

BJÖRGVIN GUÐJÓNSSON

THE LAVA TROLLS

BERGUR AND THE BIG
BONK



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Bergur and The Big Bonk

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To My Dad - Guðjón Þorgils Kristjánsson

A novel set in the world of the Lava Trolls

Chapter 1:

Breakfast, Beard, and a Yak-Toenail

Breakfast in the Great Cavern sounded like an avalanche learning to sing.

Lava kettles burbled. Stone-broth bubbled. Someone's lava loaf exploded in the oven and showered the back row with crumbs, which was considered good luck, unless you were the back row.

At the centre of it all sat Bergur.

Bergur was enormous even by Lava Troll standards: shoulders like stacked boulders, hands like shovels, and a smile that could outshine a lava flow. He was currently using those shovel-hands to butter a lava loaf with such enthusiasm that the table shifted half a metre every time he spread.

"Careful, Bergur," muttered one of the aunties, steadying her cup as it tried to escape. "Some of us like our breakfast on the table, not on the floor."

"Sorry!" Bergur boomed cheerfully. "Bit slippery this morning."

He wiped the knife. The table groaned in relief.

A warm gust of sulphuric air rushed past his ear. Loftur, Bergur's dragon, swooped low over the breakfast crowd with a mouthful of glowing pebbles.

"Don't eat over the broth!" someone yelled.

Loftur, obviously hearing "please do a trick," tried to juggle the pebbles instead. One went down the wrong way. The dragon coughed a fireball, which ricocheted off the ceiling and neatly toasted a tray of lava rolls.

A cheer went up.

"Perfect crust!" cried the baker. "Again, Loftur!"

"After breakfast," Bergur said, catching Loftur by the tail and settling him on the bench. "We're trying to be civilised."

"You know that never lasts past the second ladle of stone-broth," said a dry voice at his elbow.

Mosi flopped onto the bench beside him.

Mosi was... green.

Not completely—beneath the moss he was the same sun-dried orange as any Lava Troll—but from his eyebrows down to his toes, patches of moss, fern, and the occasional mushroom clung to him like he was a very slow-moving rock garden. A tiny lichen sprouted on his left ear. His beard could comfortably house a family of squirrels, if squirrels liked steam.

At the moment, it also housed breakfast.

“You have... something,” Bergur said, gesturing to his own chin.

Mosi swiped his beard. Lava crumb. Mushroom. Something unidentifiable and possibly sentient.

“Got it,” he said.

“No, other side.”

He swiped again. More crumbs. More moss.

Loftur’s nostrils flared. The dragon leaned in, sniffing Mosi’s beard with the fascination of a creature who had once eaten an entire stalactite just to see what would happen.

Then he sneezed directly into it.

The blast of heat puffed Mosi’s moss up like an angry hedge and revealed, stuck deep in the beard, a little slab of yellowish stone. It was curved, like a piece of horn, and etched all over with tiny black markings.

“What’s that?” Bergur asked, already reaching.

Mosi blinked down. “Breakfast?”

Bergur tugged.

“OW. Attached breakfast!”

“Hold still,” Bergur said, squinting. “You’ve got... something stuck in there that isn’t technically organic.”

He planted his feet, wrapped his hands around the object, and pulled. Mosi made a noise like a deflating geyser. With a final hairy *sllrrrp*, the thing came free, bringing a small avalanche of crumbs and one slightly offended mushroom with it.

It was not breakfast.

It was a fossil.

Curved like a giant toenail. Smoothed by age. Lines criss-crossed its surface—no, not lines. Tiny grooves, some deeper, some shallow, like the memory of scratches.

“Ugh,” Mosi muttered, rubbing his chin. “That’s been in there for days. Thought I’d grown a new bit of jaw.”

Bergur turned it over in his hand. The grooves weren’t random. They curved into rivers, loops, little circles. He pressed his thumb to one.

The groove glowed faintly.

“Ooooh,” he breathed.

“That’s never good,” Mosi said. “Nothing that glows is ever simple.”

At the far end of the cavern, an older troll peered over the top of a newspaper carved from very thin slate. “Is that... a yak-toenail?” he said.

The table went quiet.

“Looks like fossilised yak,” said another elder, leaning in.

“From the old herds that used to roam the high lava plains. We haven’t seen one of those in—oof—centuries.”

“With a map carved into it,” said Bergur softly.

He could feel it. Now that he knew what he was looking for, the lines arranged themselves in his mind. Tunnels. Landmarks. A destination marked by three concentric circles and a tiny hammer-shaped gouge.

“Oh molten crumbs,” whispered someone. “Is that what I *think* it is?”

“A recipe for stew?” Bergur asked hopefully.

“A map to the Hammer Vault,” came the reply.

Even the lava kettles seemed to simmer more quietly.

Old stories shuffled through the crowd. Stories of a world-hammer that could tap the bones of the earth and make mountains jump. Of thunder that came from inside the stone. Of a troll-hero in the long-ago days who swung it once too hard and flipped a hill upside down.

Bergur’s ears rang.

A hammer that moved mountains.

He looked down at his huge hands. At the map that had apparently been living in Mosi's beard, uncomplaining, through several breakfasts and at least one nap.

"I should probably," Mosi said cautiously, "put that somewhere safe. Like deep in a drawer. Beneath a heavier drawer."

Bergur's heart thudded like a drum.

"Or," he said, "we could follow it."

Loftur perked up, eyes bright. Mosi's moss dimmed in horror.

"Oh rock no," Mosi whispered.

But Bergur was already seeing himself in old stories, holding a legendary hammer, doing something that wasn't just lifting things and getting in the way.

He smiled, and every crumb on the table vibrated.

Chapter 2:

Warnings Are for Other Trolls

Elder Logi's listening cavern was one of the quietest places in Undirheimar.

Which was impressive, considering it contained Bergur.

Logi sat cross-legged on a warm igneous shelf, fingertips pressed to the stone, eyes half-closed. Where other trolls glowed bright and shifting, his light was steady, a deep ember-orange that spoke of patience and the sort of wisdom that comes from actually reading safety instructions.

The stone beneath his hands hummed softly.

"That's new," he murmured. "You feel that, old friend?"

"I feel everything," said Bergur, looming in the doorway.

"Mostly hungry."

Logi's eyes opened.

He took in Bergur. The fossil. Mosi behind him, already shedding a small hint of nervous moss on the floor. Loftur,

trying to pretend he wasn't licking the wall to see if it tasted different from yesterday.

"Oh Lava," Logi sighed. "You've brought me a plot."

Bergur strode forward and held up the yak-toenail like a trophy.

"We found a map," he announced.

"I found a fossil in my beard," Mosi corrected. "He found the map part."

Logi took the relic with careful hands. As his fingers brushed the grooves, the thing pulsed faintly, as if pleased to be noticed by somebody sensible.

"Ancient work," Logi murmured. "Very old. Very deliberate."

He laid it on a flat rock and traced the lines with one glowing fingertip. The grooves shimmered in response, aligning into a holographic outline of tunnels and chambers that hovered above the stone in faint orange.

Loftur yelped and tried to bite the illusion. His teeth passed through it. He looked personally offended.

“This symbol,” Logi said, pointing at the three concentric circles and hammer mark, “is not good news.”

“What is it?” Bergur asked, leaning in so close he almost smooshed the map with his nose.

Mosi grabbed the back of his belt and physically hauled him a step away.

“The Vault of the Big Bonk,” Logi said.

“Of the what?” Bergur said.

“The world-hammer,” Logi replied. “An old tool from the days when trolls thought the best way to fix a problem was to hit the entire planet with something very hard.”

Bergur’s eyes gleamed. “That sounds—”

“Reckless,” Mosi cut in.

“Dangerous,” Logi agreed.

“—amazing,” Bergur finished.

Logi turned the yak-toenail over and over, lines of worry etching into his face like tiny fault lines.

“The stories say the hammer can send a controlled shockwave through the Vein,” he said. “Tap one place, adjust another. It was used to relieve pressure, stop eruptions, close dangerous rifts.”

He paused.

“And in the wrong hands, it threw up mountains, collapsed whole caverns, and once allegedly launched a particularly annoying chieftain halfway to the surface.”

“Only halfway?” Bergur asked. “Shame.”

“Point is,” Logi said, “the hammer was sealed away for a reason. Overswing once, you don’t just stub your toe—you break the ground your toe is standing on.”

He pushed the map gently back toward Bergur.

“You will put this somewhere safe—”

“Like a drawer,” Mosi said quickly. “Or several drawers. In different caves. Separated by a chasm.”

“—and forget you ever saw it,” Logi finished, as if Mosi hadn’t spoken. “We have other methods now. Listening.

Small adjustments. Craft, not bludgeon. We've spent centuries learning finesse."

Bergur shifted his weight. The stone complained softly under his heel.

"But what if the hammer could help?" he said. "You felt that weirdness in the earth this morning, didn't you? The little off-beat rumble. What if something big is coming?"

Logi hesitated. Only for a moment, but Bergur saw it.

"Yes," Logi admitted. "The Vein is restless. But running off to wake up ancient weapons is not the answer."

"We wouldn't wake it," Bergur bluffed. "We'd just... look at it. From a respectful distance."

Loftur made a tiny excited "mrrrp" noise that suggested fire and absolutely no respecting of distances.

Logi rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Bergur," he said. "You are strong. You are brave. You are... enthusiastic."

"Thank you," Bergur said, glowing.

"That last one is not always a compliment," Mosi muttered.

"But this is not your story," Logi finished gently. "Let this one stay buried. We have enough problems without adding freshly excavated, world-altering hammers."

Bergur swallowed.

Not my story.

He looked at his hands again. The same hands that carried heavy things and caught falling rocks and moved furniture and... always, always helped someone else's adventure happen.

"What if it is my story?" he said quietly.

But Logi had already turned away, placing his palms back on the warm shelf, listening for the deeper heartbeat.

The conversation was over.

At least, for Logi.

For Bergur, it was just beginning.

Chapter 3:

Into the Molten Maze

They left at what trolls called dawn: that moment when the lava rivers were at just the right simmer and the stalactites stopped dripping long enough to decide it was a new day.

Bergur adjusted the straps of his stone-pack. It creaked under the weight of rope, chisels, provisions, and a kettle large enough to bathe in.

Mosi carried a much smaller pack filled with carefully labeled pouches: moss poultices, spore salves, rock-stitch lichen, and three jars simply marked “DO NOT OPEN.” One of them glowed faintly.

Loftur carried nothing.

Loftur was allegedly useful for scouting, warmth, light, and occasional intimidation. In reality he was useful for chaos, enthusiasm, and providing a constant low-level sense of dread whenever there was anything flammable around.

At the entrance to the Molten Maze, the tunnel yawned like a dragon’s mouth. Hot air breathed out, carrying the scent of minerals and mystery and the faint singed tang of bad decisions.

Mosi stared in.

“Last chance to put it in a drawer,” he said.

Bergur patted the yak-toenail map in his belt pouch. It pulsed faintly, the grooves warm against his side, as if the world itself was nudging him forward.

“Nah,” Bergur said. “Think I’ll step into the metaphorical dragon’s mouth instead.”

“Of course you will,” Mosi sighed.

They went in.

The Molten Maze was not an official maze. No one had designed it. No one would admit to owning it. It was just what you got when magma rivers, shifting stone, and a few million years decided to play “let’s see what happens.”

Tunnels twisted unpredictably. Some ended in sudden lava falls. Others opened into vast caverns full of gently smoking boulders. Occasionally the ceiling made a low grinding sound and turned left.

“See?” Bergur said, as the floor tilted slightly under their feet. “Adventure!”

“Have you noticed,” Mosi grunted, clinging to a rock, “that every time you say ‘adventure’ my moss tries to strangle me?”

Loftur took off down one passage, tail whipping happily.

“Loftur, no!” Bergur called. “We don’t know where that goes!”

There was a sizzle, a yelp, and a puff of steam.

Loftur trotted back, eyebrows slightly shorter than before.

“Hot,” he announced.

“Who would’ve guessed,” Mosi said. “In a place called the Molten Maze.”

To avoid accidental incineration, Bergur pulled out a slab of basalt the size of a large plate. Intricate runes glowed faintly across its surface.

“What is that?” Mosi asked.

“Seismo-slate,” Bergur said proudly. “Smudge made it. You put it on the ground, and if the rock ahead is too thin, it glows red and makes a noise like Aunt Agnes stubbing her toe.”

“So... a rock that tells you other rocks are bad,” Mosi said slowly. “Progress.”

Bergur set it down. It hummed, pulsed, and emitted a low, grumpy *hurrmph*.

“That means ‘fine,’” Bergur translated.

“How can you tell?” Mosi asked.

“It’s not screaming,” Bergur said, picking it back up.

They picked their way through the maze.

Every time Bergur took a step, the ground shuddered a bit more than strictly necessary. Twice he tripped over perfectly innocent rocks and nearly flattened Mosi. Mosi, in turn, kept sprouting things at inopportune moments.

At one point, Bergur slipped on a smooth patch. His feet went out from under him, and he slid down a short slope, collecting loose pebbles, a startled Loftur, and half a crate of glow-worms someone had left unattended. He came to rest in a heap against a stalagmite.

“Fine!” he called up. “I’m fine!”

Mosi hurried down, his moss fluffed in alarm. He grabbed Bergur’s arm to help him up.

The combination of heat, panic, and impact triggered Mosi’s magic.

A thick cluster of mushrooms exploded into being under Bergur’s boots.

He attempted to stand.

He did not succeed.

His feet sank into the soft fungi and shot sideways. He went down again with the dignified grace of a collapsing boulder.

“Mosi,” he said from the floor. “Are you growing snacks or sabotage?”

“Sorry, sorry!” Mosi flapped his hands. The mushrooms, unfortunately, enjoyed this and spread further. “They grow when I’m stressed! Or tired! Or startled! Or thinking about soup!”

Loftur hopped onto Bergur’s chest and licked his face.

“See?” Bergur spluttered, spitting out dragon drool.

“Adventure.”

Mosi glared at the cave ceiling, where a drip of lava plinked innocently.

“If the stone had wanted me to go on this trip,” he told it, “it would have given me a different friend.”

Chapter 4:

The Mountain That Forgot Which Way Was Up

Hours—or possibly days, or one very long argument about whether backtracking counted as progress—later, they stepped out of the Molten Maze and into a cavern so large it felt like they’d wandered into the inside of a bell.

Only this bell had opinions about gravity.

The ceiling soared high overhead, a forest of stalactites drooping like stone icicles. Below, stalagmites rose toward them... from the ceiling.

Bergur rubbed his eyes.

The stalagmites were definitely upside down, hanging like enormous teeth. Rivers of lava flowed up the walls in glowing ribbons before spilling into pools on what Bergur’s head insisted was “wrong.”

“Ah,” Mosi said faintly. “We’ve reached the ‘physics has left the building’ portion of the day.”

The floor under their feet sloped gently, then sharply, then sideways. Loose stones rolled past them in slow, thoughtful arcs, sometimes changing direction mid-roll with a subtle shrug.

“The Upside-Down Mountain,” Bergur whispered, breath steaming in the hot air. “It’s real.”

Loftur tried to fly in a circle. Halfway through, gravity changed its mind; he drifted sideways and landed on a wall, looking betrayed.

“How is that even allowed?” Mosi demanded. “Has no one told this place how down works?”

Runestones studded the walls: old rock-tech carved with warnings, diagrams, and what might have been instructions. They were faded with age, edges softened by steam.

Bergur brushed ash from one.

A symbol of a hammer. A series of wavy lines radiating out. A mountain flipping over like a pancake.

“At least they used pictures,” he said.

Mosi squinted. “That one looks like ‘Don’t be this troll’.”

“Or ‘Do not strike hammer in here,’” Bergur translated. “Or ‘Remember to stretch before seismic events’.”

He touched the runestone. It crackled faintly and emitted a dusty little cough, like an old device trying to turn on after a few hundred years of not being invited to any parties.

From somewhere deep in the rock, a low voice muttered:
“System... idle... please stop pressing things...”

Mosi stepped back so fast his moss left a faint green smear on the floor.

“Did the wall just talk?” he whispered.

“I think so,” Bergur said, delighted.

Loftur pressed his snout against another runestone. It gave an offended hiss and flashed a brief red rune that could only mean “No pets.”

“Rock’s getting grumpy,” Mosi said. “That seems healthy.”

They edged further in.

Here and there, broken platforms jutted from the walls. Old mechanisms of levers and carefully balanced slabs hung

limp, as if they’d once moved but had long since given up and taken early retirement.

In the centre of the cavern was a raised stone disc about the size of Aunt Agnes’ dining table. It was perfectly circular. It was perfectly flat. And it was very clearly waiting for something.

“What do we think that is?” Bergur asked.

“An extremely polite trap,” Mosi said.

Bergur stepped onto it.

The disc clicked.

“Of course you did,” Mosi groaned.

The entire mountain inhaled.

Lava flows paused, suspended in mid-pour. Stones stopped rolling. Loftur hung in the air, mid-flap, looking like someone had pressed “pause” on him.

There was a long, echoing silence.

Then the ground itself began to move.

Chapter 5:

Vörður Wakes (Eventually)

The floor under the disc rose, slowly and inexorably, carrying Bergur upward.

Mosi yelped and grabbed the edge. Loftur clung to Bergur's shoulder, wings flailing uselessly in the syrup-thick pause.

The surrounding rock groaned. Stalagmites and stalactites shifted, twisting toward the centre like teeth closing around a bite. Lines of old, dormant runes flickered along the walls, lighting up one by one in a reluctant wave.

Face by face, the mountain assembled itself.

A ridge of stone folded into brows. Cracks became wrinkles. Two enormous niches ignited with lava light, becoming eyes the colour of molten gold. A nose like a fallen pillar thrust out above a mouth carved from a thousand fault lines.

The mouth opened.

A single pebble fell out.

"Mmhh," said the mountain. "Hhhrrm."

It fell silent again.

"Is it... broken?" Mosi whispered.

Loftur sniffed the air, then sneezed. The echo went on for a week.

The eyes flared slightly brighter.

"Who..." the mountain rumbled, each word taking long enough that Bergur had time to wonder if it would finish before he died of old age, "has... activated... the... platform... without... reading... the... safety... runes..."

Bergur raised a hand.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Bergur. Big fan of your décor."

The eyes slowly rotated down, focusing on him with the unimpressed patience of someone who had seen too many idiots walk into clearly labelled traps.

"Ah," said the mountain. "Users."

Mosi bristled. His moss bristled with him, doubling the effect. "We prefer 'trolls,' actually."

“I prefer ‘unnecessary responsibilities’,” the mountain replied. “And yet, here we are.”

Its massive stone shoulders shrugged, sending a small avalanche of dust cascading to the cavern floor.

“I am Vörður,” it announced, in a tone that implied that if they didn’t recognise the name, that was *their* failing, not his. “Guardian... of the Bonk... Warden of the Vein... and... part-time... alarm... system...”

“That last bit,” Mosi muttered, “explains the attitude.”

Loftur, apparently deciding that if this was an alarm, he should test its volume, let out a roar. It echoed around the chamber, bounced off Vörður’s teeth, and came back sounding slightly embarrassed.

Vörður’s eyes narrowed.

“No... pets... on... the... platform...” he intoned.

Loftur sulked.

“We’re, uh, very sorry to wake you,” Bergur said. “We were just—”

“—touching... things...” Vörður finished. “You are always... touching... things... That is... why I was installed...”

“Installed,” Mosi repeated. “Like a... kitchen appliance.”

Vörður’s rocks rearranged themselves into something that might have been a scowl.

“Branch Folk,” he grumbled. “Came... with their... twiggy fingers... *Enhance the system,’ they said.* Add remote alert capability,’ they said. No one asked if the volcano wanted... to be connected... to a network...”

“A network?” Bergur’s curiosity glowed almost as bright as the lava. “Like a set of linked echo-stones?”

“Old... lava... echo... units...” Vörður sighed. “Half the time... I send a warning... it routes... to a pantry... and scares the soup...”

Mosi pinched the bridge of his nose.

“So you’re... what, exactly?” he asked. “A spirit? A guard? A very grumpy geology experiment?”

Vörður straightened to his full, cavern-filling height.

“I am... the guardian,” he said. “When the hammer was sealed... I was bound... to this mountain. I monitor... the Vein. I control... the calibration mechanisms. I prevent... *users*... from doing anything... ill-advised.”

He peered at Bergur.

“Until today.”

“Hey,” Bergur protested. “We haven’t done anything ill-advised. Yet.”

“You activated... the platform,” Vörður pointed out.

“That could have been an accident,” Mosi said. “In fact, statistically, it probably was.”

“Given... the size... of his feet...” Vörður rumbled, “I concur.”

Bergur folded his arms.

“We’re looking for the Big Bonk,” he said, trying to sound heroic and not like someone who had just been insulted by a mountain. “The world-hammer. The map brought us here.”

Vörður went ominously still.

All the runes along the walls dimmed, save one set behind his eyes.

When he spoke again, his voice was slower, if possible, and edged with something that might have been fear.

“The hammer is sealed,” he said. “It must remain sealed. Its last use... nearly tore the Vein... from crust to core...”

He leaned in, stones grinding.

“If you remove it... you will start... the sequence.”

“What sequence?” Mosi asked.

“The Bonk,” Vörður said simply.

Loftur’s eyes sparkled.

“Adventure,” Bergur said, before Mosi could clamp a hand over his mouth.

Vörður sighed.

It sounded like a mountain giving up on ever being peaceful again.

Chapter 6:

Terms and Condemnations of Service

They sat—well, Bergur and Mosi sat, Loftur sprawled, and Vörður loomed—and went over the terms.

It was like reading a very old contract written by someone who really loved subclauses.

“The hammer,” Vörður said, “was designed... to apply a controlled... corrective impulse... to the Vein. A gentle tap... in the right place... to relieve pressure... elsewhere.”

“So like knocking on a wall,” Bergur said, “to see if it will fall on your neighbour instead.”

“Yes,” Vörður replied. “Except the wall... is the crust... and the neighbour... is everyone.”

Mosi shuddered. His moss shuddered with him, creeping up his cheeks like worried eyebrows.

“And you were... what, the lock?” he asked. “The password protection?”

“I am the... guardian... and the interface,” Vörður said. “I read the Vein. I adjust... the calibration labyrinth. I monitor... energy levels. And I was given... a series of user... restrictions...”

He paused. The pause stretched long enough for a small stalactite to grow another millimetre.

“Which no one,” he added pointedly, “ever reads.”

Bergur cleared his throat.

“Well, maybe if they weren’t carved in microscopic runes ten storeys up,” he said.

“Users,” Vörður muttered again.

Mosi picked at a bit of lichen on his sleeve.

“If it’s so dangerous,” he said slowly, “why keep it at all? Why not break it? Or throw it into the deepest pit? Or hide it inside Aunt Agnes’ stew recipe, where no one would dare look?”

Vörður’s eyes dimmed to a thoughtful ember.

“Because,” he said, “when the Vein... was wild... when eruptions... devoured caverns... and the frost above... cracked from heat... there was nothing... else... that could reach... so far... so fast. A precise strike... in the right place... saved countless lives.”

He shifted, a landslide in slow motion.

“But trolls... are trolls. Some used it... as intended. Some... overdid it. The last Bonk... bounced a mountain... sideways. After that... the elders sealed it. They bound me. They wrote... a policy...”

“And then forgot about you,” Mosi guessed.

“As is tradition,” Vörður said dryly.

Bergur stared at his hands.

“So... no one’s used it since?”

“No,” Vörður said. “And the Vein... has calmed. Trolls learned... other methods. You have... seismo-slates. Craft. Listening. Songs. Finesse...”

He eyed Bergur’s considerable forearms.

“You do not need... the hammer... to be useful.”

The words stung more than Bergur expected.

He knew he was useful. He lifted, carried, fetched, caught. But standing here, under the gaze of an ancient guardian, knowing there was a tool that had once been swung by legends...

“It’s not about need,” he said, perhaps more sharply than he intended. “It’s about... being able. About being... more than the troll who moves the chairs.”

Mosi glanced at him.

“Bergur—”

“No, he’s right,” Bergur said. “We do have finesse. We do have craft. And we also have strength. Both matter.”

He looked up at Vörður.

“What if something big is coming?” he asked. “Elder Logi felt the Vein acting strange this morning. What if there’s a pressure building that small tools can’t fix? What if the hammer is exactly what we need—if we use it properly?”

“Properly,” Vörður repeated, like it was a word he’d heard rumours of but never actually met.

Mosi exhaled.

“It’s a horrible idea,” he said. “But he might be slightly, dangerously right about the risk. The rock *has* been twitchy.”

Vörður’s gaze turned inward for a long moment.

Deep in the mountain, unseen by the trolls, flows shifted. Tiny tremors ran along the old channels, singing something only a guardian could hear.

“The Vein... is strained,” he admitted. “There is... a knot. A place... where force... cannot escape. If nothing is done... there will be eruptions... quakes... collapses...”

He paused.

“If I still had... a support team,” he muttered, “I would... escalate the ticket...”

Bergur blinked. “Esca-what?”

“Never mind,” Vörður said. “Old rock-tech humour. Not appreciated.”

He looked to Bergur, then to Mosi.

“Even if I... allowed you... to approach the hammer,” he said slowly, “you would still need... to pass the calibration labyrinth. It was designed... to test restraint... precision... patience...”

He looked at Bergur again.

“Traits,” he said diplomatically, “which may not be... your... most prominent strengths.”

“Hey,” Bergur protested. “I can be restrained. Sometimes. If I’m asleep.”

Mosi groaned into his hands.

“Vörður,” he said. “Be honest. Could *anyone* do it alone?”

Vörður hesitated.

“No,” he said. “The labyrinth... always assumed... more than one troll. Different skills. Balance. That was... the original design.”

“See?” Bergur said, brightening. “We’ve got that. I’m the strength, Mosi is the finesse, Loftur is the... fiery disaster waiting to happen if we don’t watch him.”

Loftur, chewing a loose rock, burped a tiny flame.

“Perhaps,” Vörður said slowly, “with my guidance... and if you swore... to use the hammer... only to relieve pressure... not to `see what happens’...”

He looked pointedly at Bergur.

“...then it might... be less catastrophic... than doing nothing.”

Mosi lifted his head.

“That’s the worst recommendation I’ve ever heard,” he said.

“But I suppose it counts.”

Bergur’s heart hammered.

“So you’ll let us try?” he asked.

Vörður let out another long-suffering sigh.

“Yes,” he said. “But understand... if you succeed... no one will thank me. And if you fail... no one will survive... to blame you.”

“That’s... not comforting,” Mosi said.

“Good,” Vörður replied. “Perhaps it will finally... encourage someone... to read the runes.”

Chapter 7:

Labyrinth of Bad Ideas

The entrance to the calibration labyrinth looked innocuous enough: just a stone archway with a few carved symbols and a faint smell of regret.

“First test,” Vörður said. “Gravity hall.”

“Sounds... straightforward,” Bergur said.

Vörður’s rumbling chuckle did not inspire confidence.

They stepped through.

The hall beyond was long and cylindrical, like the inside of a stone barrel. Islands of rock floated in the air, rotating slowly. The “floor” was several metres below them. Or above them. It was unclear.

Bergur took one experimental step—and drifted gently upward.

“Ah,” he said, kicking his legs. “That’s new.”

Mosi reached for him. His moss flared, panicking, and sprouted a frantic explosion of tiny vines that latched onto the nearest floating boulder. He ended up dangling upside down, beard swinging, while Bergur rotated slowly beside him.

Loftur, delighted, flapped his wings and immediately zoomed sideways into a wall.

“Gravity in here,” Vörður explained from a convenient speaking-stone, “is... adaptive. It shifts... based on movement. Purpose... of test: see if user... can adapt... without panicking... and smacking into everything.”

“So far,” Mosi grunted, trying to untangle his moss from his own ankle, “I’d say we’re... failing.”

Bergur, hanging in mid-air, looked at the nearest floating rock.

“All right,” he said. “We just have to... think like the room.”

He reached out one massive hand and carefully nudged the rock. It swung away. His body swung the other way. For a moment they teetered in a slow, ridiculous dance.

“Stop!” Mosi yelled. “You’re making it worse!”

“Better idea?” Bergur asked.

Mosi stared at the drifting islands, the shifting vectors, the subtle tilt in how the air felt across his moss.

“Maybe...” he said slowly, “stop fighting it.”

He went limp.

The vines relaxed. The rock he was attached to steadied its spin. Gravity, apparently reassured that someone was cooperating, adjusted. The “floor” drifted gently back into its proper place.

Bergur followed suit, closing his eyes, letting the room decide which way was down. He slowly rotated upright, feet landing with a soft thump.

Loftur gave up trying to fly and just flopped. He fell—gently, like a feather made of hot bricks—and landed in Bergur’s arms.

“There,” Mosi panted. “Finesse.”

“Boring,” Loftur muttered, but he stayed put.

They navigated the rest of the hall by walking slowly, breathing evenly, and absolutely not sprinting for the exit no matter how much their instincts screamed “run.”

Next came the door corridor.

A long passage lined with identical stone doors, each with a small hammer symbol beside it.

“Second test,” Vörður said. “Force control. Strike the tablet... just hard enough... to open... without cracking... the frame.”

Bergur brightened.

“Hammering! My time to shine.”

He strode to the nearest door, drew back his fist, and tapped it.

The tablet shattered like brittle glass. The door remained stubbornly closed.

“Penalty,” Vörður sighed. “Door locked. Please... attempt another.”

Mosi pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Tap,” he said. “Not punch.”

“That was a tap,” Bergur protested. “On my scale.”

“Your scale,” Mosi said, “goes from *nudge*’ to catastrophic landslide’.”

They tried again at the next door.

Bergur tried to press gently. His muscles, used to lifting boulders, trembled with the effort of holding back. Sweat beaded on his brow.

The tablet crackled but did not shatter. The door creaked open a centimetre.

“See?” Bergur gasped. “Finesse.”

“And near hernia,” Mosi said.

He placed his own, much smaller hand on the next tablet. Instead of pushing *through*, he spread his moss softly across the surface, then tightened it just enough to mimic the pressure of a careful knock.

The tablet glowed, pleased, and the door swung wide.

“Teamwork,” Vörður noted. “Unexpected. Not intolerable.”

They worked through the corridor, cracking a few, opening more, learning to blend Bergur’s strength with Mosi’s control. Occasionally Loftur got bored and toasted a door. Those stuck.

“Not part of intended... user journey...” Vörður grumbled, resetting the mechanism with visible irritation.

The last trial was a lava-flow chamber.

Rivers of molten rock ran in criss-crossing channels, some dangerously close to brittle, cracked walls. Above, vents puffed steam; below, pits swallowed any overflow.

“Final test,” Vörður said. “Can you... redirect pressure... without... overcorrecting.”

Bergur looked at the flows—some too fast, some clogged with cooling crusts.

“Looks like a blockage there,” he said, pointing. “And that one’s going to burst if we don’t ease it.”

Mosi nodded.

“On it,” he said, rolling up his non-existent sleeves.

He knelt by the cracked channel and pressed his hands to the edge. Moss poured over the stone, cooling it, binding it, narrowing the opening so the flow slowed and levelled out.

On the blocked channel, Bergur used a chisel the size of a small log to carefully chip away a bit of solidified crust, letting the lava beneath surge free... then stop himself from chipping too far.

Loftur fluttered from flow to flow, adding a little heat here, a little flame there, keeping the lava moving but not boiling.

For a moment, everything balanced.

The flows sang.

The chamber warmed from “uncomfortably hot” to “cosy for trolls,” which was roughly the temperature at which most other species would explode.

The runes over the exit flared green.

“Calibration... acceptable,” Vörður said. “User competence... above expectations...”

He paused.

“Do not let it... go to your heads.”

Too late, Bergur thought, grinning.

They had passed.

Chapter 8:

The Chamber of the Big Bonk

If the previous chamber had felt like the inside of a bell, this one felt like the inside of a story.

The walls were smooth, gently curved, etched with murals that wrapped around in slow spirals. Trolls carved in relief raised a massive hammer toward arcs of carved shockwaves. Mountains rose and fell under the blows. Caverns opened. Rivers of lava rerouted like obedient snakes.

At the centre, spanning a wide shaft of glowing depth, hung the Big Bonk.

It wasn't *actually* called that in the old carvings. The inscriptions named it things like "World-Tapper" and "Vein-Regulator" and "Hammer of Measured Correction."

But standing beneath it, looking up at its enormous stone head and long, rune-sheathed handle, Bergur thought "Big Bonk" suited it better.

It hung horizontally, suspended by thick chains of cooled lava that pulsed faintly in time with the Vein's distant thrum. Below lay a circular strike-stone, worn smooth from a handful of ancient blows.

"It's..." Bergur breathed. "Beautiful."

"Concerning," Mosi said simultaneously.

Loftur stared, pupils wide. "Chew?" he asked hopefully.

"No," both trolls said together.

The hammer was carved from a single piece of dark stone, denser than anything Bergur had ever lifted. Runes traced its surface: some glowed faintly, pulsing like a sleeping heartbeat. Others were dim, as if waiting to be chosen.

On the walls, smaller panels showed step-by-step sequences: a troll consulting a guardian, selecting runes, raising the hammer, striking once, and then—crucially—putting it back.

Bergur traced one mural with his eyes.

"You see?" he said. "It was meant to be used."

"By trolls with restraint," Mosi said. "Look, that one has sensible sandals. You can tell."

Vörður's voice rumbled from a speaking-stone nearby.

"The hammer," he said, "is linked directly... to the Vein. Each rune... corresponds to a pattern... a path... where the shockwave travels. The last time... someone swung it... they chose... poorly."

He indicated a fragment of carving half-lost to soot. A mountain jumped sideways. A village of startled trolls clung to their furniture.

Bergur swallowed.

"You're sure," Mosi said, "that something big is coming?"

"The Vein's rhythm," Vörður replied, "is... wrong. There is a knot... far from here. Pressure building... with no good escape. If nothing is done... it will rupture... violently. If the hammer is used... correctly... the energy... can be directed... into deep stone... away from homes."

"How much time do we have?" Bergur asked.

Vörður's eyes, projected in the stone, went distant.

"Not enough," he said. "But some."

Bergur stepped onto the platform nearest the hammer. It tilted slightly under his weight, chains creaking.

Up close, the runes hummed against his skin like a thousand tiny drums.

"Bergur," Mosi said.

He turned.

"If we do this," Mosi went on, "we do it together. No heroics. No *I'll just lift this on my own.*' No watch this, it'll be fine."

Bergur opened his mouth.

"None," Mosi repeated. "Say it."

Bergur closed it again.

"...Fine," he said. "Together."

"Good," Mosi said, relaxing a fraction. The moss at his temples grew a small, relieved fern.

Loftur nudged the platform with his nose. It wobbled.

"Together," he parroted.

Bergur wrapped his hands around the hammer's handle.

It was like gripping the spine of the world.

The grooves fit his fingers perfectly, as if they had been waiting for someone exactly his shape. The weight sank into his arms, down his shoulders, into his chest. For a moment, the Vein's rhythm overwhelmed everything: thump, thump, thump, from far below.

"Careful," Vörður warned. "Do not... lift yet. First... we must select... the path."

Rune-lights flickered along the hammer's length, offering choices.

"Where... is the knot strongest?" Mosi asked.

"Here," Vörður said, projecting a map on the chamber wall. A tangle of glowing lines showed the Vein branching through the world. One junction pulsed angrily. "Deep... beneath the old collapsed... chambers. No one lives there now... but the pressure... will spread..."

"We aim the Bonk there," Bergur said. "Take the blow ourselves, before it takes us by surprise."

"That," Vörður said, "is... the idea."

Mosi stepped up beside Bergur and placed one mossy hand over the runes, feeling for the path. Some glowed hot and red—too direct, too violent. Others were cool, inactive.

He found one that hummed with a steady, controlled warmth.

"This one," he said. "It spreads the shock... thinner. Wider. Less... stabby. More... nudgy."

"Technical term," Bergur said.

He tapped the rune gently.

It flared.

The hammer vibrated.

Deep in the world, something woke up.

Chapter 9:

Countdown to Catastrophe

The first heartbeat was merely a murmur.

The second rattled the chain-links holding the hammer.

By the third, dust fell from the ceiling.

“The sequence... has begun,” Vörður said. “Energy building... in the Vein. When it peaks... the hammer will want... to swing.”

“Want?” Mosi squeaked. “Tools don’t have wants.”

“This one... does,” Vörður replied. “It was forged... to answer the call... of pressure. To seek... balance. When the forces... reach a certain point... it will move... whether you... are ready... or not.”

Loftur paced the platform, claws clicking. His tail lashed nervously, knocking a small rock into the glowshaft below. It fell a long way before vanishing in a distant hiss.

“Can we... stop it?” Bergur asked, tightening his grip.

“No,” Vörður said. “We can only... guide it. Or get out of the way... and let it strike... wrongly.”

The Vein’s rhythm grew louder, echoing in Bergur’s bones.

Thump.

The runes on the hammer brightened.

Thump.

The murals on the walls seemed to shiver.

Thump.

The chains creaked as the head twitched, eager.

Mosi’s moss fluffed up, trying to make him look bigger. It did not succeed.

“We need help,” he blurted. “Elder Logi, at least. Someone who knows the Vein like the back of his hand. Or like the bottom of his feet. Or both.”

Vörður hesitated.

“There is... one option,” he said slowly. “The old lava echo units. Ancient network. Unreliable. Loud. But... still... connected... to the Great Cavern...”

Bergur’s eyes lit.

“Old rock-tech,” he said. “Perfect.”

“Of course you’d say that,” Mosi muttered.

Chapter 10:

Echoes, Modems, and Other Ancient Noises

The lava echo alcove was tucked into a side tunnel, half-buried in stalagmites and what might have been a fossilised lunch.

At its centre stood a cluster of crystals jutting from the floor, each etched with branch-like patterns. Old Branch Folk handiwork: rune-circuits weaving through the stone, connecting far tunnels with flickers of captured sound.

“This is going to be noisy, isn’t it?” Mosi said.

“Yes,” Vörður replied simply.

Bergur wiped dust from the largest crystal. It flickered feebly.

“How do we turn it on?” he asked.

“Gently,” Vörður said. “With... a calibrated... impulse...”

Bergur punched it.

The crystal shrieked.

A cascade of discordant sounds poured into the chamber – a warbling screech, a rising whine, a series of hiccuping beeps that made Loftur flatten his ears.

Mosi clapped his hands over his moss.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE,” he yelled over the noise.

“Activated it?” Bergur guessed.

Far away, in the Great Cavern, Elder Logi sat by the main lava pool, listening to the earth and enjoying a rare moment of peace.

It ended abruptly.

A high-pitched wail erupted from the wall behind him.

Logi leapt to his feet, colour flashing bright red.

“Who put a banshee in my basalt?!” he demanded.

The wail dipped into a series of pops and squeals. A nearby hatchling yelped and dove under a bench.

An ancient slab embedded in the wall—one Logi had always assumed was purely decorative—began to pulse.

Runes flared across its surface, stuttering like someone learning to juggle glow-worms.

“Oh,” Logi said slowly. “Oh no. Someone found the Branch Network.”

The noise peaked in a long, tooth-rattling screech and abruptly cut off.

Then Bergur’s voice came booming out of the stone, slightly distorted and about three shades too loud.

“HELLO? IS THIS THING—oh. Mosi, it’s on. Don’t lick it. Elder Logi! Can you hear us?”

Logi stared.

Behind him, several trolls peered over his shoulder.

“Is that the ancient remote warning... *fax-rock?*” one whispered.

“I thought those were myth,” muttered another. “Like low-fat stone-broth.”

Logi leaned in.

“Yes,” he said slowly, enunciating at the rock. “I can hear you. Please stop shouting directly into the Vein.”

Bergur’s reply crackled back.

“Sorry! The echo is weird. We’re at the Upside-Down Mountain. We found the Big Bonk and we might have accidentally started a world-adjusting hammer sequence and also there’s a volcano spirit that sounds like Aunt Morga when she’s disappointed in you, we need advice, please.”

There was a pause.

A very long, very quiet pause.

“Logi?” came Mosi’s anxious voice. “Still there? Did the rock eat him?”

In the Great Cavern, Logi pinched the bridge of his nose so hard it almost squeaked.

Behind him, the other trolls were pretending not to listen with the intensity of trolls very much listening.

“Right,” Logi said, forcing his colour from alarm-red back to thoughtful-amber. “First: I’m impressed you managed to

locate, activate, and not completely explode a piece of rock-tech older than most of our tunnels.”

“Thank you,” Bergur said proudly.

“That was not entirely a compliment,” Logi added. “Second: you did *what* with the world-hammer?”

Bergur hurriedly explained, with interruptions from Mosi, editorial commentary from Vörður (“I told them this was ill-advised”), and occasional background dragon noises.

“So we can’t stop it,” Bergur finished. “But we can guide it. Vörður says we have to hold it. Aim it.”

“Preferably,” Vörður added, “not at anything... inhabited.”

Logi went very still.

He pressed his hands to the wall beside the crystal, feeling for the Vein’s rhythm.

The drumbeat thrummed through him, louder than before, like a heart preparing for a sprint.

“All right,” he said. “Listen carefully. You do not have time for me to get there. The sequence is too far along. This is now your hammer, your moment, your mess—”

“Sorry,” Bergur said.

“—and possibly,” Logi continued, “your greatest achievement.”

There was a perplexed pause on the other end.

“...What?” Bergur said.

“Bergur,” Logi said, voice softening. “You are exactly where you need to be. Strong enough to hold what others can’t. Stubborn enough not to let go. And you are not alone.”

Mosi made a faint, overwhelmed squeak.

“You and Mosi and Loftur and Vörður know more about that mountain right now than anyone else in the world,” Logi went on. “You’ve seen its gravity, its cracks, its flows. You’ve passed its trials. Use that knowledge. Use your hands. Use your craft. We built all this stone-tech to *help* us, not replace us.”

He placed his palm flat against the rock.

“I will listen from here,” he said. “I will feel the Bonk when it comes. But the aim—that’s on you.”

On the far end, Bergur swallowed audibly.

“Right,” he said. “Guide the hammer. Don’t panic. Don’t break everything.”

“That last one is key,” Mosi muttered.

“And Bergur,” Logi added.

“Yes?”

“Please,” Logi said, “for the love of all sensible safety procedures, do *not* lick the crystal.”

There was a guilty silence.

“...Noted,” Bergur said.

The lava echo crystal fizzled, gave a last series of nostalgic squeals, and went dark.

Logi turned slowly.

Half the cavern was staring at him.

“Well?” Aunt Agnes demanded.

Logi exhaled.

“We trust them,” he said. “And we get ready... just in case.”

Chapter 11:

Guiding the Bonk

Back in the hammer chamber, the Vein's drumbeat had become a roar.

The air vibrated. The runes along the walls burned like strips of molten metal. The chains suspending the Big Bonk strained, links glowing cherry-red.

"We're running out of time," Mosi yelled over the rising thrum.

"Positions," Vörður intoned. "Now."

Bergur wrapped both hands around the hammer's handle. He planted his feet wide on the platform, muscles bulging as the tool began to tug, eager to swing.

It felt like trying to hold back an avalanche with elbow grease.

Mosi scrambled to the edges of the chamber, slapping his palms against every crack and fissure he could see. Moss

spilled from his hands in great waves, carpeting the stone in a thick green net. It climbed the walls, filled gaps, wrapped around precarious ledges.

Every time a new tremor hit, the moss flexed and absorbed some of the shock, like a cushion between brittle plates.

Loftur darted between vents, shoving his snout into one chimney after another. He blasted controlled bursts of flame to open new paths for pressure, then fanned the air with his wings to send excess heat into unoccupied pockets of stone.

Above them all, Vörður's massive stone face watched every movement, eyes flickering with data only he could see.

"Vein pressure... at critical," he reported. "Sequence... irreversible. Impact... imminent..."

"Helpful," Mosi panted. "Thank you."

"Angle... five degrees... west-southwest," Vörður went on, ignoring the sarcasm. "Adjust... further... two degrees... downward... you must... direct the shock... toward the deep... empty caverns... here..."

A glowing map painted itself on the chamber wall—lines of light showing the Vein, the knot, the target.

Bergur gritted his teeth.

The hammer wanted to fall straight down, into the nearest easy path. He could *feel* it, a hungry pull toward the wrong angle.

“Remember,” he muttered to himself. “Measured. Not smashy.”

“Smashy?” Mosi echoed, horrified.

“Technical term,” Bergur grunted.

The handle jerked. He dug in his heels, every muscle straining.

The platform groaned under his feet.

“Need... help... here...” he gasped.

Mosi sprinted over, moss trailing behind him, and braced his own smaller hands against the handle.

His strength wasn’t in his arms; it was in his magic.

Moss wrapped around the haft, binding Bergur’s fingers more firmly, giving him grip that didn’t slip even as sweat poured down his brow.

Loftur, seeing them struggle, abandoned his latest vent and swooped in. He pressed his head under the hammer’s lower edge, pushing upward with his neck and wings.

“Lift,” he grunted.

Together—troll, moss, dragon—they held the hammer at the angle Vörður had shown.

“Now,” the guardian boomed. “Hold... and whatever... you do... do not... *follow through*...”

The Vein’s heartbeat peaked.

For one suspended instant, the world inhaled.

Then the hammer fell.

It didn’t move fast.

It moved *deep*.

The weight of it dragged through Bergur's bones. The impact struck the strike-stone like a quiet thunderclap: not loud, but *absolute*.

The sound went down, not out.

The chamber shook. Dust cascaded from the ceiling. Cracks skittered across the walls, stopped, held—caught in Mosi's waiting moss.

A wave of force shot through the floor, rippling along unseen lines. Dislodged stones bounced once and settled, as if the ground had simply shrugged off a tension it hadn't realised it was carrying.

Far below, in old, empty caverns no one had walked in for ages, brittle stone broke and rearranged. Pressure fled into deep reservoirs, where it could do no harm.

The Vein's roaring heartbeat stumbled, then steadied.

Thump...

Thump...

Thump.

Back to normal.

Back to *right*.

Bergur sagged, almost pulled down with the hammer as it swung back to rest.

Mosi's moss tightened, hauling him upright. Loftur flopped onto the platform, panting little bursts of steam.

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Vörður cleared his metaphorical throat.

"Impact... successful," he said. "Pressure... redirected. Structural integrity... maintained... with only minor... aesthetic cracking."

Mosi laughed, a half-hysterical burst. A tiny flower popped out of his hair.

"We did it," he whispered. "We actually... did it."

Bergur stared at his hands.

They trembled—not from fear now, but from the fading echo of force.

“I held it,” he said softly. “We held it.”

He looked up at Vörður.

“What now?” he asked. “Do we... leave it? Ready for next time?”

Vörður considered.

“The hammer... should not be... so easy to reach,” he said.

“I will... deepen the seals. Strengthen the trials. Add... more warnings no one... will read...”

His stone lips twitched.

“But if... the Vein... ever grows wild... again... perhaps... I will call you.”

Bergur’s chest warmed.

“I’ll bring my finesse expert,” he said, nodding at Mosi.

“And my chaos engine,” Mosi added, nodding at Loftur.

Loftur belched a small ring of flame, startled that anyone would voluntarily include him.

“Adventure,” he said happily.

Chapter 12:

Soft Hearts, Heavy Hammers

The way back through the Molten Maze felt different.

Partly because Vörður adjusted the gravity hall so they didn't have to pinwheel through the air again ("One successful calibration... per users... is sufficient"), and partly because the Vein's rhythm beneath their feet was calmer. Less fretful. More like a cat that had finally found the warm spot on the rug.

In the Great Cavern, Elder Logi felt the aftershock the moment it rolled past.

A low, deep *whump* ran through the stone, followed by a long, sighing settling.

He closed his eyes and smiled.

"That," he murmured, "was a very good Bonk."

The trolls around him winked in and out of different colours, nervous and excited.

"Was that... them?" Aunt Agnes asked.

"Yes," Logi said. "That was them."

The entrance tunnel rumbled.

Bergur, Mosi, and Loftur emerged in a blast of warm air and dust.

They were filthy. Bergur's beard had acquired several new singe marks. Mosi's moss was patchy, like a hedge after overly enthusiastic pruning. Loftur's tail-tip smoked faintly.

They had never looked more magnificent.

"You're alive!" shouted someone.

"And heavier," added Aunt Agnes, eyeing Bergur's new layer of grime. "Dinner will be late if you walk over the soup."

Logi stepped forward.

"How bad?" he asked.

"Some cracks," Mosi said. "Some new moss in places moss should not be. But the Vein's all right."

“We aimed the Bonk,” Bergur said simply. “It listened.”

Loftur trotted in a proud circle and bumped his head into Logi’s hip.

“Big hammer,” he announced. “Boom. Good.”

“That’s the most reassuring sentence I’ve ever heard from you,” Logi said, patting his head.

He turned to Bergur.

“Bergur,” he said, voice warm. “Keeper of Heavy Things. Guardian of the Big Bonk. Thank you.”

Bergur’s ears burned. He shuffled one massive foot.

“Wasn’t just me,” he said. “Couldn’t have done it without Mosi stitching the cracks. Or Loftur venting the pressure. Or Vörður being a grumpy, nagging lava alarm.”

“That last part,” Mosi said, “was especially vital.”

“Skills,” Logi said. “Hands. Craft. Power and finesse.”

He glanced at the old, silent lava echo crystal in the wall.

“And sometimes,” he added, “a bit of very outdated rock-tech that sounds like a thunderstorm getting stuck in a kettle.”

The others chuckled.

“Will we... use that thing again?” one of the younger trolls asked, peering at the fossilised yak-toenail map now hanging on the wall, safely out of reach.

“Maybe,” Logi said. “Maybe not. The hammer’s not a toy—or a shortcut. It’s a tool. A big, clumsy, dangerous tool that only works when the right trolls are holding it for the right reasons.”

He looked at Bergur.

“At the end of the path,” he said quietly, “it wasn’t the hammer that saved us. It was you knowing how and where to hold it.”

“And me knowing how and where to grow,” Mosi added, a little defensively. A small fern unfurled from his elbow in agreement.

“And me blowing into holes,” Loftur said proudly.

“Exactly,” Logi said.

That evening, the Great Cavern hummed with celebration.

There was extra stone-broth. There were Lava Loaves.

Loftur got his own tray of safely non-explosive pebbles.

Mosi’s moss slowly grew back in, thicker and a little more dignified. Bergur tried to tell the story of the Big Bonk, but every time he got to the part where they almost drifted off the gravity island, someone else jumped in with their own exaggeration.

By the time the youngest hatchlings retold it, Bergur had wrestled the hammer one-handed, Mosi had woven a moss parachute, and Loftur had eaten an entire mountain because he was “peckish.”

Bergur didn’t correct them.

He just laughed, cheeks glowing, as the story rolled on without him, becoming bigger and stranger and more heroic than the messy, frightening reality had been.

Later, when the crowd thinned and the lava rivers glowed low and sleepy, Logi found Bergur sitting on a warm ledge, feet dangling.

“Can’t sleep?” he asked, settling beside him.

“Ground’s too... calm,” Bergur said. “Feels odd.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Logi said. “That feeling? That’s what happens when we do things right. The rock stops shouting. It just... hums.”

They listened.

Far below, the Vein pulsed in a steady, content rhythm.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

“Logi?” Bergur said.

“Yes?”

“Next time,” Bergur said, “if there is one... the hammer stays where it is unless you say so. Or unless the rock screams first. Or both.”

Logi smiled.

“Deal,” he said. “And next time I need someone to hold something very big and very dangerous very, very carefully...”

He bumped his shoulder lightly against Bergur’s.

“...I know who to call.”

They sat in companionable silence.

In the shadows behind them, a tiny, dusty speaking-stone flickered on of its own accord.

Vörður’s voice drifted faintly through, like an old answering machine leaving a message after the beep.

“System status... stable... Vein pressure... normal... user behaviour... still questionable...”

Mosi poked his head around the corner.

“Did the mountain just leave us a voicemail?” he asked.

“Yes,” Bergur said, grinning. “I think we’ve made... a friend.”

Loftur yawned, curled up at their feet, and let out a tiny, satisfied puff of smoke.

“Adventure,” he mumbled in his sleep.

And for once, the earth agreed.