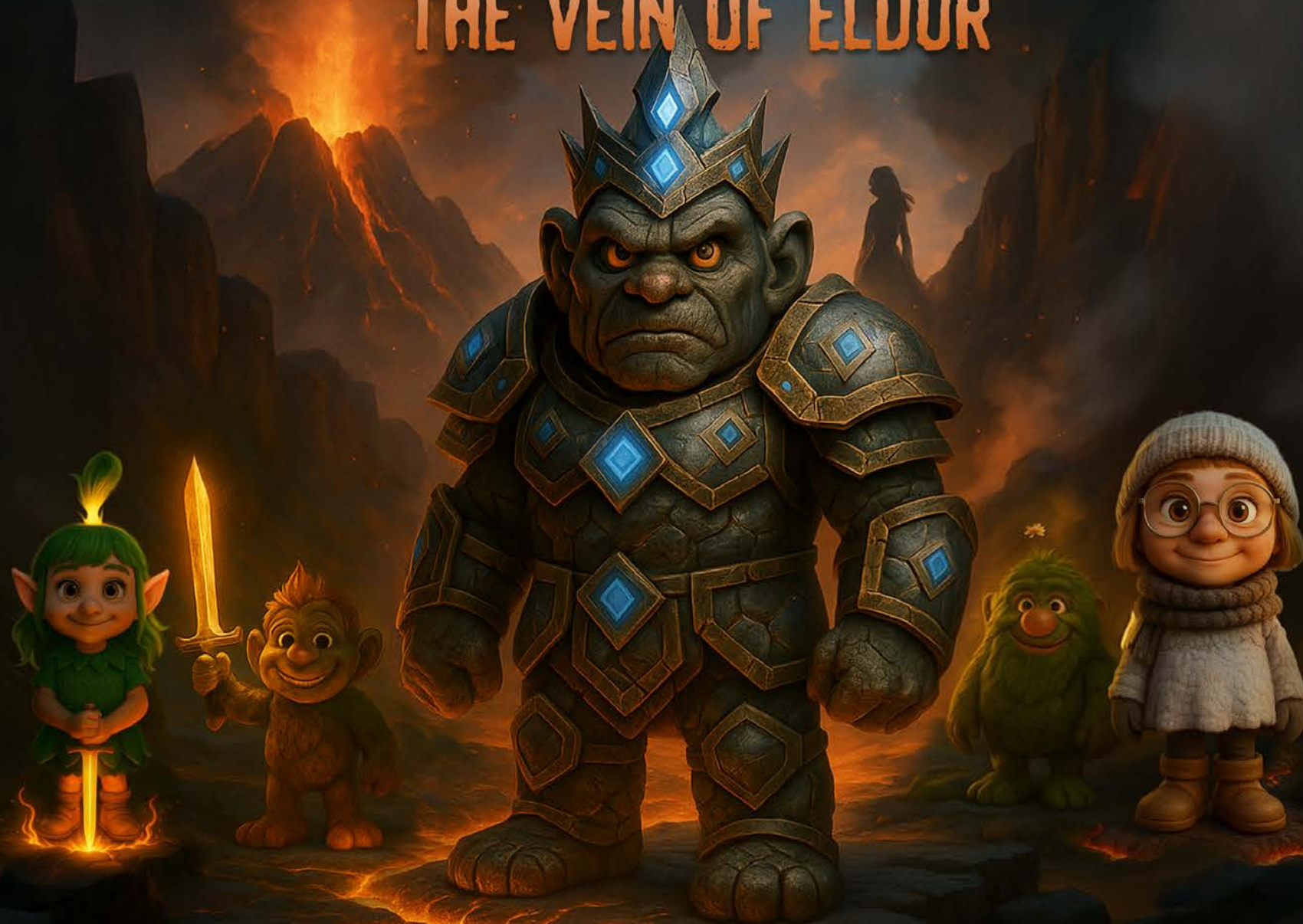


BJÖRGVIN GUÐJÓNSSON

THE LAVA TROLLS

THE VEIN OF ELDUR



THE LAVA TROLLS

The Vein of Eldur

Written and illustrated by Björgvin Guðjónsson, 2025

To My Dad - Guðjón Þorgils Kristjánsson

A novel set in the world of the Lava Trolls, following the events of The Crystal of Eldur, Flame Meets Frost, Aurora's Light, and Magma Meets Man.

Chapter 1:

Heartbeats in Stone

The trouble started, as these things so often do, with Sparky lying flat on his back and pretending to work.

Technically, he was working. Elder Logi had told him to “listen to the earth,” so Sparky had decided to take that literally—sprawled out on a warm igneous shelf, ear pressed to the stone, eyes half-closed in what he called geological concentration and what everyone else called a nap.

The underground world of the Lava Trolls hummed in a low, contented way. Since the Council of Balance had been formed with the humans—and occasionally, when they weren’t busy freezing their noses off, the Ice Trolls and the Elves—things had quieted. The thud and grind of drills had gone; the humans (under the leadership of Eva, the human whose tablet had more buttons than a dragon has teeth) now consulted the trolls before switching on anything with a

red light. Even Aunt Agnes’s prized rock collection was no longer in danger of toppling mid-lava tea.

Peace, in other words. Suspicious, enjoyable, highly flammable peace.

Then came the heartbeat.

Thump.

It wasn’t magma shifting or the polite groan of settling rock. This beat had rhythm. Intent. Like a giant drummer beneath the stone keeping time for an orchestra that hadn’t learned its instruments yet.

Thump... thump.

Sparky sat up so quickly his hair went foof, which is a very particular Lava Troll sound that means I was not asleep, thank you.

“Oh, lava buckets,” he whispered. “That’s not normal.”

He tried the scientific method, which, in a lava city, involves pressing one’s other ear to the ground to see if the sound changes. It did not, except to become louder, which is the

kind of change a scientist notes down and then goes to fetch an elder about.

By the time Sparky sprinted into the Great Cavern, Elder Logi already stood there, head bowed, fingers tracing slow circles on the volcanic wall like he was reading a very old book in a very quiet library. Torches hissed. The lava river whispered. A distant choir of young trolls rehearsed the harmony for that evening's Song of Sensible Safety Procedures (Logi's idea, and therefore popular, grudgingly).

"You've heard it too?" Sparky asked, breathless.

Logi's lined face shifted from stern granite to the even rarer active landslide. "It is the Vein of Eldur," he said.

"The vein of... what-now?"

"The life-thread beneath all realms," Logi murmured. "It binds our fires to the Ice Trolls' frost, the Elves' roots and light, even the humans' ground above. When it is in balance, we thrive. When it is disturbed..." He let the silence finish the sentence, as elders do.

Sparky shuffled. "And 'disturbed' means...?"

"Let's not find out," Logi said, which counts as optimism in elder dialect.

A gust of white breath rolled across the floor. Chilly skidded in, all ice-blue cheeks and earnest eyes, steam curling from his toes where they met the warmer rock. "Hot cracks," he blurted. "In the glacier tunnels. Steam vents where there should be nothing but the good, solid cold. My father says it's your fault."

Sparky held up both hands. "Not me this time! Well... not today. Not yet."

A soft green light stitched the air like embroidery. Princess Aurora stepped from it with the unhurried grace of someone whose hair never frizzes, not even in a geyser. The cavern filled with the scents of leaf and rain and a hint of starlight, which is a scent if you are an Elf and refuse to be told otherwise.

"In our groves," Aurora said, "the root-crystals dim. The songs of light are thin. Whatever touches your lava and Chilly's ice touches us as well."

“So it’s everyone’s problem,” Sparky said, trying not to sound pleased. Shared problems meant shared adventures. He was terribly responsible about adventures.

Aurora’s eyes found his. “If the Vein of Eldur fractures, it becomes everyone’s end.”

Deep below, the beat grew louder.

Thump.

Sparky exhaled and squared his shoulders. “Right. I suppose this is where I am volunteered for something dangerous?”

“On the contrary,” said Logi. “You are the volunteer.”

“Excellent,” said Sparky, who was very brave when other people were listening.

Logi lifted his staff and the cavern quieted further, the sound falling away piece by piece until even the lava stopped its gossip. “We will convene the Council of Balance,” he said. “Humans, Elves, Ice Trolls—and us. We will listen to the drum and decide where to step.”

Sparky swallowed. The last time there had been a council this big, someone had tried to serve cold stew. It had not ended peacefully.

Chapter 2:

A Fissure in the Peace

The surface always felt too large. Skies had no ceilings. Winds forgot their manners and tugged at your ears. The humans had built their geothermal plant here like a nest of metal birds—pipes and towers and little red lights that blinked as though trying to stay awake.

Eva met them by the perimeter fence, tablet tucked under her arm, hard hat already scuffed by the sort of accidents one can only describe as “educational.” Helga, the safety officer, hovered behind her with the expression of a woman who had learned to fear the word prototype.

“We’ve been seeing pulse anomalies,” Eva said, which is human for heartbeat. She flicked her tablet and a tidy earthquake of graphs rippled by. “They’re not drill-related.”

“Good,” Sparky said. “Bad. Good because not us, bad because something else.”

Eva’s smile crinkled her eyes. “That’s the summary I was going to send to the minister.”

Helga leaned in. “And the minister will ask what our mitigation plan is should the ground open and swallow the car park again.”

“Don’t park on the fault line,” Eva and Helga said together, which suggested this had come up before.

They followed a hazard-taped path to a fresh wound in the earth. The fissure yawed open, heat wobbling the air, a red shimmering far below. The pulse rolled up and through them. Logi flinched; Aurora’s crystal blade hummed faintly at her hip; Chilly’s breath misted in fast puffs; Helga made a note that said only Nope.

Something moved in the glow.

It rose with the slow authority of a mountain deciding to stand. Skin like cooled basalt, striated with glowing seams. Eyes molten-gold. Horns swept back in ridges as if chiselled by time itself.

“I am Karn of the Deep Below,” the figure said, and the fissure walls trembled courteously.

Silence. (There is always a very particular silence when a brand-new category of person introduces themselves.)

Eva found her manners first. “Hello. I’m Eva. Please don’t step on the pipes.”

Karn’s gaze swept the group. “The Vein weakens. In my realm, fires fail. In yours, ice thins and roots dim. I have come to awaken the First Fire.”

Logi’s hand tightened on his staff. “The First Fire is not a bell to be rung. It is the drum that keeps the world’s time. Strike it wrong and rhythm burns away.”

“Better a burned rhythm than silence,” Karn said. “We die below.”

Helga sneezed into her sleeve, which was her way of expressing profound political unease.

Eva raised both palms. “Or we don’t burn anything,” she said carefully. “Let’s talk mitigation before ignition.”

They relocated to the plant’s meeting room, which had a commendable number of chairs and a wall map no one had ever successfully folded. The Council assembled: Logi with a half-circle of Lava Trolls; an Elven envoy with notebooks made of bark and light; two Ice Troll elders wearing snow like sashes; Eva’s team of engineers; Helga, who never blinked; and, looming by the door because doorframes are small, Karn.

Debate began in the traditional way: with everyone agreeing that something must be done and then immediately disagreeing about what that something should be. The Elves spoke for balance and patience. The Ice Trolls spoke for caution and thicker socks. The humans spoke in bullet points. The Lava Trolls sang a very brief and uplifting song about not panicking, which was mostly for them.

Karn waited through it all like a cliff listening to rain.

“Proposal,” Eva said at last. “A reconnaissance to the Tri-Realm Convergence for direct assessment. If the Vein can be tuned back into phase, we try it. If it can’t, we regroup and reassess with fewer metaphors.”

“Who goes?” asked an Ice Troll elder.

“Who always goes,” said Logi, looking at Sparky with a fondness that was at least half exasperation.

Sparky lifted a hand. “Volunteer,” he said, because it is better to jump than be thrown, and also because he could feel the drum in his bones and it made standing still impossible.

Chapter 3:

Team, Assembled (Mostly On Purpose)

Volunteers were called for. Volunteers, as the Lava Trolls define them, are the people who did not step back fast enough.

The team:

- Sparky, certified lava wrangler, accidental artist, occasional hero, frequently on fire.
- Chilly, heir of the Ice Trolls, practiced eye-roller, sculptor of frost, owner of exactly one joke that he refuses to retire.
- Princess Aurora, lightweaver, negotiator, catastrophically good at not getting soot on white clothing.
- Eva, engineer, diplomat, owner of the only backpack in Iceland that contained both a seismometer and three kinds of biscuits.

- Karn, of the Deep Below, who carried the weight of a realm in his shoulders and moved like an avalanche that had learned manners.
- Mosi, who appeared halfway down the first tunnel carrying a moss-wrapped bundle of snacks and several strong opinions about socks. “You’ll want a guide,” he said cheerfully. “And a lunch. Mostly a lunch.”
- Smudge, Sparky’s friend, who insisted on coming because someone had to remind Sparky to blink. Smudge carried a ukulele-like instrument made from cooling lava and optimism.

No one admitted to inviting Mosi or Smudge, which is how you know they were absolutely necessary.

They began in the Molten Maze, where the walls decided daily which direction was fashionable. Rivers of lava wove like glowing threads; bubbles rose with the bored expression of creatures who had seen too much and weren’t impressed by any of it.

“Left,” said Aurora at a fork, reading the light as if it were a very polite book.

“Right,” said Chilly, tasting the cold drifting from a seam.

“Down,” said Karn, because stone is almost always right about these things.

“Up,” said Mosi, on principle.

They chose down-left-ish, which pleased everyone equally.

They rafted a slow lava river on a slab of pumice the size of a dinner table. Smudge played a jaunty tune that made the bubbles keep time. A basalt golem—animated by old pressure and older habit—tried to block their way until Karn laid a steady hand on its chest and hummed a chord that turned irritation to drowsy curiosity. It stepped aside, slowly, like a thought changing its mind.

They camped on a shelf above a lavafall, the air soft as baked bread. Aurora wove a light-canopy to keep the heat gentle; Chilly discovered that if he held his palms over the lava he could toast ice-flakes into a crunchy snack, which is

better than it sounds and sounds terrible. Eva logged pulse intervals; Mosi told a story about a sheep called Woolsworth who had once saved him from a wet bog and a wet argument. (Woolsworth, for the record, is very brave and very opinionated about lichens.)

Sparky lay awake and listened to the beat. It wasn't just wrong. It was two beats, slightly apart, like a duet sung by people who had never met. Somewhere, something in the deep was keeping time to the wrong song.

They woke to the Maze rerouting itself like an indecisive map. The new path sloped toward a cavern whose ceiling glittered with mineral chandeliers. “Pretty,” Smudge said, and then one fell. They ran, laughing because it is important to be rude to danger sometimes.

At the far wall a low tunnel breathed a colder air. Frost whispered from it like an invitation written on thin paper.

“Frostfall,” Chilly said, with the careful pride of someone showing you their favourite book.

Chapter 4:

The Frostfall Bridges

They came out of the lava's glow and into a breath that bit.

The Frostfall Bridges arced across a cathedral of ice—a hundred gleaming spans swept one over another like the ribs of a sleeping whale. Far below lay a mist that had never heard of ground. Sparky's hair hissed where the cold licked it. Chilly straightened up, shoulders squaring, home settling over him like a cloak.

Guarding the nearest span stood three frost elementals: figures of carved blizzard and old, old winter. Their eyes glittered like trapped starlight. Beside them, a tall Ice Troll whose beard looked like a waterfall paused in January regarded Chilly with a severity that was at least forty percent affection.

“Frosti,” Chilly said, bowing with the exact depth of a nephew who had once frozen the family teapot as a prank. “Elder.”

“Chilly,” Frosti rumbled. “You have brought fire into sacred air.” His gaze drifted to Sparky, who tried to look like an unplugged candle.

“To pass,” said the central elemental, “you must prove the steadiness of your frost.”

Chilly stepped forward. Ice spiralled from his palms and spun into an intricate lattice—a miniature of the Bridges themselves, each arch balanced, each thread singing a cold, clear note. It was beautiful enough that even the elementals paused to admire it.

Sparky, trying to be helpful, warmed the air so the sculpture wouldn't crack. The sculpture melted. A little. Which is to say: a lot.

Everyone looked at the puddle. Then at Sparky.

“I can fix it,” he said, and then could not.

Aurora breathed a ribbon of green through the lattice and made of it a shining auroral ice that did not melt even under Sparky's discomfort. The elementals nodded. “You pass,” said the central one, and their voices sounded faintly

amused, which is something like applause where they come from.

The company moved out onto the Bridges.

Halfway, the Vein thumped—a low, off-beat shudder that rolled through the arches. Cracks spidered. Chilly threw out both arms, freezing fractures as they grew; Sparky leaned his heat the other way, making a soft countercurrent of warm air to relieve the stress; Aurora wove light-lashings; Eva, with impressive calm, anchored safety lines to points that had existed for less than ten seconds and pretended this was all in the manual.

Karn walked as though the bridge were bedrock. The ice steamed under his feet and did not dare melt.

A sound like a flute rose from the mist below. A snow-whale—a great, gliding creature of compacted storms—breached the fog and circled them once, curious. Smudge, because he has never met a moment he couldn't improve with music, played a trilling line. The whale sang back, the pitch

resonating through the bridge and, by some miracle of physics and friendship, sealing the last of the hairline cracks.

On the far side, Frosti clapped Chilly's shoulder so hard it made a noise. "You did not panic," he said.

"I will panic later," Chilly promised.

They slept that night in a cave where the ice rang softly when you touched it. Chilly sculpted a tiny llama because he refuses to explain why llamas are humorous. Aurora sent a message by light-thread to the groves; the reply came back thin and distant. Eva tried to make hot chocolate on a camping stove and ended with a drink that tasted like warm, sweet regret. Mosi declared it delicious and asked for thirds. Karn stood at the cave mouth and watched the aurora without blinking once.

In his sleep, Sparky dreamed of the drum fading, the beat faltering, and something else beneath it—another rhythm beginning to throb.

Chapter 5:

The Root Spirals

Root country smells like rain and secrets. The tunnels were vast and laced with glowing veins that pulsed faintly, like sleeping things that dreamed of sunlight. Here, Aurora's steps grew lighter still, and her voice hummed low to the roots, asking permission.

They passed under arches woven of living wood and crystal, each carved with Elven script that translated roughly to Please do not touch the delicate things unless you intend to fix the delicate things. Mosi touched one and it fixed him, straightening his posture and his hair.

Mischief sprites found them first: bright pinpricks with wings and opinions. "Shinies," the sprites said, as one does when one's entire economic system is barter us trinkets or we tie your shoelaces together.

"Ah," said Mosi, and opened his bundle. "Moss."

"Shinies!" the sprites repeated, baffled and intrigued.

"This is the shiniest of mosses," Mosi explained earnestly. "It grows only on the backs of very embarrassed rocks." He presented a tuft that did, in fairness, glimmer faintly of its own accord. The sprites swarmed it like toddlers to cake. In a blink, Mosi and the sprites were best friends, the laces were safe, and passage was granted.

They arrived at a market the Elves do not admit exists: the Under-Under Fair, where root-merchants traded in glows and whispers, where a good story cost less than a bad promise, and where you could buy, for a very fair price, a jar of yesterday's sunrise. Smudge purchased a bottle of "Echo — Mild," which, when uncorked, repeated the last encouraging thing you'd been told. He used it promptly. "You're doing great," said the bottle in Logi's voice, which unnerved everyone.

An ancient dryad named Edda received them under a tree that grew downward, its leaves bells of pale light. "Children," she said, and meant all of them, "we feel your heat and your cold and your bright. The Vein beats itself to

bruises. The roots are either parched or drowning. Your drum is off.”

“Can you fix it?” Eva asked, already sketching devices in her mind.

“Roots mend by growing,” Edda said gently. “But I can give you a clearer path.” She placed a leaf-bell in Aurora’s hand.

“This will chime true at every fork that leads toward the Heart. It will not stop you taking the wrong path. It will simply refuse to sing.”

“Which is a very Elven way to help,” Smudge whispered.

They moved on, down spirals of living wood that creaked when you said rude things and hummed when you did not.

The light thinned. The air warmed. The beat grew louder

and stranger, the two rhythms pulling farther apart until walking itself felt like choosing sides.

They reached a gate knotted of stone and root. Set within it, petrified and shimmering, lay an ancient rune-stone—cousin to the one Freyja had once given Sparky on a very different quest. Sparky brushed it with his fingers. It sparked, and in his head a path unfolded: lava to frost to root, then down, then deeper still.

“The Convergence,” he said.

Karn’s hand hovered over the same stone. His voice lost some gravel. “Home,” he whispered, and Sparky heard in the word a thousand cooling forges and a lullaby sung low.

They descended.

Interlude – Lullaby of Stone

Here is what the Deep Below remembers, told in the voice of stone, which is very slow and therefore must be summarised terribly:

Once, in an age when even Elven songs were still new, the rockfolk lived near the warmth. They learned the Vein's paths and used them like roads, set their cities where the pulse was strong. Pride is a mineral you find in every layer; they mined it as others do gold. With it they dammed a branch to flood their furnaces, turned another aside to carve a harbour of fire, built engines of basalt and promise. The beat shifted. The branches starved. Their neighbours felt tremors. Diplomats came wearing concern and very firm smiles. Arguments were held in rooms with no corners so voices would not echo too sharply. It did not help. The rockfolk retreated, promising to do better later. Later is a deep place. Fires went out. Children learned the stories. The stories became laws. Laws became the only songs they remembered.

Karn learned a different lullaby: a mother's hand on cooling stone, keeping time to a heartbeat that had once been louder.

Chapter 6:

Truth in the Deep

The Heart of the Vein was not a room so much as a reckoning.

A canyon opened beneath them, its walls layered with history: striations of igneous memory, ribs of ice, lattices of root-crystal. In the center, a column of molten light rose like a tree of fire, branches of flame twisting into frost and leaf and back again. It pulsed—wrong, faltering, too fast, too slow—the way a song sounds when someone keeps changing the tempo out of spite.

“Beautiful,” Eva breathed, which is what engineers say when they mean I’m going to try to measure this and then build a very clever box.

“It is dying,” Karn said, which is what rockfolk say when they mean I have stood too long at too many bedsides.

They moved along a narrow ledge. The tremor struck without warning, a lurch that shook the ledge loose in a run

of stones. Aurora caught Eva with a lash of light; Chilly froze a handhold under Sparky’s grasp; Mosi yelled, “Duck!” at a boulder that had no intention of doing so. Karn planted his feet and pressed both hands to the wall.

“Hold,” he said, and the rock, unaccountably, did.

When they could breathe again, Sparky looked at Karn. “You’ve done this before,” he said softly.

Karn was quiet for a long time. “My people,” he said at last, “learned to bend the Vein. Once, long ago. We were younger then, and full of the pride of stone. We redirected its branches to feed our forges, dammed its heat to shape our cities. The beat changed. The Vein faltered. The upper realms—a tremor here, a crack there. Your elders noticed. We fled deeper when the balance turned against us. We told our children stories of how the world turned its back. We forgot that we pulled away first.”

Aurora’s light dimmed to a thoughtful green. “And now?”

“Now we are cold,” Karn said. “We can either ask forgiveness or take what we need. I came to take.” He looked at Sparky, and for the first time his voice gentled. “And I am... tired of taking.”

Eva crouched by the edge, watching the flux. “If we can sync the pulses—heat, frost, light—back into phase, the Vein might stabilise. I can build a temporary stabiliser to buy us minutes. Not hours.”

“Minutes are where miracles hide,” said Mosi, because he collects useful sayings like some people collect spoons.

Sparky felt the old, familiar flare inside—the one that used to burn things by accident and now, sometimes, saved them. “Tell me where to stand,” he said.

Chilly set his jaw. “Me too.”

Karn pressed his palm to the stone and nodded once. “Together, then.”

Eva assembled a device from pieces that looked like they belonged in different hobbies: copper coils, a crystal lens gifted by Aurora, an ice-core Chilly reluctantly sacrificed, and a drum-like housing Sparky shaped from a cooled

basalt disk. “We’re going to listen to the Vein and then nudge it,” Eva said, as if that were a normal thing to do with geology.

The first nudge nearly threw them all from the ledge. The second woke something under the beat that growled like a memory refusing to be forgotten. The third brought the two rhythms close enough to consider a compromise, which is as much as you can ask of most things worth saving.

Then the Heart screamed.

Cracks veined up the far wall in white fire. A pressure wave slammed into them. Karn staggered, and for the first time fear crossed his molten eyes. “It resists,” he said. “It remembers us.”

“It can remember and forgive,” Aurora said, voice steady as a rope tossed across a gap. “If we give it a new song.”

Chapter 7:

The Battle for Balance

It began with a breath.

Aurora drew in the air of the Heart and sang a note so pure the crystals woke. Eva snapped open the stabiliser whose lights winked apologetically, like gadgets that knew they were out of their depth but were trying very hard anyway. Chilly crouched at the lip of a lava thread and blew a line of frost across it, a bridge delicate as a promise. Karn placed both hands against the fault lines and spoke to the rock in the oldest language there is: remember what you are.

Sparky stepped into the heat.

He felt it take him—recognised it like an old friend who had gotten louder and more opinionated since last time. He shaped it into currents, nudged it left where Chilly's bridge thinly held, rolled it back where root-crystals burned too bright. It was like sculpting molten stone again, but now the sculpture was a living artery and the chisel was a heartbeat.

The Vein bucked. Rock imps—a whole shrieking school of them—poured from a slit, drawn to the chaos because chaos is very fashionable in imp circles.

“Mine!” cried the imps.

“Snack!” cried Mosi, who emptied his moss bundle and led a parade of delighted imps in the opposite direction, because if there is one thing imps love more than chaos it is unsolicited snacks.

The stabiliser thrummed to life, a hum that chased the falter out of the beat for a breath, two, three.

Aurora's light-web wrapped the roots and lent them strength; Chilly's frost spread like lace; Karn gritted his teeth as the fault shoved back against his palms. Smudge struck a chord on his lava-lute that harmonised with Aurora's note, and for an instant the whole chamber rang with the sound of something remembering itself.

“Now!” Eva shouted, and Sparky poured.

Flame surged, split, braided. It ran the channels he asked of it because he asked kindly (and because he has learned to put down what he loves, which is a kind of magic). The frost

held. Light kept time. The stabiliser blinked in a rhythm that matched the Vein's dream of itself. Karn's voice dropped to a rumble so low it was more feeling than sound, and the stone, reluctantly, yielded.

A roar like a small volcano announced Bergur's arrival—late, as is his custom during crucial scenes. He bounded onto the ledge with Loftur the dragonet clinging to his shoulder like an especially judgemental scarf. "Heard the island complaining," Bergur boomed. "Brought extra arms and one dragon."

Loftur squeaked fire and promptly set an unimportant rock heroically ablaze. "I help," he declared.

"Stand there," Eva said, pointing to a secondary fault that needed a very large troll to lean on it. Bergur leaned. The fault rethought its life choices.

For a long, fierce minute, everything held: the song, the frost, the light, the stone, the flame.

The fracture lines slowed. Stopped. The pulse steadied: not perfect, not what it once had been, but true enough for the world to remember its steps.

Karn sagged against the wall. "It holds," he said, unbelieving.

"It holds," repeated Aurora, eyes wet with relief.

Chilly sat down abruptly and announced to no one, "I am going to enjoy a very dignified faint," and then did not, because Sparky's hand was on his shoulder and it was warm in a way that did not melt.

The imps returned to present Mosi with a ceremonial pebble for services to cuisine. Mosi bowed gravely and put it in his pocket next to three buttons, a twist of string, and the confidence of a man who collects small things that matter.

Eva powered down the stabiliser with a pat usually given to valiant dogs. "Minutes," she said. "We did a lot with minutes."

Logi's voice carried faintly down the tunnel—the elders had followed as far as they dared. "Sparky?"

"Here!" Sparky called back. "We have a beat."

Chapter 8:

The Pact of the Vein

They climbed out of the Heart to a world slightly different than the one they had left. The fissure still breathed heat, but it no longer panted. The Frostfall Bridges rang bright when struck. In the groves, Aurora later told them, the light-songs swelled as though someone had opened a window and let in spring.

The Council met on a ledge overlooking a slow lava river that had become the unofficial diplomatic terrace. Humans arranged chairs because humans cannot be happy unless something has been arranged. Trolls preferred the floor. Elves leaned against nothing in particular with great elegance. The Ice Troll delegation brought a dignified cooler.

Karn stood a little apart until Sparky tugged him forward.

“Let it be recorded,” said Elder Logi, “that the Vein has been stabilised by a fourfold harmony: fire, frost, light, and the tempering of human craft.”

Eva raised a hand. “And moss. For snack management.”

Mosi took a modest bow.

Logi’s gaze rested on Karn. “And stone,” he said. “Do the Deep Below stand with us?”

Karn’s voice rumbled low. “We stand. We ask forgiveness. We offer craft. We remember that taking alone is a kind of collapse.” He looked to Sparky as if asking whether he’d said the right thing.

“You did,” Sparky said softly.

It was not the sort of treaty that humans like to laminate, but it was the sort trolls keep: a pact spoken in a hot room with friends nearby, sealed with shared food, a song, and the certainty that when the drum falters again, they will gather.

The charter they sketched (on a napkin, then properly on stone) included:

1. No touching the First Fire without a unanimous vote and at least three lullabies.
2. Geothermal projects to consult all realms and avoid poking the Vein with sticks, literal or metaphorical.
3. Annual festivals of Light, Ice, Fire, and Moss (trial name) to keep goodwill warmed, cooled, brightened, and delicious.
4. A standing taskforce—code name PULSE—with one member from each realm and a rotating dragonet.

That night there were lights in the sky that were not Elven and not fireworks either—just the world enjoying a good stretch. The trolls sang. The Elves harmonised without being asked. The Ice Trolls made shaved ice, which is more delicious than it sounds when flavoured with Aurora’s citrus-sparkles. Eva taught a group of small trolls to say thermodynamic equilibrium, which caused several parents to make faces.

Bergur arrived late with Loftur on his shoulder, both dusted with travel and a modest quantity of peril. “We missed it?” Bergur boomed.

“Only the part where the universe nearly broke,” Sparky said. “There’s still pudding.”

“Pudding is the best part,” Loftur squeaked, and stole a bowl with surgical precision.

As the feast dwindled and the lava river glowed like a long smile, Sparky found Aurora and Chilly at the ledge. Eva joined them, then Mosi, then Karn, who sat down farther away than was necessary until Sparky patted the stone beside him.

The earth beneath them pulsed.

Thump.

In time. Calm. A heartbeat you could set a life to.

Sparky tipped his head back and watched the night. “For the record,” he said, “I prefer peace. But I am very good at adventures.”

Aurora smiled. “It helps that you are very bad at naps.”

Chilly nodded solemnly. “And bridges.”

“Rude,” Sparky said, and they all leaned a little closer to one another because that is what people do when the world has given them back their tomorrow.

Far below the Deep Below, in a dark that had never met dawn, something old shifted its weight.

It listened to the returning drum.

It decided, in a patient way, to keep listening.

For now.

Epilogue – Minutes

Later, Eva wrote a paper with a courageous number of graphs, which the ministers declared both very interesting and completely baffling. Aurora planted a ring of new crystal-saplings at the edge of the groves and braided light through them at dusk. Chilly taught young ice-trolls to build bridges over warm places without melting their ethics. Mosi opened a pop-up stall specialising in moss snacks and unsolicited advice. Smudge's bottle of Echo ("You're doing great!") became weirdly popular at exams.

Sparky returned to the Listening Cavern. He lay down on the warm rock and closed his eyes.

He listened.

The beat came, steady and strong.

Thump.

He smiled and, for once, napped on purpose.

(Only for a minute. But as Mosi likes to say, minutes are where miracles hide.)

—

End.

