh mischief. Instead, Cole marched straight across the square and up the side path to the rear of Llewel's restaurant, eyes fixed dead ahead.

The Mountain Elf was waiting for them, already outside and stacking crates by the back step with the care of someone arranging artifacts in a museum. He didn't look up as they approached, just finished the row and set his hands to his sides.

Cole didn't waste time. "Where did you put it?" he demanded. "The supplies. The grains, the ropes, the tools—Alred's whole inventory. It's all gone."

Llewel looked at him, and for the first time, Dardrad saw a flicker of surprise—small, but real. "You noticed quickly," he said.

Cole stepped forward. "Of course I noticed. Who do you think kept

half the town running when you were too busy serving soup to count it?"

A line twitched at the corner of Llewel's mouth, gone before Dardrad could read it. "Alred has... completed himself," Llewel said, choosing the words as if they were parts of a recipe. "He is not gone, exactly, but finished with this phase. The rest of it—the shop's magic, the gift of providing what is needed—has passed here. To me."

Cole's fists clenched, then opened. "You're the new dry goods store," he said, flat. "But you're a restaurant."

"It seems I am both," Llewel replied. "I was as surprised as you."

Dalossalda leaned in, voice pitched low. "That's not how it usually goes."

"No," said Llewel, and this time there was no artifice. "But nothing about this place has ever followed the usual pattern. Not for me, and not for you."

He gestured for them to follow. Inside, the kitchen was brighter than Dardrad remembered, every surface gleaming with the same faint shimmer as Llewel's apron. But at the far end of the counter, where once there was only a rack for wine or a scatter of pastries, now stood a set of polished oak shelves. On them were jars and parcels—flour, beans, spices, rope, oil, bandages, tools for mending everything from shoes to hearts.

Dardrad reached for a coil of rope. It looked ordinary, but the moment he lifted it, he felt the pulse: not just rope, but hope, knotted into every twist.

"You've got Alred's stock," he said, almost in awe.

"I have what the town needs," Llewel replied. "That was always the point."

Cole ran his hands along the shelf, eyes wide. "Even the rock sugar," he whispered. "And the blue paper for the Púca. He said he'd never give that up."

"He didn't," Llewel said, voice gentle. "He left it for you."

Dalossalda touched a jar of salt, then looked at Dardrad. "You hear it, too?"

He nodded. The shop's whisper, always a low comfort in his bones,

was still there—but now it harmonized with a new note, clear and persistent, like the ring of a bell in the cold morning.

Llewel closed his hands over the counter, then spoke, not as a restaurateur but as someone who had spent too many nights alone in a world that didn't quite fit. "My restaurant now serves the last meal for who you are, and the first provision for who you will become."

Dardrad laughed, because it was either laugh or cry, and he was too tired to cry.

"Can I have some of the rope?" Cole asked, voice small again.

"Take as much as you need," Llewel said.

They did, each gathering a token—rope for Cole, salt for Dalos-salda, and for Dardrad, a stone from the top shelf. It was the granite Alred had left him, now polished to a mirror and set in a place of honor.

The magic in the air was undeniable. It wasn't the wild, ferocious kind that tore towns apart or set forests ablaze. It was the magic of a world made right, even if just for a single bell.

Dardrad set the stone on the counter, feeling it settle and lock into place. For the first time in a long time, he felt like he belonged.

They left the kitchen together, stepping back into the square where the world waited—level, whole, and holding.

Maybe it would last. Maybe it wouldn't.

But for now, it was enough.

nineteen

. . .

DAWN on the trade road was always a show-off, painting the mountains in blood-orange and blue long before the town had any business being awake. Dardrad was not a fan of mornings, but he liked the quiet, and he liked the peace that settled over the smithy when even the forge's old stones felt too lazy to hold a grudge. This morning, it was just himself, Warren, and Cole Coleson, clustered outside the smithy's front stoop where the air already smelled faintly of coal and promise.

Cole stood with arms folded, boots planted wide. He watched the new day with the hard stare of a farmer whose fields were still sleeping. Dardrad sipped tea from a mug as wide as his fist, using the edge of the anvil as a table. Warren loomed behind them, bent over a massive horseshoe and humming an off-key lullaby that vibrated the doors on their hinges.

"Think we'll get rain today?" Cole asked, breaking the silence.

"Not before noon," Dardrad said. "Sun's too bold. She'll scare off the clouds."

Warren snorted, which from an ogre was like a sheep sneezing inside a barrel. "Sun's only brave when she's got a mountain to hide behind. Wait until she's halfway up, then she turns shy."

Cole smiled, but it was a shallow thing. Dardrad noticed the set of his jaw, the pinched lines that ran from nose to chin. Since Alred had gone, Cole had spoken less and watched more, as if he were keeping tally of every change in the square and waiting for someone to tell him it was safe to breathe again.

The quiet broke with a bang as the town's main gate slammed open. The three of them turned, mugs and tools frozen mid-air, to watch the approaching figure: a traveler with wild, salt-and-pepper hair, eyes as wide as tea saucers, and a stride that said he was late for every appointment in his life.

He pelted down the lane, arms pumping, boots sending up rooster tails of frost. By the time he reached the smithy, his breathing was a bellows and his face had gone from pale to alarming pink.

"Is there a—huff—is there a—huff—store for food here?" he demanded.

"Grocery's in there," Cole said, pointing at his own front door, "but we're a little low on the fresh stuff. I can check the farm for—"

"No, no, not that." The traveler's eyes darted, desperate. "I need dry grain. The kind that's been packed for a moon or more. I'm meant to leave in two—two—" He paused, fumbled a battered notebook out of his jacket, scanned it, and blurted, "Two bells. No more. If I don't—"

Warren squinted at the man. "You on a quest, or just in a hurry to visit the privy?"

The traveler ignored the jibe, gaze landing on Cole's basket of root vegetables. "Do you have it? Just a handful will do. I'll pay double."

Cole's mouth opened, then shut. He shot Dardrad a look—equal parts helpless and apologetic. "That would have been Alred's job. Dry grain, seeds, the like. Sometimes I keep a bit, but I'm out for another three days, at least."

"Try the restaurant," Warren offered, rolling the horseshoe in his hand like a coin. "Mountain Elf can get you anything if you're polite."

Dardrad nodded, then added, "Llewel's a better cook than a shop-keeper, but he's got a dry goods counter now."

The traveler swore—politely, but with the conviction of someone raised by sailors. He turned in a jittery circle, scanning the storefronts.

"I didn't even see a shop on the way in," he said, a little softer.

Cole's face crumpled, as if remembering the sign on Alred's window all over again. "There isn't, anymore. Although most of the shops are inside the town gate, our dry good shop... closed."

Dardrad watched the exchange, the way the hope drained from Cole's face and left only the sharp edges behind. He wondered how many more times they would have to watch someone reach for a memory that had vanished overnight.

"I'll check with Llewel," Cole said, straightening his sleeves. "Wait here, or go on to the square. I'll catch up."

The traveler nodded, still clutching his notebook like a life raft. He gave the group a tight, nervous bow and jogged off in the direction of the town gate.

Warren waited until he was out of earshot, then set the horseshoe down with a clang. "You ever see anyone so frantic for grain?"

"Not since the famine," Dardrad said.

"Wasn't a famine, was a distribution error," Cole muttered, but he didn't sound like he believed it. "The fields were full, just not enough hands to get it all up and sorted."

"Still felt like famine," Dardrad said. He sipped the last of his tea and crunched the dregs between his teeth. "People always want what's just out of reach."

Warren's gaze flicked to Cole. "You miss him," he said, not unkindly.

Cole's jaw flexed. "He was the reason things ran smooth. I thought it was just the shop, the way he kept everything in order, but now—" He shrugged, then stooped to sweep away a patch of loose grit from the stoop. "Now I see it was him. The rest of us just follow the tracks."

Dardrad grunted in sympathy. He'd never been one for eloquence, but he knew loss when he saw it. He'd carried it long enough to recognize the shape.

They stood in silence for a moment, watching the day advance by slow degrees.

When the traveler reappeared, he was walking. Not running, not frantic, just walking, his arms folded tight against the wind. He cradled a sack in his hands—dried grain, tied with blue string and

heavier than it looked. Behind him, walking with the composure of a bishop at a funeral, was Llewel.

The Mountain Elf wore his usual black, but today there was a thread of gold at the collar, and the apron was gone. He moved with a calm, unhurried certainty, and if he noticed the three of them watching from the smithy, he didn't let on.

"Thank you again," the traveler said, tucking a coin into Llewel's hand. "You saved my life."

Llewel smiled, brief but genuine. "We only offer what the world wishes you to have," he said, and bowed with the perfect angle of an old master.

The traveler turned, nodded at the group by the smithy, and made his way out toward the road—slower, but sure now, as if the future had decided to leave him alone for a while.

Llewel lingered by the edge of the square. He caught Dardrad's eye, then glanced once at Cole, then back at Dardrad. The message was clear as a brick through a window: This is how it is now. Make peace with it.

Cole watched the retreating figure, then turned his gaze on the sack of grain. "He's got Alred's handwriting," he said. "I saw the label when the Mountain Elf handed it over. That's Alred's script, no question."

"Maybe it's the same stock," Dardrad said. "Maybe he just never let go."

Cole's voice was barely a whisper. "He really is gone, isn't he."

Dardrad put a hand on Cole's shoulder, the way Warren had with him so many times. It was a hard comfort, but it was what they had. "Alred chose his ending, and his new beginning. The magic didn't take him, Cole. He gave himself to it."

Cole didn't answer, just stared down the lane until even the dust had settled.

Across the square, Llewel vanished back into his restaurant, the gold thread at his collar catching a slant of sunlight before the door closed behind him.

Warren cleared his throat. "Want to hit the pub tonight?" he said, his voice surprisingly gentle. "First round's on me."

Cole managed a thin smile. "Sure. I'll bring the dried carrots. Can't have a night out without something to gnaw on."

Dardrad clapped him on the shoulder, then let go. "We'll hold," he said, and meant it.

The day moved on. The world didn't forget, but it made room.

And for the first time since the shop had closed, the square felt almost whole.

Dardrad hesitated at the threshold of the Broken Claw, shoulders hunched against the wind that blew down the trade road. The sign over the door rocked on its rusty chain, creaking out a rhythm in time with the restless tap of his boots on the stoop. He caught a whiff of old malt, roasting meat, and the sharp tang of woodsmoke. It made his stomach twist in a way that had nothing to do with hunger.

He pushed open the door and stepped into the glow.

Inside, the pub was its usual self—better, maybe, for the repairs done after last moon's brawl. Every trestle table was full, the benches crowded with regulars and travelers both, the sound of laughter and tankards clattering over the low drone of conversation. At the back, the hearth snapped and crackled, throwing shadows on the faces that ringed it in close company.

Behind the bar, Sam Godsdotter wiped down a line of mugs, her scar catching the firelight and making her look a little feral. She glanced up, met Dardrad's eye, and gave him a nod so warm it took the chill from his beard.

"Thought you'd gone soft," she called, then slid a mug down the bar with a flick of her wrist. "Or worse, gone to the fancy place across the square."

"Too much wine, not enough sense," Dardrad replied, catching the mug and holding it aloft in salute. "You water it down with ice?"

Sam snorted. "Wouldn't dare. That one's Dragon's Breath, straight from the cask. If you can taste the cinnamon, it means you've not had enough."

He took a sip. The ale burned on the way down, but left a taste of

peat and spice that lingered like a good memory. He smacked his lips and nodded approval.

A familiar clatter drew his attention to the old corner table, where Prudence, Cole, Warren, and Jen were already gathered. Prudence wore a dress of deep purple tonight, offset with green trim, and her hair was done up in a twist that seemed held together only by stubbornness. Cole, freshly scrubbed, had abandoned his farm boots but not the calluses on his hands. Warren took up two seats, elbows spread and face bright as a lantern. Jen sat with back to the wall, arms folded, eyes forever sweeping the room as if expecting trouble to erupt from under the benches.

Dardrad threaded through the tables, nodding greetings and swatting the occasional Púca off his ankles. At the table, he set his mug down, then himself beside Warren, the bench creaking but not complaining.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," Jen said, but there was no bite in it.

"Could have been worse," Dardrad replied. "Could have been the ogre."

Warren grinned, showing off a mouthful of blindingly white teeth. "Ogre only drags home what's worth eating," he rumbled.

Prudence reached out and gave Dardrad's hand a quick squeeze. "We missed you," she said, quietly.

He squeezed back. "I was only gone a sennight."

"A sennight too long," Cole said, and they all laughed, even Jen, though she tried to hide it behind her mug.

For a while, they talked of nothing important. The spring planting, a pie-eating contest scheduled for the next market day, the rumor of a two-headed sheep born up in the North Pasture. Warren told a story about a customer who'd tried to order a sword for "honorable dueling" and left with a garden trowel instead. Jen, when pressed, recounted her latest brush with a traveling merchant who'd tried to cheat her on the price of horseshoes. The merchant was, in her telling, not welcome in any town for a hundred miles in any direction.

Prudence listened more than she spoke, but when she did, it was always to ask the right question or steer the conversation back on

course. Dardrad could see the tired in her eyes, but also the light that came from sitting among friends.

"Did you see the square this morning?" Cole said, leaning in. "The depression's gone. Not just filled—gone. Even the grass grew back. Wilem had to pick up every post and re-measure the whole lot."

Warren made a face. "Told him the earth likes to move. Should have just left it and made a moat."

"Imagine a moat around the bakery," Prudence said, lips curving into a smile. "Makota would turn it into a swimming pool for the kits by nightfall."

Jen shook her head. "You'd have drowned half the Púca before dinner."

The laughter came easy, and Dardrad let himself drift with it, shoulders relaxing, the lines on his face smoothing as the ale worked its way into his veins.

But even among friends, silence finds a crack.

By the third round, the mood had shifted. Cole was staring into his mug, mouth set. Prudence had gone quiet, fingers tracing circles on the wood grain of the table. Warren watched Dardrad with the patience of a smith waiting for metal to heat. Even Jen seemed to sense the weight in the air, her gaze fixed on the fire.

Dardrad cleared his throat. The sound was rough, louder than he meant.

"I need to tell you something," he said, voice low.

The table turned as one.

He stared into his mug, watching the dregs swirl, then lifted his head.

"It's about the old city," he said. "About why we left."

Warren opened his mouth, but Jen stilled him with a look.

Dardrad took a breath. "We were architects, Dalossalda and me. Not the kind that draws plans for houses or shops. We made vaults. The kind that keep the world from tearing itself apart."

He let that settle. It was true, in the way stories are true, even if they never happened quite like that.

"The job was simple: reinforce a sacred vault, deep under the council hall. The city needed it for some big spell, I don't remember

what. It was going to be the new center of magic for the whole continent." He snorted. "Ambitious, even for dwarves."

He traced the rim of his mug, gathering the words.

"They called in the best. Not us, but the team we apprenticed under. We were there to fetch, carry, set wedges, mix mortar. But—" He looked up, meeting Prudence's eyes. "We got cocky. We thought we could improve on the old ways. I saw a piece of stone so pure, so perfectly veined, that I thought it would make the vault unbreakable."

He felt his hands tightening on the mug, the knuckles going white. He loosened his grip, forced himself to continue.

"I set it myself. Adjusted the line, the grain, just enough that it sang under the hammer. It was beautiful. It was perfect."

Warren's brow furrowed. "And?"

"And I never checked the supports," Dardrad said, the words tumbling out now. "The next day, the council fired the vault. The spell loaded into it was too strong, and the lintel—the one I'd changed—buckled. Brought down half the chamber. Killed three, injured more. The rest of the city nearly collapsed with it. They called it a flaw, but everyone knew it was a mistake. My mistake."

The words hung in the air like smoke. He waited for someone to speak, to joke, to shift the blame. No one did.

"They exiled us," he said. "Not formally, but it's the same. 'Those who fail the foundation,' they called us. Dalossalda tried to argue, said it was her fault too, but they didn't care. The city wanted a scapegoat, and I fit."

He looked around the table, at each of them. "I thought I'd left it behind. That I could build a new life here, make up for what I'd done. But when the flaw showed up under the square—when the world started to slide again—I thought it was just bad luck. Only now I know I brought it with me. The flaw was mine. Always was."

The silence was not awkward. It was respectful, the kind that comes when the truth is too big for small words.

Warren was first to move. He reached across and clapped Dardrad on the back, hard enough to nearly spill the ale.

"Nothing you can do about the past," Warren said. "Except live better after."

Jen nodded. "You fixed the flaw here. That's what matters."

Prudence reached for his hand again, held it tight. "Everyone makes mistakes," she said. "Not everyone admits it."

Cole just raised his mug, eyes bright with something that was not quite tears.

Sam, who had been watching from the bar, came over with a fresh pitcher. She refilled the mugs, then leaned in, voice low. "You rose above it, Dardrad. That's what matters in the end."

He let the words soak in.

He looked at his friends, at the fire, at the polished wood of the table that had held a thousand stories before his.

He smiled—a real one, for the first time in too long.

The night went on, and the world held.

It was enough.

twenty

. . .

THE AFTERNOON LIGHT slanted through the butcher shop window, dust motes swirling lazily in the sunbeams before landing on the glass jars that lined the back shelf. The jars, neat as a parade, held every color of pickled root and peppercorn, but even their boldness was outdone by the day's cuts: haunches and flanks and sausages coiled like rope, all gleaming under the careful scrutiny of the shop's old, bell-jar lanterns. The air was thick with the perfume of smoked tallow and roasted garlic, a combination so particular that even the Púca, whose sense of smell bordered on the supernatural, would have wept with envy.

Dardrad stood behind the counter, hands folded, the apron over his chest creased into the map of a hundred careful washings. The block before him—oiled, seasoned, scored by generations of good work—caught the afternoon's light and threw it back with a kind of pride. On one end of the block, a pile of lamb chops waited their turn. On the other, a half-finished knot of braid-sausage sat coiled, the casing glistening with promise.

The bell above the door trilled, high and sharp. Dardrad didn't look up; he just reached for his knife and sliced two chops from the row, as if he'd been expecting the interruption.

The first traveler of the afternoon was a boy—maybe fourteen, maybe younger, thin as the moon’s edge and wrapped in a patchwork cloak that looked like it had been through two sennights of rain. The boy hovered at the threshold, nose wrinkling at the sight of Dardrad’s beard—freshly trimmed, but still unruly—then tiptoed to the counter and set down a sack of dry beans as currency.

“Jerky, please,” the boy said, voice feather-light. “For the road. As much as this will buy.”

Dardrad took the sack, bounced it once in his palm, and without ceremony tossed the boy a packet of dried venison. “Keep your coins for next time,” he said, gruff as always. “Travelers get a first sample free.”

The boy’s eyes widened at the weight of the packet. He took a cautious bite, then let out a sigh that sounded almost religious. “It’s good,” he said, surprised.

Dardrad just grunted, setting the beans aside. “Salt cure. Won’t spoil, even if you forget it in your pocket for a moon.” He fixed the boy with a glare meant to be intimidating, but which came out mostly concerned. “Where you headed?”

“West. The river,” the boy replied. He bit off another chunk, mumbled thanks, and retreated, the bell trilling as he went.

Before the echo died, the next customer slid through the door. This one was a woman in trader’s livery, hat at a sharp angle and eyes like flint. She went straight for the counter, set down a coin so clean it looked suspicious, and said, “Pork belly. Thickest cut.”

Dardrad plucked a slab from the case and slapped it onto the block. The woman flinched at the sound.

“Nice knife,” she said, eyeing the blade as he sliced.

“Best edge in the valley,” Dardrad replied. He worked in silence, letting the scrape of steel and the slap of meat fill the shop.

The shop’s voice whispered in the back of his mind. *Pepper for the first*, it suggested. *This one needs ginger and honey.*

He wrapped the pork belly, then, before the woman could protest, sprinkled a twist of dried ginger over the package and tied it off with a dab of honey from the jar behind him.

The woman arched a brow. “That’s extra?”

He snorted. "It's what it needs. Your coin is good for three more, anyway."

She looked like she might argue, but the shop had already decided, and Dardrad had learned long ago not to resist. He set the package in front of her and waited as she eyed it, the silence between them growing.

"It's fine work," she admitted, tucking it into her satchel. "Better than the bakery's sausage."

"Don't let Makota hear you say that," Dardrad said, deadpan. "She'll hunt you down with a wooden spoon."

The woman chuckled—a sound like a crow calling. She left, the bell catching her laughter and spinning it around the shop as she went.

A trickle of customers followed: two Púca, who ordered beef shin and spent five minutes arguing over the merits of marrow; an old tinker with a busted jaw who communicated only through elaborate gestures and an occasional whistle; and finally, a pair of visiting scholars, draped in robes and baffled by everything, who bought blood sausage solely because the name delighted them.

With each customer, Dardrad felt the hum of the shop—its memory, its magic—settle a little deeper into his bones. The work was good and clean, the transactions simple. The voices in the stone were quiet now, the tension of the world above holding firm. For the first time in a sennight, the act of cutting and weighing and wrapping felt less like a performance and more like a conversation.

The bell tinkled again, softer this time. The man who entered was neither familiar nor unfamiliar—a face Dardrad had seen before, but never in the context of the shop. He wore the dark blue coat of a caravan captain, but the fabric was worn, the cuffs patched and the hem lined with a fringe of dust. He moved with the deliberate care of someone who'd spent most of his life keeping secrets in crowded rooms.

He set his hands on the counter, palms down. "Are you Dardrad Pebbleblade?" he asked, voice almost formal.

Dardrad nodded. "What's your business?"

The man leaned in, lowering his voice to a hush. "I was told you carry cuts... not always listed. For special needs."

The shop's magic, usually a whisper, perked up in his head. He recognized the request: not the usual craving for fat or protein, but something deeper, more specific. A customer who knew what he wanted, and had reason to keep it quiet.

"Depends what you're after," Dardrad said. He looked the man over. "Not for a festival. Not for trade. Not for a pet, either."

The man shook his head. "It's for a... healing. Something rare, for a friend who's not well."

Dardrad didn't ask for the story. He nodded, then straightened, running a hand over his beard as he considered.

"It'll take time," he said. "Come back in three candelmarks. I'll have it."

The man's shoulders loosened. He left two silver coins on the counter, more than enough to cover whatever Dardrad might fetch. He hesitated at the door, turned, and said, "Thank you, Master Pebbleblade. I'll return before sundown."

Dardrad watched him go, then locked the shop door behind. The bell sounded once, then stilled.

He surveyed the counter: clean, orderly, the knives all set in a row. The air was thick with the scent of pepper and smoke, but beneath it all, Dardrad caught a new note—a clarity, like the air after rain. The work was waiting, but there was no rush, no panic. He moved with the certainty of a craftsman who'd made peace with his own hands.

He wrapped the remaining sausage and set it in the cooler. He rinsed the knives and laid them on a towel, blades facing away from the door. He wiped the block, gathered the day's tally, and then, with a final sweep, pressed his palm to the counter's edge.

The shop's magic hummed, gentle and sure. For the first time, the sensation was not of being directed or managed, but of being in harmony with something that wanted him to succeed. The voice was less a command, more a partner. Together, they'd get the cut.

Dardrad reached for his coat, shrugged it on, and unlocked the back door. He walked to the narrow stairwell behind the cold room, flipped the lantern on, and descended.

Below, the warren waited, cool and dark, the air carrying the faintest tinge of fresh earth.

He paused at the landing, then continued down, the stone steps solid beneath his boots.

The shop rested, confident that the world would hold.

The descent through the warren was different now. Where once each step into the dark brought a knot of tension to Dardrad's neck, now it felt like gliding down a gentle slope, the walls offering back the cool touch of home instead of the memory of failure. The new lines Dalos-salda had etched into the stone shone faintly in the dark, guiding his way—a stitched seam of soft blue running through blackness. He trailed a finger over them as he walked, and each time he touched the line, the warmth beneath his calluses deepened.

The transit chamber waited, its obsidian floor polished to a mirror by uncountable boots and the careful luster of Dardrad's own sweat. The Keystock rose from the floor's center like the heart of a giant, solid and quietly radiant. The flaw that had once haunted this space was now a single, beautiful seam, running up the pillar in a perfect spiral, catching and bending the crystal light set into the ceiling above.

He paused at the threshold, just for the pleasure of seeing the place as it should have been all along.

There was nothing left of the old dread. He crossed the floor, boots clicking, and set his hand to the Keystock's surface.

It was cool, but not cold. As he pressed his palm flat, the hum began—a vibration in the wrist that spread through his forearm, then the chest, then the whole skeleton, until he felt the earth's own heart-beat rise to meet his. Once, this was the moment he'd brace for a fight—the stone resisting him, the line of force always threatening to slip. Now, the stone welcomed him. The seam in the Keystock pulsed blue, and the world beneath his feet seemed to shudder in anticipation.

He stood in the center, closed his eyes, and let go.

Sinking was not so much a fall as a surrender. The sense of gravity vanished, replaced by the buoyancy of water, or maybe memory. He floated, weightless, the layers of soil and rock parting to let him pass. The blue light spiraled down, guiding him through the ancient

bedrock, through the lines of fault and fossil, until the world narrowed to a tunnel just wide enough for his will to fit.

He shot forward, the stone parting then closing behind, no hesitation, no pain. It was a dance, and he was both lead and follow. The world above faded, and for a moment he was nothing but movement, a memory etched in granite, a whisper of what the town had always wanted to be.

When he came up through the stone, it was not dramatic. He simply emerged, as if rising from a warm bath, his head clearing the crust of earth and his hands finding solid ground as though he'd never left.

The cave was small, but perfectly shaped—a bubble of space locked deep in the old mountain, its ceiling hung with pale crystals, the air sharp with the tang of mineral water. The shop's voice was here, too, now. It told him what he needed and where to find it.

He padded across the floor, careful not to scuff the old crystal. He knelt beside a pool fed by a single, steady drip, and reached into the dark water. His fingers closed around the bundle of meat he'd stashed two moons ago—Hoar-Deer, wrapped in waxed cloth, still chilled by the cave's breath and smelling faintly of thyme from the forage that animal had loved best.

He set the bundle on the rock, checked the seal, then straightened. The feeling of ease—the rightness—was so profound that he almost forgot what it used to be like. The stone did not begrudge him this prize. It offered it up with the pride of a parent showing off a child's best work.

He ran his hand along the wall, feeling the pulse of the seam, the way it arced through the bedrock and tied back to the town. Dalos-salda would have admired this place; he made a note to bring her next time, just to show how well it held.

He took the bundle and returned to the entry. The journey back was easier still—the stone seemed eager to return him to the surface, eager to show off its new perfection.

He surfaced in the chamber, just as before, the Keystock still warm under his hand. There was no trace of fatigue, no tremor of uncer-

tainty. The line of blue had grown brighter, and as he climbed the steps back to the shop, the air on his face felt like an old friend.

At the top of the stairs, he paused. He looked back, just for a heartbeat, and saw the seam in the stone, the way it glowed, the way it marked him as a part of the world.

He smiled, then ducked through the trapdoor, the bundle of Stone-Ram in his arms.

The shop was waiting, and he was more than ready to serve.

He entered the shop with the bundle tucked under his arm, the cold from the cave still seeping through the waxed cloth. The air inside was warmer now, the smells deeper—bacon grease, rendered fat, and the faint spice of thyme that clung to his prize. For a moment, Dardrad stood just inside the door, soaking in the comfort. The world above and below felt perfectly in balance.

He carried the bundle to the block and set it down with a gentle thud. The lantern above cast a round pool of light over the surface, illuminating the fine grain of the wood and the shine of the best knife. He unwrapped the package with reverence, peeling away layer after layer of waxed cloth until the meat gleamed on the board—rose and silver, marbled with fat, as beautiful as any gem he'd ever cut.

The shop whispered: *That's the one. Perfect.*

He nodded, and set to work. The knife slid through the muscle with hardly a sound, and as he sliced, the meat caught the light, every grain and striation visible and true. He trimmed away the sinew, checked the grain, and cut the portions just so—three thick slabs, and one delicate sliver for tasting.

The traveler arrived exactly as promised—three candlemarks to the bell, hat in hand and eyes darting around the shop with a nervous energy. Dardrad waited until the man stepped up to the counter before speaking.

"Got what you needed," he said, voice gentle as it ever got. "Hoar-Deer, from the middle altitude. It'll set right whatever's out of place."

The traveler exhaled, as if he'd been holding his breath for a

sennight. "Thank you, Master Pebbleblade. No one else would take the order."

"Not many can," Dardrad replied, and it was true.

He wrapped the three cuts in fresh paper, then tied them off with blue string. The last, smallest piece he placed in a bit of waxed paper, and set it on top. "Try this first," he said. "You'll see it's worth the coin."

The traveler hesitated, then lifted the piece to his nose. He inhaled, slow, eyes widening. He bit, chewed, and then—just for a moment—looked up at Dardrad with pure gratitude.

"It's perfect," the man said. He paid the rest of the fee, left with the package held close to his chest, and offered a quiet word on his way out: "You do good work, sir."

Dardrad watched the door close, then listened to the silence that followed. The shop's magic, never loud, was now a background hum—a promise that whatever happened tomorrow, the foundation would hold. He took a moment to clean the block, rinsed the knife, and lined up the remaining cuts for tomorrow's display.

He moved through the closing rituals with an ease that surprised him: sweeping, wiping down the counter, snuffing the lanterns one by one. Each motion felt like a punctuation mark at the end of a sentence, a declaration that the day was finished and the world had not, in fact, come undone.

The last thing he did was run his hand along the edge of the block, feeling the smoothness, the history, and the memory of a thousand days just like this. He smiled, not out of pride but out of a deep, animal satisfaction. The job was done, and it had been done right.

He hung his apron on the hook by the door, locked up, and turned toward the narrow stairwell at the back of the shop.

He was done with the world above for now, and below, Dalossalda waited.



The passage to the warren was a ribbon of smooth stone, the walls cool and faintly luminous with the lines Dalossalda had etched there

over many, many nights. At every turn, the seams ran blue-white, a map of the world as she saw it: not as a latticework of pressure and risk, but as a living thing, changing and healing and remembering every hand that shaped it.

Dardrad followed the lines to the central gallery, then down the gentle curve of the east corridor. The air was dry and faintly sweet, dusted with the memory of crushed granite and the smoke of last night's torch. The world above was full of bread and sunlight and the riot of living things; here, the quiet was a living partner, not an absence.

Dalossalda was waiting in the unfinished chamber, a lamp hung from a hook and a roll of parchment spread on a crate. She wore her hair loose tonight, the curls falling around her face as she leaned over the sketch, muttering the measurements to herself.

He watched her for a moment, admiring the way her hands moved—quick, precise, always knowing exactly where they wanted to be. He could have spent a lifetime just watching her work, but there was a wall to finish and an arch to set, and he was as much a part of that as the stone itself.

He stepped into the light. Dalossalda looked up, smiled, and handed him the chisel.

"It's holding," she said, nodding at the Keystock's pulse. "Nothing's shifted since you set the last one."

He grunted, took the chisel, and sighted along the mark she'd left. The line was perfect, not because it needed to be, but because she knew how to make even a flaw into beauty.

He braced, angled the tool, and struck.

The sound was the best thing in the world—sharp, clean, a note that echoed down the corridor and came back softer, rounded by distance and memory. Dardrad fell into the rhythm: strike, turn, brush, measure, strike again. Each motion was an answer to the last, and the arch began to take shape, a gentle sweep rising from the wall.

Dalossalda worked beside him, holding the lamp, offering the brush when he needed it, keeping the dust out of the seam. She talked as they worked, about the day, about Cole's new plans for the square, about how the Púca had found a use for the leftover twine.

"They're stringing it between all the fenceposts," she said, laughing. "To catch the dew, they claim. Or maybe to trip up the bakery cats."

He smiled, not breaking his focus. "If it works, it's architecture."

She laughed again, low and musical, and leaned close to inspect his cut. "You're not worried about the set?"

He shook his head, just once. "Not anymore. It's true now. The line, the load. Even if it shifts, the stone will remember where it's meant to be."

Dalossalda gave his arm a squeeze. "You trust yourself."

He grunted. "I trust the stone. But yes."

They worked together until the arch was done, the curve smooth and the keystone set with a gentle tap. Dalossalda wiped the seam, then leaned back on her heels to admire it.

"It's good," she said, a verdict that meant everything.

Dardrad set the chisel down, flexed his hands, and breathed in the cold air. The sense of satisfaction was complete—no cracks, no doubts, just the knowledge that the job was done right.

He looked at Dalossalda, who was rummaging in a box by the wall.

"I have something for you," she said, not looking up.

He blinked. "Another list of improvements?"

She smiled, but there was something shy in it. "You could call it that."

She emerged with a wrapped bundle, tied off with a scrap of blue ribbon. She handed it over without ceremony, but her eyes were shining.

Dardrad undid the ribbon, peeled back the oilskin, and stared. In his hand was a knife—not just any knife, but one he recognized instantly as Dalossalda's best work: blade chipped from the warren's own bedrock, handle set with three bands of polished obsidian, the seam in the blade catching the torchlight and reflecting it in a line of pure blue.

He turned it over, feeling the balance, the way it fit his grip as if it had always been waiting for him.

"I thought you might want something for the next arch," she said, voice quiet.

He weighed the knife, ran his thumb along the edge. "It's perfect."

Dalossalda ducked her head, a rare show of nerves. "It's supposed to be. I measured it against your hand."

Dardrad set the knife down, then pulled her in, holding her just long enough that the world slowed to match their pulse.

The moment held: the lamplight on the walls, the arch above them gleaming, the memory of what they had built together. He realized, not for the first time but maybe for the last, that this was what he had been running toward his whole life—a place where every flaw could be part of the whole, where the work and the worker were one and the same.

He released Dalossalda, picked up the knife, and set the next mark on the wall. He didn't need to check the line; he knew it would hold.

For a while, they just stood in the new chamber, listening to the silence, breathing in the clean, cold air. It was enough.

He looked at the knife in his hand, then at Dalossalda, and knew exactly where he belonged.

Above, the world spun on. Below, the warren glowed, each chamber brighter for what they'd made together.

And for Dardrad, there would never again be a question of what needed fixing, or who would be there to hold the line.

twenty-one

. . .

THE BELL above the butcher shop door had barely finished its first trilling when Dardrad's day took a sharp turn. It wasn't the usual lunchtime Púca in need of bones for soup, or a farmer asking for offcuts to salt and stow. This customer was a young woman with a voice that stuttered like a failing lamp wick—hushed, breathy, and haunted by the promise of what it used to be. She placed her coins on the counter and whispered a request: "Shadow-Fox lungs, if you have them. For a singer. Mine."

Dardrad had heard stranger orders, but not by much. He watched the woman's hands twist the hem of her sleeve, the way her knuckles paled with hope and embarrassment. He nodded once, set her coin aside, and said, "I can have it ready before first bell tomorrow. If the mountain is kind."

He did not tell her that no one had brought in a Shadow-Fox in more moons than he could remember, nor that their territory was a good three leagues distant and down two ridgelines, the kind of trip that was always harder than the map made it look.

He finished the rest of the day's work in a slow blur, the job too routine to trip him up but too familiar to distract from the itch in his mind. By the time the candles in the window were half-melted, he'd

made up his mind to go down, to the transit chamber beneath the shop, and try for the lungs himself. He closed up, left a note for Dalossalda ("Gone for a fox. Back by moonrise. Love, D"), and rolled his shoulders until the stiffness melted away.

The descent was always a ritual. First, he locked the cold room, then washed his hands three times—lather, rinse, repeat, until the skin tingled. He took the new knife Dalossalda had gifted him, set it in his belt, and lit the old lantern that hung at the mouth of the warren stair. The light was a sickly blue, not warm but pure, throwing every edge and angle into high relief. He went down.

The warren had not changed, but he had. Every step felt less like sneaking into a forbidden place and more like coming home after a long absence. The seam Dalossalda had etched along the wall was bright tonight, pulsing faintly with every footfall. When he reached the landing, the air hummed in his ears, a living sound that spoke of pressure and weight, but never menace.

The transit chamber's obsidian floor gleamed in the lantern light. It was a beautiful thing, a disk so smooth it almost looked like water, and tonight it was free of dust. At its heart, the Keystock—now perfect, now his—waited for him like an old friend. He set his lantern down, took a breath, and pressed his palm flat against the stone.

Once, this had been a struggle. The stone would hold back, resist, judge him. Now it welcomed him, or at least allowed him to pass without complaint. He let himself sink—not a fall, not a surrender, but a merging, like slipping into a well-fitted coat or an old memory that no longer stung.

Down he went.

The sensation was always strange, neither cold nor warm, but alive, as if the world itself had paused to listen for the sound of his approach. The line of blue from the Keystock stretched and thinned, guiding him along, and the stone parted around his will, soft as dough and just as easy to move. For a time, there was nothing but the feel of stone, the certainty of direction, and the low, happy hum of a job done right.

He emerged in the hunting grotto exactly where he intended: an air pocket under the oldest pine at the foot of the Mistrals, a place he

knew by scent and memory even if he'd never seen it with his eyes. The air here was crisp, scented with crushed moss and the sharp promise of frost. The stone above arched away, making a pocket just big enough for a dwarf to stretch and work. A narrow vent to the surface let in a thread of late evening light, just enough to turn the stone's skin silver and blue.

He waited, listening.

The Shadow-Foxes were always here, sooner or later. They made their nests close to the surface, but always beneath the rootline, where the earth was soft and full of life. Dardrad crouched, boots planted just so, and let his senses adjust.

It took less than a hundred breaths before he heard the shuffle, the tiny scrape of claw on stone. He readied his net, looped it twice around his wrist, and waited. When the fox slipped into the edge of the chamber—no bigger than a cat, but twice as quick and infinitely more wary—he snapped the net forward and pinned it with a practiced flick. The creature stilled instantly, as if it knew the rules of the game. Dardrad worked fast, talking to it the whole time, voice low and steady.

"Sorry, friend. It's for a good cause," he said, and meant it.

Dardrad had learned, over the years, that you owed a blessing to anything you took. He set his hands over the little chest, closed his eyes, and spoke the old words—not loud, not proud, but true: "Thank you for your work, for the air you drew, for the grace you brought to the world."

He stood, wiped his hands, and looked around the grotto one last time.

There was more here, if he wanted it. Enough to feed the whole town for a moon. But he took only what was needed. That was the way, and the shop would not abide greed.

He pressed his hand to the floor and let himself slip back into the world below.

The return was even easier. The stone welcomed him now, the seam running true. He surfaced in the transit chamber with no more effort than a step through an open door.

Dalossalda was waiting for him.

She leaned against the far wall, arms folded, a smile on her lips and a wildness in her eyes that only came out when the work was good and the world was holding. “You didn’t even wake me,” she chided, but the words were soft.

“Didn’t want to disturb,” he said. “This was mine to do.”

She glanced at the pouch in his hand. “For the singer?”

He nodded, holding it up.

Dalossalda’s eyes danced. “The earth welcomes you now,” she said, her voice a strange echo of what he had thought, deep in the rock.

He let the words settle. For a moment, all the old shame was gone. He was just himself, in the right place, with the right person. “It’s different,” he admitted. “I used to feel like I was stealing from the world. Now it feels like... a favor, traded between friends.”

Dalossalda shrugged, as if to say that was how it always should have been.

They climbed the stairs together. In the shop above, the lanterns had burned low, but the cold room waited, ready. Dardrad worked quickly, slicing the lungs into even strips and setting them in a bath of brine and herbs. The shop’s magic, never loud, began to hum at the edge of his hearing.

This will cure the voice, it whispered. Eat with honeyed bread. Sing before the meal, and after, and forever.

He smiled, tucking the whisper away for the next time he saw the customer.

He dressed the rest of the animal, wrapping the cuts for tomorrow’s case, and set aside the pelt—clean, silver, beautiful. He thought of Prudence, who’d make it into a cloak that could stop frost or maybe heartbreak, depending on the color of the lining.

By the time he finished, the sun was gone from the sky, and the world above was settling into night.

He closed the cold room, checked the front door, and set a fresh candle in the window.

Dalossalda caught his hand as he passed her in the stairwell. “You did good,” she said, voice low.

He squeezed her hand, and for a moment, just a moment, he allowed himself to believe it.

He went to bed with the world at his back and the stone at his feet, and for once, he dreamed of nothing at all.

The Broken Claw was half full by the time Dardrad and Dalossalda claimed their corner table, the one with the lopsided view of both the hearth and the bar. The pub's old bones creaked with the weight of stories and laughter, and the smell of roasted meat and yeast-heavy ale braided itself through the air, settling into the wood, the floors, and every scrap of clothing in the place.

Sam presided behind the bar, her white hair tied up with a length of red cloth and her left sleeve rolled tight to avoid the worst of the spills. She wiped down mugs with her characteristic violence and took orders with her characteristic patience, nodding at each customer as if she already knew what they wanted and was only letting them have their say out of politeness. Above her, the register bell chimed every time a coin hit the drawer, punctuating the ongoing low drone of conversation.

At a small table just left of the fire, Socialite Púca held forth. Even seated, he was barely knee-high, his chair modified with a stack of old books and a carefully folded wool blanket. He wore his whiskers waxed into points and his vest in a blinding shade of saffron, and he spoke with the velocity of a springtime river and the accent of someone who measured life in cups of strong tea.

"—and then I told him, 'Yer mother raised a braver hedgehog than you, friend, and she did it in half the time with twice the smarts!'" The Púca's laughter came out like the popping of dry twigs. His table-mates—three human tradesfolk, none of them sober—whooped with delight, one nearly spilling a flagon over his own boots.

Dalossalda shot a look at Dardrad that said, "We could leave and never be noticed." He grunted, "Not tonight. Tonight's for listening."

They sat, backs against the wall, letting the warmth from the hearth soak into their bones. Dardrad sipped a thin, dark beer—never his

favorite, but it was the only thing Sam would pour without a lecture—and watched the room change as the evening wore on. By the third bell, the regulars had all staked their claims: Cole Coleson by the door, keeping silent count of everyone who came and went; Makota's eldest perched at the bakery end with a pastry in one hand and a knife in the other, dissecting both with equal focus; a pair of out-of-town traders huddled together at the center table, heads bent over a map and faces set in an expression that always meant "we're about to get fleeced."

It was the Púca who noticed the change first.

"Now there's a sight I never thought I'd see this side of the grass," he declared, voice bouncing off the rafters.

The door swung open, letting in a slap of cold air and, after it, Llewel Magcaryn.

The Mountain Elf did not glide, exactly, but he did move with a quiet efficiency that made everyone else look like they were still learning to walk. He wore his customary dark suit, the fabric so fine it seemed to drink up the light, and his hair was bound with a cord that matched the color of his eyes—a deep, winter-blue. He paused at the threshold, letting the door settle shut behind him, then scanned the room as if weighing each soul inside. He found Dardrad and Dalos-salda immediately, nodded once, and then turned to the bar.

Sam's eyebrow twitched upward, but she said nothing as Llewel approached. He ordered a sherry, of all things, and paid with a coin that gleamed brighter than any metal in the room.

The Púca twisted in his seat to watch. "Well, I'll be hung on the mayor's gate and used as a windchime," he said, quieter now but no less thrilled. "Didn't think the fancy lad would lower himself to a common house. Even for sherry."

One of the traders glanced up, smirked, and whispered something to his companion. The Mountain Elf either did not hear, or did not care.

Dardrad watched the exchange with a craftsman's eye—he could always spot a seam under stress, even in conversation. He wondered what would bring Llewel here tonight. The Elf usually avoided the Broken Claw, claiming the "subtlety of taste" was not to his liking, but everyone knew it was really to avoid the direct gaze of

Nimarith, who claimed the far corner as his own whenever he visited in the flesh. The old Mountain God was not in tonight, though, unless he was disguised as an overturned bucket by the fireplace.

Dalossalda kicked him under the table. "You're staring," she murmured.

"He's the first Elf in here since the wedding," Dardrad replied. "It's worth a stare."

A second shock came not long after, when Elspeth Riverpine walked in. She was dressed for the cold, coat patched at the elbows and bright scarf flaring out behind her like a banner. Her eyes, wide and alive, swept the pub before landing on Dardrad and Dalossalda.

She made her way to the table, boots clomping loud on the boards.

"Room for one more?" she asked.

Dalossalda moved her coat, and Elspeth slid in beside her, hands wrapping around her own mug of something that steamed and smelled faintly of cinnamon and honey.

"I can't stay long," Elspeth said softly as she settled herself. "I'm told to expect a traveler at my keep soon. Young woman who once had a voice like an angel. She's to sing me an aria in exchange for an artifact to heal her parents."

"She bought Shadow-Fox lungs from me," Dardrad said, nodding. "They'll have had time to work if she followed my instructions."

Elspeth's eyes sparkled as she took her seat. "You're a marvel, Dardrad. And I owe you twice over—I was terribly afraid the poor girl wouldn't figure it out."

He gave a modest shrug. "Just lungs. The real trick is not puncturing them."

Elspeth leaned in, her tone shifting, softer and sly. "And how's business otherwise? Everything holding up underfoot?" Her gaze lingered, searching his face for more than shop talk.

Dardrad caught the meaning, mouth twitching. "Steady as bedrock, these days," he replied. "The cracks are mended, and the ground's settled—inside and out."

Dalossalda's laugh broke the moment. "He's even whistling again in the mornings. A sure sign the world's right."

Elspeth grinned. "Not tempted to eat any of your own Shadow-Fox, then? Or is that a retirement treat for old dwarves?"

Dalossalda snorted. "I've seen him eat worse. Remember the Snowcat's tail?"

"It did not improve with roasting," Dardrad said, deadpan. "But I suppose the memory has."

Their laughter came easy, old and comfortable, turning heads at nearby tables and knitting them closer together.

The evening carried on, with Sam keeping mugs and bowls full, and Socialite Púca drifting from table to table, dispensing stories and gossip with the skill of a professional bridge-builder. Llewel nursed his sherry for a long while, then, at last, stood and approached the corner where Dardrad's table held court.

He paused, hands folded behind his back. "May I join you?"

Dalossalda gestured to the open seat. "It would be our honor."

Llewel slid into the chair, nodded at each of them in turn, and said, "I am told that this is the table where the world gets fixed."

"That depends on the world's expectations," Dardrad replied.

Llewel smiled—a small, precise gesture. "It is better than most places I have been."

They made room for him, and the conversation shifted, as it always did when someone new joined a table. Elspeth told a story about a party of would-be adventurers who arrived at her mountain keep last season, convinced they were meant to unearth a lost civilization hidden beneath the summit.

"They were all scholars, but you wouldn't know it from how they read a map," she said. "Two of them thought the bear sleeping in my woodshed was a guardian spirit and tried to bribe it with licorice root."

Dalossalda cackled. "Did the bear take the bribe?"

"Oh, yes," Elspeth said, wide-eyed. "But then it followed them for a day, hoping for more. They ended up barricaded in the guest house until the bear got bored and left."

Even Llewel smiled at that. "There are worse fates than being adopted by a bear."

They traded more stories, each better than the last, until even the

traders and the bakery apprentice drifted closer, drawn by the laughter and the promise of free company.

It was Elspeth who, noticing the gittern case at Llewel's side, asked, "Do you play?"

Llewel hesitated, then opened the case and withdrew the instrument. The wood was pale, inlaid with abalone, and the strings shimmered in the firelight. He tuned it quickly, the notes falling into line as if they'd been waiting for the command.

He played, and it was not showy or grand—just a gentle melody that wound around the table and slipped into the cracks of the old pub. The room quieted, every ear leaning closer. When he finished, there was a pause, then a ripple of applause, even from Sam behind the bar.

"Better than a bear," Socialite Púca declared. "Unless the bear also plays gittern."

"Only badly," Elspeth said.

Dardrad found his hand tapping the beat before he even realized it. Dalossalda leaned her head against his shoulder, and for a moment, it was as if the whole world existed only for this music, this table, this night.

Then Elspeth, bold as ever, launched into a song. It was a rowdy, old tavern tune—something about a dwarf, an elf, and a goat with more pride than sense. The chorus was easy, the verses bawdy, and soon the whole place was singing along.

Even Llewel.

By the third chorus, Dardrad's voice was raw, Dalossalda's was sweet and sure, and the Púca was standing on the table, conducting with a fork.

Sam watched it all with a faint, secret smile, and when the last note faded, she raised her mug and said, "If there's better music in this world, I haven't heard it. And I've had every bard in three valleys try to prove otherwise."

The night spilled forward, and the pub held them, warm and sure as the stone beneath their feet.

Dardrad leaned back, closed his eyes, and let the sound wash over him.

Tomorrow, there would be meat to cut and debts to collect, stones to set and a world to hold together. But tonight, there was only this: friends, laughter, and the simple, stubborn joy of being where he belonged.

And if he carried the tune home, humming it into the darkness of the warren and all the way down to the bones of the world, well—who could blame him?

twenty-two

. . .

THE WORLD on the other side of stone always felt sharper—Dardrad was used to the hush and pulse of the warren, the logic of earth and the warm embrace of dark. But stepping out into the open court of the village, he was struck by a cold wind and the silvery glare of lantern light bouncing off polished granite walls. It made him blink twice before he got his bearings.

The entry to the dwarven settlement was nothing like the raw, damp root-holes of the exile colonies or the patchwork—if opulent—burrows strung under North Pointe. This was a true gate: three layers of stair-stepped stone, each etched with sigils and house-marks, rising up to a proper archway buttressed with copper bands. The whole plaza was swept so clean he could have dropped his reflection in it.

Two guards were posted at the arch, each a head taller than he'd expected and gleaming like candied fruit under the torchlight. They wore breastplates inlaid with chevrons of blue steel, the metal burnished to a glare. Their helms had blacked-out faceplates, but even so, their eyes tracked every move as if they were counting the pebbles under his boots.

Dardrad squared his shoulders, stepped out ahead of Dalossalda,

and waited for her hand to brush his knuckles before moving. The guards went rigid the moment they crossed the last threshold.

"Halt and declare!" one barked, voice ringing off the stones like the snap of a whip. "State name, house, and business."

Dardrad opened his mouth, but Dalossalda beat him by a sliver. "We are called home by kin and council," she said, her voice steady as an anchor. "We bring news of the world above."

The guards blinked in unison. Dardrad could hear the faint clink of armor as they glanced at each other, unsure whether to be suspicious or impressed. He cleared his throat and offered the words he'd rehearsed a hundred times in the dark:

"Dardrad Pebbleblade, scion of the Arched Vein, last of the line that carried the Vault. This is Dalossalda, daughter of the Wallwrights, bonded by cut and craft." He set his jaw, feeling the old habit of formality settle in his chest. "We seek passage and audience, per the old compact."

The name did the trick. The left-hand guard stiffened and hissed under his breath, "Pebbleblade, from the Censured line?"

Dardrad nodded, keeping his face a smooth mask. "We come in peace and kinship. The world above sends tidings—some grave, some hopeful. Let us through."

A brief silence. Then the right-hand guard, clearly the junior, snapped to attention and pounded his halberd on the stone. "We must summon the elders. Wait here and be seen."

He vanished into the archway at a fast jog, leaving the other to hold the gate. The one who remained relaxed by half a notch, helmet bobbing as he gave Dardrad a once-over. "Didn't expect you to be..." He trailed off, glancing at Dalossalda. "Didn't expect you to return."

She met the gaze with a slight tilt of her chin. "No one ever expects a flaw to mend itself," she said. "But sometimes the mountain heals."

Dardrad snorted. "Sometimes it just gets a new crack."

The guard's faceplate twitched—a smile, maybe. "If you're Pebbleblade, and you can prove it, you'll be welcome. If not, the old rules still hold." He glanced at Dardrad's hands. "You got the signet?"

Dardrad dug into his coat and brought out the pebble. It was nothing fancy, just a thumb-sized oval of granite, polished to a luster

and inscribed with the Pebbleblade sigil—a diagonal slash, crossed by three lines to signify the last bearers of the Vault. He'd kept it hidden for years, more out of habit than shame, but now he palmed it and flipped it toward the guard.

The guard caught it midair, turning the stone between thick fingers. His eyes widened as he ran his thumb over the mark. "You could forge this," he said, a challenge at the edge of his tone.

Dardrad didn't flinch. "Ask it the right question," he replied.

The guard set the pebble on the ledge, closed his eyes, and placed his palm atop it. For a moment, nothing. Then a faint blue light glimmered from the seams of the stone, pulsing once, twice, then settling into a low, steady glow.

The guard's breath whistled out between his teeth. He replaced the pebble with care, then stepped back and gave a formal bow. "Welcome home, Pebbleblade. You and yours may pass."

He gestured through the archway, and Dalossalda nudged Dardrad forward, her hand resting warm against his.

The passage was longer than he remembered, the floor worn down by centuries of boots and carts. New carvings adorned the walls—whorls and faces and the unmistakable sigils of at least three dozen clans he didn't recognize. There were also ribbons of iron braided into the stone, a technique he'd never seen outside the forges of the east. The changes made the place feel bigger, but not less familiar.

The further in they walked, the more Dardrad caught the scents of home: the black tang of forge-smoke, the sharp resin of mountain herbs, the damp mineral tang of unsealed rock. It all hit him with a force that was equal parts nostalgia and nausea.

Dalossalda squeezed his arm, reading his mood. "I wish they had rebuilt in the old place. No reason not to," she murmured, nodding at the support arches overhead. "Twice as strong, but still hungry for stories."

"Maybe someday," he admitted. "Not sure I'd want to, to be honest."

They emerged at last into the central court. It was busier than he'd guessed—dwarves moving in groups, some in work smocks and others in crisp livery, all under the gaze of a dozen lanterns suspended

from the high ceiling. There were even a few human traders present, off to one side and nervously eyeing the architecture as if expecting the walls to eat them.

Before he could get his bearings, the junior guard reappeared, breathless but triumphant, trailed by two figures in ceremonial garb. The elders, Dardrad realized. Older than any dwarf he'd seen in years, but still upright and fierce as rebar.

They stopped before Dardrad and Dalossalda. The female elder eyed them both, then spoke in the flat, iron-edged accent of the old city.

"Who comes to claim the name Pebbleblade?" she said.

Dardrad stepped forward, feeling his boots dig into the familiar grit of the stone. "I am he. Dardrad, son of Torstan and Varelia, who bore the Vault and watched it fall. This is Dalossalda, my craftswife and anchor." He dipped his chin in respect.

The elder regarded him in silence, her eyes like drills. At last, she nodded. "You bear the signet. You know the words. You have the look of your father." She paused, glancing at Dalossalda. "And you have the sense to bring a better half."

Dalossalda smiled, sharp and sure.

The elder shifted her attention to the guards. "Let the word go forth: the exile is ended. Bring them to the Hall of Stone."

The junior guard looked stunned, but managed a salute.

The other elder—male, smaller but with a beard that nearly trailed the floor—spoke next, softer but no less certain. "You are needed here," he said. "There is work to do. The mountain has shifted again, and we fear for the lower galleries." He glanced at Dardrad's hands, and at the scar along his left wrist. "You still work the stone?"

Dardrad nodded. "Every day. Sometimes I even get it right."

The elder smiled—a flash of teeth, quick as a trick. "Good. We will see."

They led Dardrad and Dalossalda through the inner gates, past the bustle of the court and into a passage lined with lanterns. As they walked, the younger dwarves stared, whispered, then quickly busied themselves with whatever task was at hand.

Dalossalda walked beside him, her posture proud, but her hand never left his arm.

They passed a bakery, the smell of sweet bread so thick it nearly made him dizzy, and Dardrad thought of Makota and the fresh loaves cooling in her shop. He wondered, with a flicker of guilt, whether anyone up there would miss him if he vanished into the earth for another moon.

As they climbed the last stair and entered the Hall of Stone, Dardrad caught the sound of a distant hammer striking true. The ring of it echoed through the vault, a note so perfect it made him ache. He glanced at Dalossalda, and she nodded, as if to say, *We're home.*

They stepped inside, ready for whatever came next.

The Hall of Stone was colder than the one remembered. Not the clammy chill of a cave, but the proud, deliberate austerity of a place meant to last a thousand years. The ceiling soared overhead, held aloft by pillars carved in the likeness of mountain gods and the great matriarchs of the old clans. Between them, rune-lanterns floated in perfect alignment, casting a blue-white glow that pooled on the granite floor and sent long shadows into every corner.

At the far end of the hall, a dais rose from the floor—three steps, each a little less polished than the last, but each inscribed with words Dardrad could recite even after all these years. They spoke of duty, of legacy, and of the unbreakable promise of stone. Above the dais, a wall of crystal panes glimmered with a slow pulse, reflecting every footfall, every breath.

Dardrad's parents were waiting.

His mother stood left of center, hands folded across the leather apron that marked her as a master mason. Her hair—once a shock of black—was now almost entirely silver, drawn back in a braid that reached to the small of her back. Her beard was trimmed, precise, but the lines at her eyes had deepened into crow's-feet that could chisel granite. She wore the heavy tool-belt of her trade, every pocket packed and every buckle burnished from years of use.

Next to her stood his father, Torstan. He was shorter than Dardrad remembered, but somehow wider, with shoulders like quarried blocks and a nose that looked as if it had been set and broken in equal measure. He kept his beard long, as was the Pebbleblade custom, and it fanned out from his jaw in two disciplined wings. His hands—always his most expressive feature—were folded behind his back, but Dardrad could see the fingers working against each other, drumming out a staccato rhythm of nerves and memory.

Dalossalda's parents flanked the opposite side. Her mother, Narsil, wore a tunic of deep red, the Wallwrights' color, with intricate needlework running from collar to hem. She was taller than most, but carried herself with a gentle stoop, the posture of one who'd spent a lifetime bending over blueprints. Her face was softer than Dardrad remembered, but her eyes were just as sharp and keen.

Dalossalda's father, Harrek, stood with feet apart and arms crossed, his expression a mask of gruff skepticism. But even he couldn't hide the tremor in his jaw, or the way he kept sneaking glances at his daughter's hands, as if checking for missing fingers.

There was a pause—a vacuum of expectation, as if the entire hall had forgotten how to breathe.

It was Torstan who broke first. He stepped down from the dais, his boots ringing on the stone. He stopped three paces from Dardrad and Dalossalda, then reached out and seized his son's forearm, squeezing it with the force of a vise.

"We were wrong," he said. The words came out as gravel, torn from a place deeper than pride or anger. "The Censure—what they did to you—was a mistake. I should have spoken." He let the grip soften, but did not let go.

Dardrad's throat closed, but he managed, "You couldn't have stopped them."

His mother moved next, gathering them both into a rough embrace that smelled of mortar and thyme. "We could have tried. We should have tried." She pressed her cheek to his, then let him go. She blinked hard, but her voice was steady. "You don't know how much we waited for this day."

Dalossalda's mother wasted no time. She strode forward and

pulled her daughter close, holding her for a full breath before whispering, "Never let a wall come between us again." There were tears on her face, but she wiped them away with a sleeve and turned to Dardrad, giving him a smile as bright as any lamp.

Harrek just nodded, but the motion was so fierce it threatened to dislodge his spectacles.

For a moment, no one spoke. The only sound was the hush of the lanterns and the slow, mutual unwinding of years of shame.

Torstan finally let go of Dardrad's arm, but kept a hand on his shoulder. "We heard the news from above," he said, softer now. "That you fixed a flaw. That you made a Keystock and set it."

Dardrad ducked his head, feeling heat rise in his ears. "We only did what needed doing."

His mother smiled, and the lines in her face seemed to melt away. "That's all anyone can ask."

Narsil motioned for Dalossalda to sit. "Tell us everything," she said. "Tell us about North Pointe. About the work. About the magic."

Dardrad and Dalossalda settled onto the stone benches facing the dais, and for the next 'mark—maybe two—they recounted their story. The journey to North Pointe, the slow process of earning trust, the challenge of running a butcher's shop in a town that never stayed the same for more than a moon. Dardrad spoke of the Púca and their infinite capacity for mischief, of the ogre who forged swords for dreams, of the humans who lived as if each day were a contest to see who could spill the most flour or invent the next best cheese.

He told them about the flaw—the one he'd left behind, and the one he'd found waiting under the new town. He described the feeling of the earth shifting, the terror of thinking he'd made the same mistake twice, and the slow, hard work of setting things right.

Dalossalda added her part: the long days in the warren, the joy of teaching new apprentices, the pride in seeing a line she'd drawn hold true after the first hard winter. She spoke of Dardrad's stubbornness, of the way he never gave up on the stone, or on her.

The parents listened in silence, only rarely interrupting with a question or a nod of agreement. When Dardrad finished, the Hall

seemed warmer. The lanterns flickered, and for the first time since their arrival, he felt the weight in his chest lift.

His mother leaned in, eyes shining. "You came back. That's all that matters."

Narsil reached over and laid her hand on Dalossalda's. "And you've made a new place—something stronger than the old one."

Torstan's eyes were damp, but his smile was the surest Dardrad had ever seen. "You've always belonged here," he said. "We're just sorry it took us this long to say it."

Harrek, who had not spoken, finally cleared his throat. "There's work here if you want it," he said. "The lower tunnels are a mess. We could use a real Pebbleblade."

Dardrad felt the old tug—the pride of fixing, the deep satisfaction of leaving a seam that held. He looked at Dalossalda, who squeezed his hand and nodded, just once.

"We'll see to it," he said.

The Hall echoed the promise.

It wasn't a perfect mending—not yet. But it was a start.

The reunion was not allowed to linger in solemnity. In fact, the moment the first flush of forgiveness faded, the hall door banged open and a raucous flood of children poured through, every one of them shrieking at a pitch that bounced off the stone with enough force to sandblast the eardrums.

Dardrad braced, then caught himself and laughed as the procession sorted itself into a blur of boots, braids, and hastily mended tunics. There were seven by his count—two on the cusp of grown, three in the sweet spot of mischief, and two so new to walking they had to be retrieved from the bench legs by their older siblings. Nieces and nephews, he realized, though he could not have matched a name to a face for all the cheese in the valley.

They stopped short when they saw him and Dalossalda, forming a ragged phalanx at the base of the dais. The eldest girl—tall, angular, with a cascade of red-blond hair—stepped forward and gave a curtsy so perfect it nearly tripped her up. The others followed suit, except for one who kept a suspicious eye on Dardrad's boots, as if expecting them to stomp off on their own.

Behind the children, Dalossalda's mother beamed. "Go on, then," she prompted. "Say hello."

The smallest of the bunch, a girl with Dalossalda's eyes and a nose like a turned plum, clambered up the steps. She approached Dalossalda, tugging at her sleeve, then offered up a small, palm-sized object. It was a lump of stone, roughly shaped but clearly meant to be a bear—complete with scratches for eyes and a tongue of red thread for the mouth.

"I made this," the girl announced, voice as clear as a bell. "Grandmother says I have the gift, just like you." She waited, expectant.

Dalossalda dropped to one knee, inspecting the bear as if it were a diamond. "It's beautiful," she said. "You did this by hand?"

"With a chisel," the girl said, straightening with pride. "Father said to use the grinder but I wanted it to have the real feel."

Dardrad stifled a laugh, then let it out. "That's how you know it's a true bear. The grinder just scares the dust."

The girl grinned, showing two missing teeth. She looked to Dalossalda for approval, and when she got it, she scampered back to the others, who immediately began arguing over whether the next sculpture should be a mountain lion or a wolverine.

One of the older boys—a head shorter than Dardrad, but thick-armed and built like a fireplug—circled around, eyeing Dardrad's surface tunic with a look of deep suspicion.

"That's not clan wear," he said, blunt as a pickaxe. "Is it true you lived with humans?"

Dardrad drew himself up to his full height and glared, doing his best impression of a tribunal judge. "Is it true you still put mud in your pockets for luck?"

The boy's cheeks reddened. "Only sometimes," he muttered, then quickly changed the subject. "Is it true you can move through stone?"

Dalossalda snorted, then nudged Dardrad forward. "Show them," she said. "They've never seen it."

The children gathered in a knot, faces upturned, as Dardrad rummaged in his pocket. He drew out a chunk of polished wood, the kind he used for marking tight corners on the butcher block. The

surface was smooth as skin, and the veins in the grain shimmered when he rolled it in the light.

"Ever seen this?" he asked, holding it aloft.

The crowd gaped. A few reached out to touch, fingers barely daring the surface.

"It's... warm," said one.

"It's from a tree," another whispered, reverent.

Dardrad smiled. "Above, they make houses of it. And sometimes, if you're clever, you can make the grain go where you want. Just like with stone."

He pressed the wood to the floor and slid it, slow at first, then faster, until the tip seemed to blur and vanish into the granite. When he pulled it back, the children gasped. The wood had taken on the faintest gray tinge, as if it remembered the stone it had passed through.

"Now you," he said, handing the wood to the boy. "Push it, but think about where you want it to go."

The boy hesitated, then set his jaw and did as told. The wood glided across the floor, following a straight line toward the base of the nearest pillar, where it tapped and stopped, perfectly aligned with a seam in the marble. The children erupted in cheers.

Dalossalda's mother clapped. "It's been too long since we had a show like that in the Hall," she said.

The smallest girl reappeared, this time with two new figurines—one, a goat, the other, a human with wild hair and a pointed nose.

"Are the people up there really so tall?" she asked, waving the human at Dardrad.

"Some are," he replied. "But most just think they are."

Dalossalda covered her laugh with a hand. "What about ogres?" the girl pressed.

"Friendlier than you'd expect," said Dardrad. "But never take the last bun at a bakery, or you'll find out the hard way."

The children took this in, eyes wide. "Do you think I could go someday?" asked another. "To the surface?"

He looked at Dalossalda, and she nodded. "When you're ready," she said. "The world's bigger than you think."

The questions kept coming: What did snow taste like? Did the sun really rise every day? How did you keep your beard from freezing? Was there such a thing as a green river, and could you really get bread from a plant?

Dardrad found himself answering each, his gruffness melting under the relentless assault of curiosity. By the end, he was on the floor with the youngest two in his lap, drawing pictures in the dust and telling the story of the time he'd met a hedgehog that could read numbers.

The adults watched from the dais, grins plastered on their faces.

Dalossalda's father shook his head, unable to hide the pride. "He always was better with the little ones than the old ones," he said, not bothering to lower his voice.

Dardrad winked. "Old ones just have harder heads. Takes a lifetime to make a dent."

The youngest girl, now emboldened, climbed onto Dardrad's knee and whispered, "When you go, will you take me with you?"

He looked at Dalossalda, who shrugged in mock defeat. "Only if you promise to bring the bear."

"I promise," said the girl, and hugged his arm with all her strength.

For the first time since entering the Hall, Dardrad felt entirely at ease. The weight of the old exile faded under the tide of new voices, and the ache in his chest was replaced by a swelling warmth. The next generation was brighter, braver, and, if he had anything to say about it, destined to go much further than he ever had.

He watched the children, wild and happy, and wondered what else they might ask for if given the chance.

For now, he was content to let them dream.

The feast hall was the heart of the mountain, and tonight it throbbed with life.

The long stone table, carried from the old city and its surface worn smooth by generations of elbows and spilled ale, ran the length of the cavern. It groaned under the weight of roasted roots glazed in honey,

platters of steaming mushroom stew, dense loaves of black bread, and trays of cured meats sliced so thin they caught the light. Every few feet, barrels of ale jostled with jugs of bitter water and the occasional bottle of imported human wine, which no one admitted to drinking but which always seemed to be the first emptied.

Torches flared from the wall sconces, their flames reflected and amplified by polished crystal globes suspended from the arching ceiling. The light was golden, but the air was blue with the smoke of a hundred fat-wicked lamps. It gave the whole place the feeling of a forge in full song—hot, bright, and louder than any reasonable soul would want.

By the time Dardrad and Dalossalda took their seats, the hall had filled with every living member of the two families, plus a scattering of curious neighbors and a delegation from the apprentices' guild. The children who'd mobbed them earlier were now washed and re-dressed in their best, shoving each other for a place near the head of the table. The adults were louder, but their laughter was older, and the stories flew thicker than the steam rising from the stew.

At the center of the table, atop a block of polished granite, stood the loaf. It was a tradition that dated back to the first vault—bread shaped into an arch, glazed with salt and black seeds, and set aside until the moment of pronouncement.

When the noise had reached its peak, the village elder—Ebbin, white-bearded and stoop-shouldered but with eyes that still saw everything—rose from his chair and lifted both hands for silence. The room stilled instantly, the way only a dwarven feast hall could. Even the children stopped breathing.

Ebbin's voice, when it came, was a slow thunder. "We gather here to break the Censure," he said, each word landing with the weight of a mallet. "Let it be known that those once named 'they who fail the foundation' are now remembered as 'they who strengthen distant stones.' Their flaw is healed, their line restored, and their honor returned to the bedrock."

He paused, letting the echo run its course. No one moved.

With careful fingers, Ebbin picked up a ceremonial hammer and

chisel—both tools older than the hall itself—and set the blade to the arch of bread. He raised the hammer and brought it down in a single, clean strike.

The loaf cracked, the sound ringing off the walls like the first blast of a new shaft. The aroma of salt and sweet yeast filled the room.

Dardrad felt his chest tighten. This was it—the true end of exile, a thing no apology could have accomplished alone.

Ebbin beckoned them forward. Dalossalda nudged Dardrad, who stumbled up, acutely aware of a hundred eyes on him. The elder handed them each a wedge of the keystone, then motioned for them to perform the rite.

Dardrad took his own hammer from his belt, Dalossalda her favorite chisel. Together, they touched tool to tool over the bread, letting the metal ring once—sharp, bright, unmistakable.

The hall erupted. Every dwarf in the place slammed fist to table, stomped the floor, or let loose a cry of joy. The children shrieked. The apprentices pounded their steins in rhythm, splattering the nearest adults with ale. The air pulsed with the kind of joy that left bruises and didn't mind a bit.

The feast began in earnest.

Food was passed down the table with the urgency of a fire brigade. Dardrad found himself with a bowl of stew in one hand, a slice of keystone in the other, and a child under each arm before he could so much as protest. The taste was as he remembered—earthy, sharp, with the sweet tang of black salt. He savored it, then laughed as the smallest girl from earlier tugged at his sleeve for a second bite.

Dalossalda was at his side, her face flushed with happiness, her mouth already full of stories. The apprentices—boys and girls alike, some barely past their first tool—crowded around her, firing questions with the intensity of a training drill.

“How do you set an arch with no template?” asked one.

“What’s the trick for a keystone that wants to walk?” asked another.

Dalossalda answered each in turn, her explanations patient but never slow. She gestured with hands that had laid more line than half

the clan combined, showing them the subtle shift of weight, the way a seam could be convinced to hold if you just treated it with respect.

Dardrad's own crowd was older—former rivals, now a little softer around the middle but no less eager to show off scars and stories. They pressed him for tales of the world above: What was the strangest thing he'd eaten? (Dried eel, followed by raspberry jam.) Did the humans really bathe in rivers? (Yes, and not always alone.) Was it true that elves never blinked, not even when asleep? (He'd never seen it, but wouldn't doubt.)

One, a cousin he barely recognized, asked the question no one else would. "How did you do it?" he whispered, glancing around as if the walls might listen. "How did you fix the flaw?"

Dardrad swallowed, then set down his fork. "The trick," he said, "is not to erase the crack. It's to carry the line past it, make it part of the new shape. The flaw holds, if you let it."

The cousin nodded, thoughtful. "Is that true for people, too?"

He smiled. "Especially for people."

The wine and ale flowed, and as the night wore on, the distinctions between family and guest faded. Even the elders, who'd started the evening with all the dignity in the world, were soon clinking mugs and telling jokes that would have gotten them barred from the library in daylight.

When the plates had been scraped clean and the children had fallen asleep under the table or in the crooks of their parents' arms, Ebbin rapped the table for silence once more.

"Now," he said, "a song."

The tradition was that the newly-restored must sing first. Dardrad and Dalossalda looked at each other, eyes wide.

"You start," she hissed.

"No, you," he whispered back.

In the end, they sang together. It was an old work-song, one that required no tune and only the rhythm of hammer and chisel. Dalossalda took the melody, her voice strong and sure. Dardrad rumbled along in harmony, and soon the whole table joined, the voices layering together until the hall was full to bursting.

When the song ended, Ebbin raised his mug. “To Pebbleblade and Wallwright—may the mountain always carry your line.”

A cheer, then a toast, then a hundred more. The feast continued into the small bells of morning.

Dardrad sat back, letting the sounds of family and laughter soak in. He looked at Dalossalda, her face flushed, her hands entwined with his, and knew they had found their place—not above or below, but right at the seam, where the world was at its strongest.

For the first time in his life, he felt whole.

By the time the last of the children were bundled up and hauled off to their cots, the feast hall was a scatter of empty mugs and half-eaten bread, the air thick with the sweet reek of spilled ale and happiness. Dardrad lingered at the table, reluctant to let the moment go, but Dalossalda nudged him gently. The message was clear: face the next thing.

His parents found him in the corridor just outside the hall, the light from the lamps soft and golden on their faces. Torstan looked years younger than he had that afternoon, and Dardrad noticed for the first time that his mother’s braid had picked up a few new streaks of iron. They stood together, hands entwined, and for a heartbeat Dardrad was a boy again, caught at the threshold of the impossible.

“We’ve kept your rooms ready,” his mother said. Her voice was low, but the hope in it echoed. “The guild has missed you. So have the workshops.”

“We could put you right to work in the morning,” Torstan added, his smile almost bashful. “The new transit lines are a mess. No one can make them true. Not like you.”

Dardrad and Dalossalda shared a look—a tiny twitch of eyebrow, a squeeze of the hand, a thousand words passed without a breath. Dardrad felt the ache of it, the way the mountain pulled at his bones, but he knew what he had to say.

He cleared his throat. “There’s a place for us, above,” he said, the

words measured and slow. "North Pointe's got need for more than stonework. The shop, the green, the people—they're ours, too. We made a promise there. It's a good town. Honest work."

Dalossalda nodded. "We've got a warren," she said. "And apprentices. And friends who'd be lost if we didn't come back."

His mother's mouth tightened, but she managed a smile. "You'd come for the winters, then? When the town slows, and the rock calls?"

Dardrad grinned. "I'd be back at the first hint of snow. You couldn't keep me away."

Torstan exhaled, relief and pride battling in his face. "You found your true seam," he said. "It's all any of us want."

Dalossalda's mother appeared then, flanked by Harrek, who offered Dardrad a hand. He took it, the grip firm, and for a long moment they just stood there, four parents and two wayward children, the whole of the past finally level.

Dalossalda broke the silence. "We'll bring the little ones up next time. There's a baker's daughter who wants to see the mountain, and a whole town of Púca who'd riot for a chance to visit."

His mother laughed, the sound bright. "Bring them all. This place could use new stories."

Dardrad's father squeezed his shoulder, and for once, there was nothing left to say.

They parted in the corridor, promising to write, to visit, to send news at the first sign of trouble. As Dardrad and Dalossalda walked away, he glanced back and saw the four parents still standing together, proud and content, watching them go.

The mountain would always be here. But so would the world above.

The morning after a dwarven feast always had a particular air to it—a mix of scorched candles, stale bread, and the lingering sweetness of stories told too late and too loud. Dardrad padded down the main corridor, nursing a mug of strong tea, the echo of laughter still buzzing

in his ears. He had one boot on and the other dangling from his hand, too lazy to fix it until the stairs demanded it.

He found Dalossalda in the entry hall, already awake and inspecting a line of tools left askew on the main workbench. She glanced up, caught his eye, and smiled. "I thought you'd sleep until next bell."

"Didn't want to miss the chance to leave in daylight," he replied, sliding his boot on with a grunt. "Or miss breakfast."

The hall was quieter now. Most of the clan had drifted off, either to their workshops or out into the day, but a few lingered in clumps—gossiping, cleaning, or just sitting in companionable silence.

A familiar face appeared, half-hidden behind a stack of ledgers and a mop of untamed brown hair. Torgin, the son of Dardrad's favorite cousin, was just shy of grown but already taller than half the clan, with arms like bundled rebar and the energy of a hundred caged moles.

He waited until Dardrad was almost at the door, then sidled up with a conspiratorial grin. "Are you really going back up?" he asked, voice barely above a whisper.

Dardrad nodded. "Town needs us. And there's a shipment waiting that'd drive Cole mad if I left it more than a day."

Torgin fidgeted, then blurted, "Take me with you."

Dalossalda raised an eyebrow, but Dardrad said nothing, waiting.

Torgin pressed on. "Just for a day. Or a night. I want to see the sun and the lake and—and—" He trailed off, biting his lip.

Dardrad set his mug down, then put a hand on Torgin's shoulder. "What do your parents say?"

Torgin looked away, then back, the hope in his face hard to ignore. "Mother says I'd run off anyway. Father said I might as well get it out of my system now, before I break another kiln."

Dalossalda laughed. "He's got a point."

Dardrad considered. "You'll have to help carry the packs. And mind the Púca—they're worse than the youngest in a mood."

"I will," Torgin said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "I promise."

Dalossalda's mother appeared at the end of the corridor, arms folded but eyes soft. She watched the trio for a moment, then gave the barest of nods.

Dardrad grinned. "All right then. But you'll need to learn how to walk through stone."

Torgin's jaw dropped. "You'll show me?"

He beckoned the boy and Dalossalda down a side tunnel, away from the noise of the clan's main artery, to a small, quiet chamber where the mountain's raw bedrock jutted up through the floor. Dardrad ran his palm over the surface, feeling the familiar tremor that marked the best seam for transit.

He set his pack down, then motioned for Dalossalda and Torgin to join him. "It's easier if you don't think about it too much," he said. "Just put your hands on the stone, and on each other. The line will do the rest."

Torgin's fingers were sweaty, but he squeezed Dardrad's hand without hesitation.

Dalossalda took the other side, calm as ever.

Dardrad closed his eyes and let his will settle. The old shame, the memory of the Censure, was gone now—smoothed over by the night's song, the parents' blessing, the laughter of children. The seam in the stone welcomed him, eager to be used, eager to become something new.

"Ready?" he asked.

Torgin nodded, determined.

"Hold tight," Dardrad said. "The first time always feels like falling."

He pressed forward, the world narrowing to a breath, a heartbeat, a single line of force.

They slipped through the bedrock, the transition so gentle it was almost a caress. Around them, the stone flickered blue and gold, the pulse of the mountain guiding their way. Dardrad could feel Torgin's awe, the shiver of wonder running through him. He let it in, let it buoy them forward, out of the dark and toward the light above.

They emerged in a spray of sunlight, the air crisp and the world waiting.

Torgin whooped, eyes huge, then spun around to take in every blade of grass, every beam of morning sun, every distant glimmer on the lake. "It's beautiful," he whispered, voice trembling.

Dalossalda squeezed his hand. "It is. And it's yours, for as long as you want it."

Dardrad looked at the two of them, then up at the sky, and felt a peace so deep he knew he'd carry it forever.

Behind them, the mountain stood silent and sure, but the path ahead was theirs to walk.

epilogue

. . .

THE FIRST BELL of evening brought a slow, happy noise to the Broken Claw. Lanterns swung from every timber, chasing the dusk from the corners and painting the faces of its regulars in soft, buttery gold. The hearth—nearly as wide as a carriage and only slightly less lively—flared and snapped, drawing in the chill and sending it packing back to the trade road. Every table brimmed with the spoils of a generous cook: slabs of roast and grilled onions, bowls of white bean stew slicked with pepper oil, and rolls from Makota's hearth, their tops glazed and shining like little moons.

Dardrad sat with his back to the wall, boots planted, the world perfectly arranged. He had trimmed his beard that morning (Dalossalda's suggestion, and a good one), and though the scars along his jaw caught the lantern light, there was a new smoothness to his face. He nursed a mug of Dragon's Breath, thumb tracing the groove worn by a hundred other hands. His left hand was steady as stone; his right was busy demolishing a hunk of roast smeared with horseradish.

To his left, Dalossalda, who had never looked more at ease. She wore her warren-worn work shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow, but had let her hair out for the night, and it spilled across her shoulders like a

banner. She picked at a plate of grilled root vegetables, but mostly she watched the room, eyes laughing even when her mouth wasn't.

Cole Coleson anchored the other end of the table, his shoulders filling half the bench. He'd come straight from the fields by the look of his hands, but his shirt was clean and his hair combed flat—probably Caitlin's work, or maybe one of the girls. Cole talked with his hands as much as his mouth, but tonight he seemed more thoughtful, eyes darting around the pub as if trying to memorize the evening.

Sam Godsdotter glided through the crowd, refilling mugs with the efficiency of a drill sergeant and the grace of a matron who'd seen every kind of trouble and forgiven most of it. She caught Dardrad's eye, winked, and filled his mug to the brim, leaving behind a coin-sized ring of foam. "It's a lively one tonight," she said, her voice carrying above the din. "You keeping up?"

"Doing my best," Dardrad replied, lifting the mug in salute.

Dalossalda reached over, ran two fingers along his wrist, and murmured, "Pace yourself, pebble-head. The last time you tried to match Sam's pour, you woke up with a pickled onion in your ear."

He grunted, but the memory made him smile. "This time I'll stop at two."

Cole let out a low whistle, grinning. "He's got a reputation to uphold. Two's just the warm-up."

A new round of laughter circled the table. Above it all, the Claw's old beams creaked and the candles guttered, but nothing could touch the warmth inside.

Cole leaned in, voice low, eyes bright. "You been to the restaurant yet? The new dry goods counter?"

Dalossalda shook her head. "I heard Llewel's running it, but I haven't had time to see."

Cole's face lit up. "You should. Never seen anything like it. Every jar's lined up perfect, every sack labeled and double-tied. Rope, twine, flour, dried mushrooms—they've got it all. Even blue paper for the Púca, which is rare as sunrise in a cave."

Dardrad chuckled, swallowing a mouthful of bread. "That's because the Púca won't touch the old black paper since the last incident."

"Don't remind me," Sam called from a nearby table, where a pair of Púca were busy arm-wrestling over a dish of pickled eggs. "Had to spend a full bell scraping the ink off the rafters."

Cole raised his mug. "Anyway, I asked Llewel how he got it all in place so quick. He just looked at me with those eyes—creepy, those eyes—and said the world provides what is needed. Then he handed me a bundle of rope and asked if I wanted the regular, the heavy-duty, or the 'hero's choice.'" He laughed, rolling his eyes. "How do you even respond to that?"

Dalossalda grinned. "You take the hero's choice. Every time."

"Obviously," said Cole, mock-serious. "But the point is, he's running that shop better than Alred ever did, and Alred was a machine."

Dardrad nodded, his face softening. "The town's magic had to go somewhere. Seems it found a good landing."

For a moment, Cole went quiet, turning the mug in his hands. "I still miss Alred," he said. "But I think he'd have liked the way it's turning out."

Dalossalda squeezed Dardrad's arm, and he found the words. "He would," Dardrad said. "But he'd also want us to keep moving. Fix the next thing, help the next soul who comes through that door."

They sat with the thought a moment, the noise of the pub swirling around them, firelight making halos of every face.

Galhani appeared from the other side of the hearth, a little flushed and a lot delighted. She wore her best vest (patched at the pocket, but freshly pressed) and held a cup of something that steamed with a life of its own. "What's this talk of fixing things?" she said, sliding into the empty spot next to Dalossalda. "The world's running smoother than ever, now the square's patched and the restaurant's got a proper supply. I even heard the bakery's new oven never runs cold."

Dalossalda arched a brow. "Makota's oven was always perfect. It's Makota's patience that runs hot and cold."

Sam's voice sailed across the room again: "That's a lie and you know it, Dal! I've never met a baker who could wait for dough to rise without checking the oven at least twice."

Cole snickered. "It's because her kits keep eating the dough."

This time the Púca at the next table chimed in, their voices quick and eager: "It's not theft if it's in the proving basket!" "We're quality control!"

Dalossalda shook her head, then looked at Dardrad, her eyes crinkling. "This is why we can never have a quiet meal."

Dardrad shrugged, entirely content. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

The clink of mugs and the low rumble of a happy crowd set the rhythm of the evening. Sam made the rounds, never missing a detail. Every time she passed, she checked on Dardrad—subtle, but not so much that he didn't notice. He gave her a nod, a little tighter each time.

Galhani leaned in, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Between you and me, I think the restaurant is haunted now. Saw the candlemarks move backward when I picked up my order last night."

Dardrad snorted. "It's not haunted. It's just—" He stopped, searching for the right word. "It's got a memory, now. All that old magic from the dry goods shop didn't vanish. It just—shifted."

Galhani's eyes went wide. "Like a graft on a tree."

"Exactly," Dardrad said, pleased. "Same roots, new branches."

Cole finished his mug, then said, "You think the magic in the meat shop does anything like that?"

Dalossalda answered for him. "It remembers every cut. I swear, if Dardrad so much as trims a chop wrong, the knives go blunt for a day."

He raised his hands in surrender. "She's not wrong."

They laughed, and the sound was good and deep.

For a long while, they just ate and drank and let the night build around them. The fire in the hearth hissed and danced. The bread disappeared, and Sam brought another basket without being asked. Someone in the back started a song—a silly one, all about a miller's daughter and the misadventures of a too-curious goat. Before long, half the Claw was singing along, even the visitors who clearly didn't know the words.

Dardrad watched it all, feeling the old nervousness replaced by a calm that was as solid as the bench beneath him. He glanced at Dalos-

salda, who smiled back, and he realized—maybe for the first time—that he was exactly where he needed to be.

The talk shifted to the next market day, the gossip of a new stonemason out east, and a particularly feisty rumor about Sam's secret recipe for the Claw's infamous ginger snaps. Dardrad let the stories wash over him, content to listen and be a part of it.

By the time the first candlemark had burned down, the benches were packed. More faces appeared—Warren, ducking in with a thunderous laugh and a fresh tray of sausage; Makota herself, flour-dusted and bright-eyed, bearing a plate of sweets for the table; even Llewel, who glided through the door with a kind of effortless dignity and set up at a table near the window, content to watch and sip a glass of pale wine.

The world outside might have been cold, but in here, nothing could touch them.

Dalossalda reached for Dardrad's hand, lacing their fingers together. "We did good," she said, and he knew she meant more than just the night.

He nodded, squeezing her hand. "We'll hold."

The fire popped, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. Sam passed by with a plate of ham and rye, pausing just long enough to clap Dardrad on the shoulder.

"Glad to see you out, Pebbleblade," she said, voice soft now. "The place feels truer with you in it."

He blushed, and if anyone noticed, they were kind enough not to mention it.

The conversation rolled on, stories growing wilder with each round. Galhani told a tale about a mouse who'd outsmarted her entire kin for a moon, and Cole topped it with an account of a wildcat that had taken up residence in his hayloft. Even Dalossalda got in on the fun, spinning a yarn about a warren ghost that could rearrange stone in the night, but only to spell rude words if you looked at it from the right angle.

As the laughter swelled, Dardrad thought of the stone under the square, the way the seam glowed true and held the world aloft. He thought of the warren below, the arch he'd finished with Dalossalda,

and the shop above, humming with the rightness of memory. He looked around the Claw—at Cole’s easy grin, at Sam’s steady hands, at the way Galhani’s eyes sparkled with every new story. He saw the future here, as clear as the cut of a keystone.

As the candles burned lower, the tone in the Broken Claw slid toward the silly and the soft. Plates cleared and bellies full, the talk at Dardrad’s table drifted from the business of town life to the small absurdities of the day. The regulars at the next table over began a game of Stones and Bones, rattling dice against the tabletop, while at the bar two Púca tried to out-drink a peddler from Downriver and were promptly, spectacularly losing.

Makota arrived late, a dusting of flour across one cheek and the distinct scent of singed yeast clinging to her coat. She plopped herself on the bench beside Cole, her tail swishing with delight as she surveyed the remains of the meal. “Leave anything for a poor baker?” she asked, though the mischievous glint in her eyes said she knew there was plenty.

Dalossalda nudged the bread basket toward her. “Not the best batch, but it’ll do.”

Makota snatched a roll and took a savage bite. “I’ll be the judge.” She chewed thoughtfully, then pronounced, “Edible. Not as good as mine, but better than Warren’s attempt at breakfast buns last market day.”

Cole snorted into his mug. “Those weren’t buns. They were bludgeons. My daughter tried to use one as a skipping stone—almost put a hole through the cistern.”

This drew a round of laughter, but Makota wasn’t done. “Speaking of disasters,” she said, licking a smudge of butter from her paw, “I had one today. You ever see a proofed dough go off like a loaded sling?”

Cole’s eyes widened. “You mean—?”

Makota spread her hands, fingers splayed, as if to contain a memory too large for mere words. “I turned my back for a breath—just a breath, mind you—and the whole basket let go. Sent the lid flying. Nearly took Sora’s ear off. The bread rose so fast it slammed against the oven door and glued it shut. Kene spent half a candlemark prying it open with a broom handle. We had to eat our way out.”

Dardrad snorted so hard he nearly spilled his drink. "That's a first."

Makota grinned, pleased with her audience. "I'll bring you a piece tomorrow. Still got the oven shape on the back. Looks like a map of the valley—if you squint."

The table howled, and even Sam, passing by with a tray of refilled mugs, paused to offer her own two coppers. "If it tastes better than it smells, I'll eat my apron," she declared. "Or make Dardrad do it for me."

"Please don't," Dardrad said, but he grinned as he said it.

As the story died down, Cole leaned in, warming to the flow of the night. "You want to talk troublemakers? Try getting four children dressed and out the door before sunrise. Senan lost his boots. Willow braided her hair into the fence. Erich put a frog in the milking bucket, and Ivy—sweet Ivy—tried to trade our entire harvest for a single marzipan pig at the bakery."

Makota clapped her hands. "She's got good taste."

Cole shook his head, mock despair. "She's five and already knows how to get what she wants. I don't know if I'm proud or terrified."

Dalossalda offered her own wisdom. "It's always both."

Dardrad watched the banter, feeling the low, steady burn of satisfaction in his chest. It used to be that a crowd this lively would put him on edge—too many moving parts, too many old ghosts in the cracks between voices. But now, he found himself anchored, present for every word. His eyes didn't stray to the door, or the floor, or the line of the ceiling beams; they settled on the faces of his friends, on Dalossalda's easy smile, on the slow, careful way Cole tipped his mug back when he laughed.

The room's air thickened with the scents of roasted garlic and ale, laced through with the sharper tang of woodsmoke from the hearth. The fire burned lower now, but it radiated heat that reached all the way to the back tables, where the oldest regulars held court and debated the finer points of local cheese.

Dardrad reached for Dalossalda's hand, just briefly. She squeezed back, then let go, her eyes shining with the reflected light of a dozen candles.

He remembered the days when even this much comfort would have seemed impossible. When every gathering felt like a test, every shared meal a reminder of the world's unfinished edges. But here, tonight, there was nothing left to prove. The seams had been filled, the arches set, the load distributed so well that even if the roof came down, it would settle gentle.

Sam made another pass, her apron now decorated with a fresh splatter of stew and a hint of flour—evidence of a food fight at the far end of the bar, if Dardrad had to guess. She refilled mugs, flicked a wayward Púca off the bench, and delivered a gentle cuff to the back of Cole's head when he tried to sneak a slice of sausage before it made its way to the plate.

"You're in rare form tonight," she said to Dardrad, pouring him a finger's width of something clear and potent. "You planning to keep up, or just watch the rest of us have fun?"

"I'll match you pace for pace," he said, holding her gaze.

Sam barked a laugh. "That'll be the day."

The banter rolled on, but Dardrad found himself watching the interplay of everyone at the table. He caught the subtle glances between Makota and Galhani, the way Cole's eyes softened when he spoke about his children, the way Dalossalda held herself taller every time someone turned their attention her way. He recognized, suddenly, that he was as much a part of this as any of them. Not just present, but essential—a keystone in a table that would never tip.

The noise in the room swelled and faded in waves, punctuated by shouts of victory from the dice players, the clack of mugs, the roar of the hearth. The night folded around them like a quilt, every thread stitched with laughter and memory.

At one point, Makota produced a deck of hand-inked cards and challenged the table to a round of Hightail. Dardrad lost spectacularly, though Dalossalda swore he'd let her win. Cole taught them a song about a particularly stubborn mule, and before long, half the pub was singing along, voices ragged but enthusiastic.

The scents of food and woodsmoke deepened as night drew on. Outside, a hard frost crept over the square, but inside the Claw, the warmth held fast.

Dardrad turned to Dalossalda, brushing a stray curl from her face. "This is good," he said, and she nodded, leaning her head on his shoulder for a heartbeat.

"It is," she replied. "Let's remember it."

He would, he knew. Every word, every laugh, every small kindness.

As the night pressed on, the wildness of the early bells gave way to something quieter, richer. Laughter faded to chuckles; songs drifted into memory. Most of the regulars had drifted home or slipped into the warm shadows of the far booths, leaving the core crowd in the bright and breathing heart of the Broken Claw.

The last candlemarks always belonged to the close, the stubborn, and the content. Dardrad stood and found himself taller than he remembered, the table quieting as he drew in a breath and raised his mug.

He cleared his throat—a sound like gravel poured into a bucket—and every face turned his way.

"To North Pointe," he said, voice low but ringing in the hush, "and to the quiet strength that holds us together." He nodded once, just the way his father used to, as if to drive the point home.

Cole was first to respond, standing and hoisting his own mug so high it nearly caught on the lantern chain above. "To North Pointe!" echoed, strong and bright.

The rest of the table joined in: Makota, tail flicking in delight; Galhani, eyes shining behind a fog of steam from her cup; even Sam, wiping down the bar with a smile and lifting her own battered tankard in salute.

Dardrad looked at each of them—at Cole, whose laugh was the best part of every morning; at Makota, who fed the town with more than bread; at Galhani, who never gave up on a thing once she'd set her mind to it; and at Sam, whose watchful eyes missed nothing, and whose care stitched the whole place together.

He felt the room settle—felt, truly, the foundation beneath them, the weight of every story and secret and sorrow and celebration. It was the same as the seam he'd set in the square: invisible, but strong enough to hold the world up.

For a long, sweet moment, no one said a word. They just drank, and breathed, and existed together.

The fire crackled, catching the angles of their faces in gold. Mugs met in the air, not all at once but in small, sincere collisions, each one a promise.

As Dardrad drank, he felt it: a soft, humming vibration in his bones. Not the danger-thrum of a flaw, but the music of something made right. The Claw itself seemed to thrum, every table and beam and stone in the floor singing a quiet harmony. No one else mentioned it, but he could see in their eyes that they felt it too—a magic as old as the world and as new as this very moment.

He caught Dalossalda's eye across the rim of his mug, and she smiled at him—slow, certain, entirely his.

He smiled back.

Somewhere down the line, chaos would come again. A storm, or a bad harvest, or a wild idea in the mind of a child with too much time and not enough sense. But for now, for this night, the world was whole.

The mugs clinked together one last time, a circle unbroken.

And beneath it all, the foundation held.

afterword

I hope you enjoyed getting to know Dardrad a little better. His story turned out to be one of the shorter ones in North Pointe, but I feel he's really enriched the lore of the town. And I'd love to work more of the dwarven culture into this little world... I've been spending some time brainstorming how that might work, and which of the shopkeepers will be the right one to share in that particular story.

The next book in the Tales from the Broken Claw is *Bandages & Banshees*, where you'll spend a great deal of time with Dexter, the town's medical practitioner. He's got a story you absolutely won't believe, and I can't wait to share it with you.

I'd like to thank you for continuing to share in the happenings in North Pointe. Truly, it's incredibly meaningful to me—the series has been doing well on Amazon, and it's very, very heartening to know I'm building a little group of friends out in the world, even if I haven't met you all in person yet. Believe it or not, I've finished the rough outlines for *fifteen* total books, and I can't *wait* to start writing them. But... I *will* wait a bit. I'm going to take a few moons' vacation from North Pointe to work on *A House of Forgotten Quests and the Dragons that Lie Within*, an entirely different—but not entirely un-cozy—fantasy in a much more literary, Victorian style. If you don't already follow me

Afterword

on Amazon, consider doing so—you'll find a handy button on the front page of DonJones.com. That way you can get a quick notification from them once the new tale is ready.

In the meantime, thank you for reading. Books have always been amongst my best friends, and knowing that folks out there feel the same way is how I get out of bed with a smile every morning.

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about the author

Don Jones spent two decades writing tech books before he finally penned his first sci-fi novella, *A History of the Galactic War*. His well-reviewed and award-winning novels span fantasy and science fiction, with a focus on world building and relatable characters.

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