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THE LAVA TROLLS

LOGI AND THE FIRST FLAME



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To My Dad - Guðjón Þorgils Kristjánsson

A novel set in the world of the Lava Trolls

Chapter 1:

The Flame That Knew Too Much

In the beginning—well, not the very beginning, but the beginning of this story—there was a flame.

It sat in the middle of the Great Cavern of the Lava Trolls, burning with the calm confidence of something that had never once failed to light. Trolls called it the Heart Fire, the First Flame, the Sacred Ember, and occasionally, when it smoked too much, “That Blasted Thing.”

Around it, a crowd of Lava Trolls swayed and hummed.

“O Flame most bright,” chanted the Flamekeepers, three ancient trolls in ceremonial aprons that might once have been white, **“keeper of warmth, bringer of light, reminder not to touch very hot things with bare hands—”**

The chant paused as one of the younger trolls reached out to poke the fire.

“Especially that last bit,” added the lead Flamekeeper sharply.

Young Logi stood at the back.

He was, by troll standards, unremarkable: short, round, orange, with a nose like a very determined potato. But where other trolls glowed in broad, eager strokes of colour, Logi’s light was quieter. It flickered when he thought, which was often.

Today he was flickering a lot.

Not at the ceremony—the ceremony was fine, in the way that rituals are fine when you know everyone means well but also hasn’t updated the script in four hundred years.

He was listening to the stone.

Under the stomped rhythms of the chant, beneath the crackle of the fire, Logi could feel it: the faintest stutter in the deep, slow heartbeat of the earth. The Vein of Eldur, the great molten thread that ran under all their tunnels, had skipped.

Just once.

But once was new.

“O Flame most deep,” the Flamekeepers intoned, “we honour thy mystery, thy power, thy—”

The First Flame flickered.

It wasn't the normal little wiggle flames do when someone burps nearby. It went thin, almost threadlike, then flared too high, licking the crystals above before settling again with a guilty pop.

The Flamekeepers gasped.

“A sign!” wheezed Elder Morga, clutching her ladle. “The First Flame speaks!”

“A message from below!” cried Elder Throkka. “The gods of magma are displeased!”

“Or,” murmured Logi under his breath, “someone forgot to open the secondary vent again.”

He glanced up. Sure enough, the little exhaust fissure above the flame was half blocked by a chunk of stubborn rock that had never learned proper airflow etiquette.

He raised a hand.

“Elders? If we just—”

“Silence, child,” Morga hissed, not unkindly but very firmly. “The Flame is delivering an omen.”

Logi shut his mouth, and somewhere deep below, the Vein gave another tiny, worrying twitch.

He sighed.

The trouble with living in a world full of magic, he thought, was that sometimes trolls blamed magic for things that were really just bad ventilation.

Chapter 2:

The Moss Heresy

Later, when the ceremonies ended and everyone dispersed to argue over what precisely the flame had meant (there were at least twelve schools of thought by lunchtime), Logi slipped away to where the air was cooler.

The side tunnels near the outer edges of Undirheimar were less crowded, less polished. No ceremonial carvings. Fewer slogans like “RESPECT THE FIRE” and “REMEMBER: IF IT HURTS TO TOUCH, DON’T.”

Instead, the walls here were damp.

And green.

Logi turned a corner and found Mosi.

Mosi was lying on his back in a shallow depression of stone, staring at the ceiling as if waiting for it to do something interesting. From his shoulders outward, a thick carpet of moss and mushrooms spread, soft and vibrant,

like someone had poured a meadow over a rock and then forgotten to stop.

“Are you... leaking?” Logi asked.

Mosi didn’t look over.

“Growing,” he said. “Apparently.”

His voice had the resigned tone of someone who had long ago shouted “Why me?” at the universe and received only a shrug in response.

Logi sat on a nearby rock that obligingly warmed for him.

“You weren’t at the ceremony,” Logi said.

“That’s because every time I get near the ‘holy fire’ it sulks,” Mosi replied. “The last time, it went out completely.”

“Maybe you made it nervous,” Logi said. “You are very... green.”

“That’s what they keep telling me,” Mosi muttered.

A thin crack ran along the tunnel floor, a hairline fault. As Logi watched, a hiss of too-hot air puffed through it. The stone around the crack glowed an unhealthy red.

“You see that?” he said. “The Vein is getting restless. That fissure wasn’t there last week.”

Mosi sighed and rolled onto his side. The moss beneath him reluctantly peeled up from the stone, leaving a soft green outline.

He crawled over to the crack and set his hands on either side. The moss on his fingers bristled, then flowed down like watery grass, seeping into the gap. Steam hissed. The glow dimmed.

The air cooled.

“There,” Mosi said. “Smothered your little tantrum, didn’t we?”

Logi stared.

“You just prevented a steam burst,” he said slowly. “By growing... plant on it.”

“I prevented a ‘minor incident of divine wrath’,” Mosi corrected. “If the Crones saw that, they’d write three new commandments and ban me from soup.”

“They’d be wrong,” Logi said. “About what it was, I mean. Not about the soup; that’s between you and the kitchen.”

Mosi snorted.

“Tell them that,” he said. “Tell them their sacred fire needs a bit of mould to behave.”

“I might,” Logi said.

He meant it, too.

The trouble was, he suspected, they wouldn’t listen.

Chapter 3:

The Crack in the Tablet

The Hall of Tablets smelled like dust, hot stone, and very old certainty.

Rows of monolithic slabs lined the walls, each carved with dense runes. At the bottom, they said practical things like “Do Not Store Explosives Near Open Lava” and “Never Lick Frozen Rock.” At the top, the same advice had been translated into ornate, poetic verse and declared spiritually profound.

The Flamekeepers drifted between the slabs like volcanic ghosts, muttering.

Logi had been summoned.

“Ah, there he is,” said Elder Morga. “Our Listener.”

She always said it like it was both blessing and accusation.

Elder Throkka beckoned him closer to a tablet near the centre. It was cracked.

Not a big crack. Just a thin, new line splitting one corner.

“You see?” Throkka whispered. “The Flame sends warnings. The very laws of the elders tremble.”

Logi squinted at the inscription.

““Remember to stir the lava evenly,”” he read aloud. “Yes, I can see how that would devastate civilisation if it broke.”

“The content is not the point,” Morga said severely. “The crack is the point. The Vein stumbles. The Flame flickers. The Tablets crack. All at once. It is a pattern.”

Logi hesitated.

She wasn’t entirely wrong. He’d felt the Vein falter. He’d seen the flame misbehave. Now a tablet.

It wasn’t proof of divine displeasure.

But it was... something.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

Morga and Throkka exchanged a look.

“We believe,” Morga said, “it is time.”

“For...?” Logi prompted.

Throkka puffed up.

“For the Listener,” she declared, “to go to the Source.”

Logi blinked.

“Below?” he said.

“To the Chamber of the First Flame,” Morga said reverently.

“To reawaken it. To restore it. To correct whatever imbalance has crept into the world.”

“The prophecies are clear,” Throkka added, gesturing at the crack as if it were a footnote. “When the Vein’s heart stutters, the Listener shall descend, and the First Flame shall blaze anew.”

Logi peered at the tablet.

“I’m pretty sure this one is about stew,” he said.

“The meaning is symbolic,” Morga said. “The stew is the world. The stirring is the Flame. The pot is—”

“All right,” Logi interrupted gently. “Fine. I’ll go see what’s wrong.”

Morga sagged in relief.

“Good,” she said. “Take your ears, your questions, and... whatever it is you do with your hands.”

“Maintenance,” Logi said. “I do maintenance.”

“Exactly,” Throkka said. “Sacred maintenance.”

He left the hall with a feeling that somewhere along the line, someone had taken a manual and mistaken it for a myth.

Chapter 4:

The Snail Who Would Be Fate

Logi packed light.

A satchel with tools. A flask of stone-broth concentrate that could strip paint off a cavern. A spare ladle (he had learned you could solve surprising problems with the right ladle). A charred notebook.

He was halfway down a seldom-used side tunnel when he heard it.

“About time,” said a small, annoyed voice.

He froze.

The tunnel was empty.

“Hello?” he tried.

“No, don’t ‘hello’ me,” the voice snapped. “You have been walking past me for years. Years. Do you know how long that is in snail time? Several lifetimes of moss.”

Logi turned slowly.

On the wall, a small pale snail inched along, leaving a faint shimmering trail. Its shell was spiralled stone, patterned like a tiny galaxy.

“Down here,” the voice said. “The magnificent, the marvellous, the mildly inconvenienced... Skuldra Verdandóttir.”

Logi stared at the snail.

The snail stared back, or would have, if she’d had visible eyes and a better sense of theatre.

“You’re... talking,” Logi said carefully.

“Yes!” the snail replied. “It’s what happens when a fragment of fate incarnates in a gastropod instead of a tall, dignified, robed figure with excellent hair. The universe plays jokes; we cope.”

Logi rubbed his temples.

“Right,” he said. “Of course. A fate-snail.”

Skuldra hissed in outrage.

“Not just any fate-snail!” she said. “I am Skuldra, cousin—well, sort-of-off-brand relative—of Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld. They got the nice postings. Looms, threads, dramatic wind. I got lost in a root system and woke up under your feet.”

She wriggled in what might have been indignation.

“I have seen half the threads of destiny,” she went on. “I know the shape of tomorrow’s perhaps. I speak, little troll, and worlds tremble.”

She paused for effect.

Nothing trembled.

“Well,” she admitted, “worlds *should* tremble. We’re working on it.”

Logi leaned against the wall, considering the possibility that stress had finally made him start hallucinating opinionated molluscs.

“Can anyone else hear you?” he asked.

“Not yet,” Skuldra said. “You actually listen. The others are too busy reciting instructions to notice when the rock answers.”

That stung a little, mostly because it was true.

“Prove it,” Logi said. “Say something about the future. Something specific.”

Skuldra sniffed.

“In precisely six steps,” she declared, “you will tread on a loose stone, slide, and land on your backside in a very undignified manner.”

Logi frowned.

“I’m not that clumsy,” he said.

He set off again, counting under his breath.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five—

His foot hit a loose pebble.

The pebble shot sideways.

Logi's legs went out from under him. He landed with a thump that echoed all the way back to the Hall of Tablets.

Skuldra's voice drifted down from the wall.

"I rest my case," she said smugly.

Logi stared up at the ceiling.

"All right," he wheezed. "You're... something."

"An oracle," she said. "Part-time. I'm right half the time and hilariously wrong the rest. Which, if you know anything about probability, is the only way to be sure you're not just guessing."

Logi pushed himself upright.

"I'm going below," he said. "To see what's wrong with the First Flame. The Crones think it's a holy mission. I think it's a maintenance problem. Either way, it's dangerous."

"Excellent," Skuldra said. "Take me with you."

"Why?" Logi asked.

"Because," she said, "the last time I ignored a call like this, I missed my chance to be reincarnated as something with knees. I am not making that mistake twice."

Logi hesitated.

On the one hand, he was about to descend into unstable tunnels with a self-proclaimed fate-snail who'd just insulted his walking.

On the other hand, she'd been right.

"Fine," he said at last. "But you stay in the satchel. And if anyone asks, you're... an unusual pebble."

Skuldra gasped.

"A pebble?" she cried. "I am a cosmic incident!"

"Pebble," Logi repeated.

She sighed dramatically.

"Very well," she conceded. "But an *important* pebble."

Chapter 5:

Three on the Road

Logi had planned to leave quietly.

He should have known better.

“Where are you going?” Mosi asked, folding himself out of a corner of shadow, leaving a moss print on the wall.

“Below,” Logi said. “To the First Flame.”

“Alone?” Mosi’s moss fluffed in agitation. “That seems incredibly sensible and therefore unlikely.”

“I was going to bring my ladle,” Logi said.

“I am coming,” Mosi said.

Logi opened his mouth to argue.

Mosi waved a hand, and a small, worried mushroom sprouted out of the floor between them.

“Look,” Mosi said. “The Vein is twitchy, the cracks are spreading, and things are growing where they shouldn’t. This isn’t just a fire problem anymore. It’s fire and... whatever I am.”

He swallowed.

“You listen to rock,” he went on. “I listen to roots. Between us, we might actually hear the whole story.”

Logi sighed.

“You realise,” he said, “the Crones will call this heresy.”

“Good,” Mosi said. “Faith could use a little compost.”

From inside the satchel, Skuldra’s indignant voice piped up.

“I will have you know,” she declared, “that I am an authorised representative of cosmic destiny. You are all heretics and you don’t even dress the part.”

Mosi’s eyes widened.

“Did your bag just talk or am I finally hallucinating?” he whispered.

“Snail,” Logi said. “Long story.”

“Hmph,” said the bag.

Mosi looked delighted.

“Oh, we’re definitely doomed,” he said. “When do we start?”

They set off together: a quiet, thoughtful troll; a mossy anomaly; and one snail with a god complex.

Behind them, the Great Cavern bustled and hummed, rituals continuing as if everything were normal.

Below them, the Vein watched and waited.

Chapter 6:

The Way Down

Descending into the Deep Veins was like walking down a throat.

The air grew heavier. The walls narrowed, then widened unexpectedly, like the rock was trying on shapes. Lava light came and went in pulses, leaving pockets of darkness that tasted of iron and old echoes.

Logi walked with one hand on the wall, feeling.

“The rhythm is wrong,” he murmured. “It’s too fast here. Too slow there. Like a drum played by someone with hiccups.”

Mosi trailed behind, leaving soft green footprints that glowed faintly before fading. Every time they crossed a crack leaking too much heat, his moss flowed over it, soothing.

“So,” Mosi said, for the third time, “explain again why the Crones think the answer is ‘more fire’.”

“Because the stories say the First Flame used to burn brighter,” Logi said. “They remember that part. They don’t remember why.”

“Probably because the why was boring,” Skuldra muttered from the satchel. “Maintenance is never as exciting as miracles, even when it saves everyone’s tails.”

They reached a chamber where the ceiling was studded with small crystals. Each one captured a flicker of light and tossed it to the next, creating a web of slow, shimmering movement.

“Oh,” Mosi whispered. “Pretty.”

“It’s a listening cavern,” Logi said. “The rock is thinned here. You can hear the Vein more clearly.”

They stood in silence.

The heartbeat of the earth thudded under their feet.

Thump. Thump. Thump... thud-thud... thump.

The off-beat was obvious now. An extra kick, a hesitant lag, like a dancer tripping over one step in a long, practiced routine.

“Definitely not just ‘mysterious ways’,” Logi said.

“Something’s stuck.”

Skuldra sighed.

“I once foretold an entire era based on the way a leaf fell,” she said. “The leaf turned out to be stuck to a goat. Point is, you can make anything look like meaning if you squint. But this—this is actual meaning. Measurable. Repeating. It matters.”

Mosi blinked.

“That was almost wise,” he said.

“Write it down,” Skuldra said. “I have a reputation to salvage.”

They moved on.

The tunnels grew damper. Small trickles of water ran along the walls, bringing with them smells from above: cold, soil, a distant memory of air that wasn’t always hot.

Mosi visibly relaxed.

“Feels... friendlier,” he said. “Less like we’re walking into someone’s stomach, more like we’re walking under a very heavy garden.”

Logi frowned at a side passage.

“Left or right?” he asked.

“Left!” Skuldra proclaimed. “I have Seen it.”

Logi closed his eyes, laid both palms on the ground.

The left passage vibrated with a faint, excited shiver—the kind stone makes right before it falls on something.

“Right,” he said, and turned.

Behind them, the entrance to the left collapsed in a great, offended cough of rubble.

“See?” Skuldra said. “If you had gone left, you would have fulfilled my vision by being crushed. You’re welcome for the warning.”

“You told us to go left,” Mosi pointed out.

“Prophecy is a collaborative art,” Skuldra sniffed. “You provided the common sense. I provided the drama.”

Logi couldn’t help it. He smiled.

Perhaps, he thought, there was room in the world for both.

Chapter 7:

The Roots of Things

The first root they saw was small.

Just a tendril, pale and tentative, poking through the ceiling of a narrow passage. It quivered as they walked past, as if surprised to find trolls down here.

The second root was not small.

It was as thick as Bergur's thigh (a measurement of some significance), snaking along the wall and disappearing into the rock like a vein of wood.

"This is wrong," Logi said. "Roots shouldn't be this deep."

"Neither should snails," Skuldra said. "And yet."

Mosi reached out and touched the root. His moss surged toward it eagerly, blending green with pale fibre.

He gasped.

"What?" Logi asked.

"Memories," Mosi whispered. "Not like yours. Like... weather. Sunlight. Snow. Something cold touching leaves. Voices singing without stone."

He jerked his hand back, breathing hard.

"Someone up there is connected to this too," he said. "Not just us. The Flame isn't just our story."

They entered a wider cavern where roots and stone wove together in intricate tangles. Some roots pulsed with soft light; others were dormant, coiled.

On the walls, old paintings emerged from shadow: figures in red, blue, and green pigments.

Trolls in orange.

Smaller, spiky figures in white-blue—Ice Trolls, perhaps.

Branchy, elongated shapes in green and gold—something else entirely.

Between them all, a single stylised flame.

“The Crones’ stories,” Logi said quietly, “always said we were chosen. The only guardians of the First Flame. The centre of everything.”

“Shocking,” Skuldra said dryly. “People writing stories put themselves in the middle. Who could have predicted.”

Mosi traced the line connecting a troll to a root-figure.

“What if we’re just... one part?” he said. “Important, sure. But not... special-special. Just... necessary. Like a ladle.”

“There’s nothing ‘just’ about a good ladle,” Skuldra said, scandalised.

Logi laid his ear against the wall.

The heartbeat here was different. Softer. Threads of other rhythms braided into it—a faint crackle like frost, a rustle like leaves.

“We’re not alone in this,” he said. “If the Vein breaks, it’s not just our caverns. It’s... everything that touches it. Roots. Ice. Maybe even the surface.”

Mosi swallowed.

“And our current plan,” he said, “is to go poke its primary power source based on a slightly cracked stew tablet.”

“That,” Logi said, “is why we’re going to look before we poke.”

Skuldra hummed.

“A radical strategy,” she said. “The gods will be outraged.”

“Good,” Logi said. “They can file a complaint. I’ll add it to the maintenance schedule.”

Chapter 8:

The First Flame

The Chamber of the First Flame did not look the way Logi expected.

There were no pillars of fire licking the ceiling. No choir of lava sprites. No booming voice saying “WELCOME, CHOSEN ONE, MIND THE STEP.”

Instead, there was a basin.

A wide, deep bowl carved from shimmering crystal, set into the floor. Within it burned a single flame the size of a Lava Troll’s head.

It was not impressive.

It was... alive.

It burned without fuel, its colour shifting slowly from deep gold to soft blue to a red so dark it was almost black. Light from it travelled out along faint cracks in the crystal, down into the stone below, threading into the Vein.

Around the basin, murals told a story.

Trolls standing with their hands outstretched, feeding small controlled flares into the flame.

Other figures—ice-blue, root-green—touching the base, cooling and anchoring.

No one was kneeling.

No one was declaring themselves chosen.

They were working.

“Not a temple,” Logi breathed. “A control room.”

Mosi stepped forward reverently.

“Or a garden,” he said. “A very hot, very dangerous garden.”

Skuldra puffed herself up on the rim of the basin.

“At last,” she proclaimed. “The core. The centre. The axis of all your little destinies. Bow, mortals, before the sight of—”

The flame wobbled.

A spark shot out and singed her slime-trail.

“OW!” she squeaked, retreating. “I take it back. Be moderately respectful at a safe distance.”

Logi knelt, palms hovering over the crystal.

The Vein’s heartbeat was loud here. Strong. But there was an unevenness, a catch, like a cartwheel bumping over a stone every rotation.

“This is what the Crones meant,” he said. “The Flame is out of balance. But it’s not weak. It’s... misaligned.”

“How do we fix it?” Mosi asked. “More fire? Less? A stern talking-to?”

Logi closed his eyes.

He felt his own inner warmth, the glow in his chest that all Lava Trolls carried. He let it brush the Flame’s edges, gently, like testing bathwater.

Too much and it flared dangerously.

Too little and it drooped.

It needed... shaping.

“We don’t make it bigger,” he said. “We make it... smoother. We redirect. Adjust how it feeds the Vein. Like tuning a song.”

Skuldra sniffed.

“Typical,” she said. “Given a holy relic of incalculable power, and you want to... fine-tune it.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Logi asked.

“Yes,” she said promptly. “We ascend it to the heavens, crown me in its light, and declare an epoch of my benevolent rule.”

He waited.

She sighed.

“Also your plan,” she admitted. “Probably yours.”

Chapter 9:

The Holy Mess

A shape moved at the edge of the chamber.

At first Logi thought it was a shadow. Then the shadow's eyes opened.

It was large. Not as large as Vörður would one day be, but big enough to be mistaken for a particularly ambitious boulder pile. Its skin was stone, criss-crossed with glowing seams. Horn-like ridges curled back from its forehead.

A Rockfolk.

Or rather, an echo of one.

"You... have come," it said. Its voice was like plates grinding deep under mountains. "At last."

Logi bowed, because sometimes good manners were just self-preservation.

"We're listening," he said.

The Rockfolk's eyes slid to the Flame.

"Long ago," it said, "we forged a way to reach far. To send gentle quakes... relieve pressure... save homes. This Flame was our tool. Our bridge between realms."

Murals lit in sequence as it spoke.

Trolls, Ice beings, branchy figures—all working together.

"But then," the Rockfolk went on, "we forgot the why, and loved only the what. We struck harder. Forced the Vein. Made mountains dance for sport."

One mural showed a landscape buckling, trolls clinging to their huts, a caption in old runes that probably translated to something like "This Was A Bad Idea."

"After the Great Shatter," the Rockfolk said, "we sealed the Flame. We left warnings. Instructions. We hoped our children would remember."

It glanced at the ceiling, as if it could see through stone to the Hall of Tablets above.

“They remembered... halfway,” it said. “They turned ‘warning’ into ‘prophecy.’ ‘Manual’ into ‘myth.’ They made faith of our fear.”

Mosi winced.

“That sounds familiar,” he muttered.

The Rockfolk’s gaze softened.

“Faith has its place,” it said. “It can keep memory warm when details fade. But if you follow it without question, you walk off cliffs someone meant only to point at.”

“So the tablets were... safety notes,” Logi said.

“And stories to explain them,” the Rockfolk agreed. “You must decide which parts are still true. That is the burden of those who listen.”

Skuldra wriggled.

“I caused none of this,” she said. “I just want that on record.”

Chapter 10:

Tuning the Vein

The Vein groaned.

A shudder ran through the basin, making the Flame ripple.

“We are out of time,” the Rockfolk said. “Pressure rises. The knot tightens. If you do nothing, the Vein will break on its own terms.”

“Do we have to ask... permission?” Mosi whispered. “To touch it? To change it?”

The Rockfolk shook its head slowly.

“Responsibility,” it said. “Not permission. The Flame was forged to be used. With care.”

Logi exhaled.

“All right,” he said. “Here’s what we do.”

He looked at Mosi.

“You anchor the crystal,” he said. “Wrap the outer edges with moss. Not to smother, but to hold. Give it something to lean on when it shifts.”

Mosi nodded, though his moss quivered.

“I can... try,” he said.

“You already are,” Skuldra muttered.

Logi stepped into the shallow depression around the basin, close enough that the Flame’s heat tingled his skin.

He let his own inner warmth rise, very slowly, until it almost touched the Flame.

“Don’t push,” he whispered. “Just... listen.”

The Vein’s heartbeat thudded through him.

He could feel where it was too strong, hammering at thin rock—where quakes would erupt if nothing changed.

He also felt hollow places, underfed, risking collapse.

Like a badly cooked stew: burned at the bottom, raw at the top.

He coaxed the Flame gently toward the cool places, letting more energy trickle there. At the same time, he and Mosi—through the moss—dampened the flow to the over-pressured regions.

The Flame shrank in one direction, grew in another.

Mosi's moss climbed the basin, forming a soft, glowing lattice. It vibrated with the Vein's rhythm, smoothing spikes.

Skuldra watched, unusually silent.

When a fissure in the floor cracked wider, Mosi lunged, slapping both hands down. Moss surged over the gap, sealing it before the Vein could tear it further.

“Careful,” the Rockfolk warned. “Too much cooling, and you’ll shock the system. It must flex, not freeze.”

“I know,” Mosi said through gritted teeth. “I’m not trying to turn it into salad.”

The Flame pulsed, once—hard.

The chamber shook.

A mural toppled. A carved figure of a troll priest shattered on the floor.

The Flame did not explode.

It settled.

The Vein's heartbeat slowed, then evened.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

No extra stutter.

No frantic surge.

Just... steady.

Logi sagged, sweating.

Mosi collapsed beside him, moss wilted and faint.

Skuldra cleared her nonexistent throat.

“Well,” she said. “I suppose that means I can cancel my prophecy about ‘the time the world turned inside out’.”

“Please do,” Logi panted.

The Rockfolk bowed, as much as stone could bow.

“You have done,” it said, “what we hoped our descendants might. You listened to the truth behind the story. That is all we can ask.”

Logi looked at the Flame.

It was no bigger than before.

But it burned cleaner.

“That’s it?” Mosi said weakly. “No giant halo? No chorus? No booming voice saying ‘Well done’?”

Skuldra sniffed.

“The world did not end,” she said. “In my experience, that’s as close as reality gets to applause.”

Chapter 11:

Faith, Adjusted

The walk back up felt longer, even though the tremors had calmed.

Word had outrun them.

By the time they reached the Great Cavern, the Flamekeepers were waiting, flanked by a sizeable portion of the tribe.

Morga squinted at Logi.

“Well?” she demanded. “Did you reawaken the First Flame?”

Logi thought of the murals. The Rockfolk. The shared responsibility.

“I tuned it,” he said.

Silence.

“Is that... the same as making it bigger?” Throkka asked suspiciously.

“No,” Logi said. “It’s the same as making it *better*.”

He explained, as simply as he could, what they had seen and done. The shared guardianship. The danger of overuse. The difference between story and instruction.

Some trolls frowned.

Some nodded slowly.

Some were clearly disappointed nothing had exploded.

“So the prophecies...” Morga began.

“...were warnings,” Logi said gently. “With extra drama. We remembered the drama and forgot the diagram.”

“It is still faith,” Mosi added quietly. “Faith that if we act with care and sense and kindness, the world will keep supporting us.”

He gestured at the Flame.

“It’s just... less about asking it to fix everything, and more about doing our part.”

“Blasphemy,” muttered one old troll at the back.

“Possibly,” Skuldra called from the floor, having oozed discreetly out of the satchel. “But functional blasphemy.”

Several trolls jumped.

“What is that,” someone whispered, “and why is it talking?”

“I,” Skuldra announced, swelling as much as her shell allowed, “am Skuldra Verdandóttir, Oracle of Half-Truths, Seer of Some Things, Cosmically Misplaced Gastropod. You may kneel, or just nod politely; I am flexible.”

No one knelt.

A few nodded out of sheer confusion.

“You were not in the prophecies,” Morga said faintly.

“Of course not,” Skuldra said. “Have you *read* your prophecies? They barely fit on the tablets as it is. No room for everyone.”

Logi bit back a smile.

Morga sighed deeply.

“So what now?” she asked. “Do we stop the rituals? Stop singing? Stop calling the Flame sacred?”

“No,” Logi said. “We just... remember why we started. We sing to remind ourselves to be careful. We chant so the little ones don’t forget that fire burns. We tell stories, yes—but we also check the vents.”

He met her gaze.

“Faith is fine,” he said. “As long as we don’t use it instead of thinking. Or instead of helping.”

Throkka frowned.

“And you,” she said, pointing at Mosi, “are... necessary to all this?”

Mosi swallowed.

“I grew moss on holy things,” he admitted. “And it helped.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd.

“He cooled a vent near my house,” someone said.

“Stopped it from bursting.”

“My lava oven hasn’t exploded once since he walked past,” another added.

“Coincidence,” a third muttered.

“Blessing,” said a fourth.

“Good plumbing,” Logi suggested.

They argued. Of course they did. Trolls always did.

But the arguments sounded... different. Less about whether the Flame was offended, more about how best to keep children from sticking their hands into it.

Later, in a quieter moment, Morga touched the crack in the stew tablet.

“Perhaps,” she said reluctantly, “the Flame sent us a sign. And perhaps the sign was ‘check your foundations.’”

“Sometimes the gods’ will,” Skuldra said, lounging on a ledge, “looks very much like common sense.”

“Do you speak for the gods?” Morga asked, wary.

“Absolutely not,” Skuldra said briskly. “Terrible job. No holidays. I speak for me. And occasionally for good timing.”

Chapter 12:

Departures and Directions

Life in Undirheimar did not change overnight.

The Flame still burned in the Great Cavern.

The Crones still led chants, though they updated some lines. “O Flame Most Mysterious” quietly became “O Flame Most Needing Regular Inspection.” The new verse didn’t scan, but it was honest.

Trolls still told stories of the First Flame, but more of them now ended with “...and then they fixed it,” instead of “...and then it fixed everything.”

Logi found himself with a new unofficial title: **Keeper of the Flame.**

Not because he owned it, or because the prophecies said so, but because when something went wrong, he was the one everyone came to.

He still listened to the Vein.

He still carried a ladle.

He still argued with Skuldra.

“Look at you,” she said one day as he checked a vent.

“Wise. Respected. Consulting oracles. The whole smug package.”

“I consult you,” he said. “I at least try to verify the results.”

“Rude,” she sniffed. “Accurate. But rude.”

Mosi, meanwhile, grew itchier.

Not literally, though his moss did that when he was restless.

He started spending more time near the upper vents, where breezes from the surface slipped in. He listened to the faint murmur of roots, the distant scuttle of creatures that had never seen lava.

“One day,” he said to Logi, “I’m going up.”

“Above?” Logi asked. “To the surface?”

Mosi nodded.

“I want to see what else grows,” he said. “What the Vein looks like from the other side. Maybe there are others like me. Or maybe I’ll just scare a lot of sheep. Either way, I’d like to know.”

Logi was quiet a long moment.

“The world needs you here,” he said at last.

Mosi smiled, a little sadly.

“For now,” he agreed. “We’ve patched the worst cracks. You’ve taught others how to listen. I’ve woven moss where it counts. But the Vein doesn’t end at our ceilings.”

He shrugged.

“Besides,” he added, “somebody has to go find out what’s sitting on top of all this. We can’t keep writing stories about gods and glaciers if we never go say hello.”

Skuldra oozed onto Logi’s shoulder.

“He has a point,” she said. “Also, I have never prophesied about a troll with moss on his face meeting the sky. It sounds like good entertainment.”

“You’ll go with him, then?” Logi asked dryly.

“Obviously,” she said. “Someone has to narrate.”

They left not long after.

No grand procession. Just a hug that left Logi’s tunic muddy, a promise to send messages down whatever cracks they found, and a snail shouting instructions at the concept of destiny.

Logi watched them vanish into an upper tunnel.

“Will they be all right?” Morga asked, coming to stand beside him.

“Probably,” Logi said. “Mostly. With interesting accidents.”

“What makes you so sure?” she asked.

He smiled.

“Because,” he said, “I trust them. And I trust the world a little more now that we know it doesn’t need constant miracles—just decent maintenance and the occasional act of courage.”

He turned back toward the Great Cavern.

The Flame was burning steadily.

Trolls bustled around it—singing, cooking, bickering, living.

He settled onto his usual listening ledge, hands on the stone.

“Ready?” he murmured to the Vein.

It thrummed, content.

Skuldra’s last voice of the day seemed to echo faintly down from somewhere high above, like a slightly smug breeze.

“Common sense,” she said, “the most underrated magic of all.”

Logi chuckled.

“Agreed,” he said.

Then he closed his eyes and listened—not for prophecies, not for omens, but for the simple, steady heartbeat of a world held together by fire, moss, stone, and the stubborn, quiet goodness of the people who called it home.