

BJÖRGVIN GUÐJÓNSSON

THE LAVA TROLLS

THE KNUCKLINGS



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To My Dad - Guðjón Þorgils Kristjánsson

A novel set in the world of the Lava Trolls

Chapter 1:

Breakfast Before the Future

Breakfast in the Great Cavern sounded like civilisation being built out of ladles, elbows, and soup.

The Great Cavern was the warm heart of the Lava Trolls' home. It was not a throne room. It was not a museum. It was a huge underground hall where everyone ate, argued, worked, sang, announced things, lost things, found different things, and pretended not to notice when somebody's goat chewed the decorations.

Lava-light glowed from cracks in the floor. Stone-broth steamed in big black pots. Lava loaves crackled in their racks. Trolls talked over one another in the affectionate volcanic way of people who had lived together long enough to know that love and volume were close relatives.

Sparky was standing on a bench.

This was not necessary. The breakfast was already happening. The pepper flakes were already on the table. No one had requested a speech. But Sparky had discovered years ago that standing higher made a statement feel more important by at least a third, and importance, like soup, was best served hot.

"Before anyone panics," he called.

"Why would anyone panic?" asked Smudge, who was already reaching for bread.

"Because," said Sparky, with great dignity, "I am about to carry the extra-hot pepper flakes across a crowded breakfast hall."

Auntie Svara moved her bowl out of the likely blast radius.

"That," said Smudge, "is actually a fair reason."

Sparky jumped down and set off between the tables with both hands wrapped carefully round the little obsidian dish. The pepper flakes inside shimmered dark red, the colour of bad decisions after bedtime. He moved slowly. He concentrated. His tongue stuck out slightly, which made him look less like a hero and more like a very determined lizard.

He might even have made it.

Unfortunately, Bergur chose that exact moment to come through one of the wide tunnel entrances carrying three kettles, a basket of lava loaves, two sacks of black-salt roots, and Loftur draped round his shoulders like a dragon-shaped scarf.

Bergur was enormous even by Lava Troll standards. He was all shoulders, grin, and helpful momentum. He moved through the Great Cavern with the confidence of a mountain that had decided to assist with breakfast.

"Coming through!" he boomed. "Hot kettle! Hot loaf! Moderately suspicious root!"

Loftur, who was not helping, sneezed a puff of sparks into Bergur's ear.

Bergur twitched.

Sparky swerved.

The pepper flakes flew.

There was a gasp, a red cloud, and then an elderly troll near the soup pots sneezed so hard that his eyebrows lit at the tips.

Not fully. Just enough to make him look, for a moment, unusually wise.

"Oh, for basalt's sake," muttered Mosi.

Mosi sat at the end of a bench with a bowl in one hand and a mossy herb cake in the other. Bits of fern and lichen clung to him as though they had signed a long-term lease. A tiny mushroom near his collar trembled as he sighed.

Without getting up, he plucked a damp strand of moss from his wrist and flicked it across the room. It landed on the elder's eyebrows with a soft pffft and put them out at once.

"Thank you," said the elder.

"You're welcome," said Mosi. "Do try not to season yourself."

Laughter rolled through the hall. Sparky protested that the incident had been mostly air's fault. Smudge immediately improved the story by adding a heroic tumble, three explosions, and a goat with legal opinions.

Bergur had already set the kettles down and begun pouring broth for anyone whose bowl looked even slightly underfilled, which in practice meant everyone within reach. Loftur investigated whether theft counted as breakfast if performed charmingly.

On a high shelf near the western wall, Elder Logi watched the morning with the patient expression of a troll who had

long ago accepted that common sense was not evenly distributed.

He sat with one hand against the warm stone. To anyone else, he appeared to be enjoying breakfast with elderly restraint. To those who knew him, he was listening.

The Great Cavern had a way of speaking if one paid attention. Not with words. Stone was too old and dignified for that. It spoke through warmth, little trembles, slow breaths of air, and the deep hum beneath daily life. This morning it sounded mostly like itself: noisy, fed, slightly chaotic, and structurally resigned.

Which was encouraging.

Then Logi's hand stilled.

It was a tiny thing. Most trolls would have missed it. But Mosi noticed. So did Loftur, who lifted his head and gave a low uncertain chirr. Even the goat near the decorations stopped chewing long enough to look offended by the silence.

Logi pressed his palm more firmly to the wall.

There it was again.

A knock from deep below. Not danger. Not yet. More like someone politely asking the world to make room.

"That's not breakfast, is it?" Sparky asked.

"No," said Logi quietly.

From the tunnel came a gust of dry mineral heat. It smelled of long roads, old stone, and tools that had worked for centuries without once being asked whether they were tired.

Then came the sound.

One heavy tread.

Another.

And beneath it: click-click-click-click-click.

Karn ducked through the entrance first. He was Rockfolk, broad and grey as an old cliff, with golden seams glowing faintly beneath his basalt skin. Behind him came a smaller figure in fitted Rockfolk gear. She was quick-eyed, young, and carrying a case bristling with rods, folded plates, strings of metal, and the serious expression of someone who had rehearsed this moment twenty-seven times and disliked the twenty-eighth already.

Around her feet marched half a dozen little stone beings no higher than a soup pot.

They moved on jointed limbs with startling speed and complete seriousness. Each was made from dark basalt plates, tiny hinges, and bright glowing seams at the knuckles. One carried a rolled cloth. Another carried a little wedge. A third paused inside the doorway, looked around the hall, and nudged a dropped spoon into a straighter position.

No one spoke.

Sparky stared.

Mosi narrowed his eyes.

Bergur looked faintly insulted, though he could not yet have explained why.

One little stone being clicked twice, scuttled to a crooked bench, and straightened it with three brisk shoves.

The bench ended up straighter than it had been in years.

Karn inclined his great head.

"Good morning," he said.

The Great Cavern, which had not been expecting the future before second broth, stared back at him in silence.

Then Sparky, because of course it was Sparky, whispered in delighted horror:

"Oh, lava buckets."

Chapter 2:

Tiny Helpers with Very Serious Faces

Logi climbed down from his listening shelf with his staff in one hand.

He did not always need the staff, but there are times when carrying a staff tells a room that someone intends to be the adult. The Great Cavern had enough adults, technically, but not enough with staffs.

"Karn," said Logi. "You arrive before second broth. That suggests urgency or optimism."

"Perhaps both," said Karn.

The young Rockfolk stepped forward. She looked at the room full of Lava Trolls, swallowed once, and lifted her chin.

"I am Nara," she said. "From the Deep Below. I study small helpers and the words that guide them."

Sparky leaned toward Smudge. "That may be the most interesting sentence anyone has ever said."

"It is very early in the day," Smudge whispered back.

Nara set her case on the nearest table. The little stone beings lined up around her boots as if they had all agreed that standing still was also a job.

"We bring a gift," she said.

The word gift travelled through the hall like steam through a crack. Trolls turned. Aunties leaned. Someone said, "Ooo," in the voice normally saved for festival pastries. Someone

else said, "From below?" in a tone that meant delight and suspicion had met and were sharing a coat.

Bergur stepped forward, wiping his hands on his tunic.

"A gift is lovely," he said. "Unless it is cursed. We had a singing kettle once. Beautiful voice. Terrible advice."

"It is not cursed," said Nara.

"That is exactly what a cursed kettle would say," muttered Mosi.

Karn's molten eyes shifted slightly. With Rockfolk, amusement could be hard to spot, but there was a strong possibility that Karn was enjoying himself.

Logi gestured to the table. "Show us."

Nara opened the case. Inside were little rods, stone tags, thin metal cords, folded cloths, and neat compartments designed by a person who deeply distrusted mess. The little beings clicked closer.

"These," said Nara, "are knucklings."

The word sat in the air, then began to travel.

"Knucklings," said Smudge.

"Knucklings?" said Auntie Svara.

"Knucklings!" said Sparky, instantly deciding it was one of the finest words ever made.

Bergur folded his arms.

"Hmph."

"You don't approve?" asked Mosi.

"I haven't decided," said Bergur. "They look too sure of themselves."

"They are smaller than your breakfast."

"That has never once stopped trouble."

Nara drew breath, then glanced at Karn. Karn gave the smallest nod. A mountain approving a pebble.

"The knucklings are little stone helpers," she said. "They lift, carry, clean, sort, fetch, hold, and check things that are too dull, too heavy, too hot, or too often repeated. They are not alive like us. They do not want praise. They do not get bored. They do not wake up in the morning and decide to become poets."

"Useful," said Smudge.

"Tragic," said Mosi.

"They understand instructions," Nara continued. "But only the instructions they are actually given. Not the ones you meant to give. Not the ones you hoped they would guess. Not the ones hidden inside your tone of voice, unless you explain the tone of voice first."

Sparky raised his hand. "So if I say, 'Make breakfast better'?"

"Then you deserve what happens," said Nara.

That won her a small wave of respect from the room.

Bergur cleared his throat.

"When you say they lift things," he said carefully, "you mean lift as in... carry?"

"Yes."

"Move heavy pots?"

"Yes."

"Carry sacks?"

"Yes."

"Fetch baskets?"

"Yes."

"Take large things from one place to another without making a speech about it?"

"Also yes," said Nara, now slightly less confident.

Smudge put a hand over his mouth.

Sparky failed to.

"Oh, this is going to be brilliant."

Karn stepped forward, and when he spoke the room settled. He had the kind of voice that made even soup listen.

"The Rockfolk know burden," he said. "We have carried old mistakes for a long time. But burden does not become noble just because one grows used to it. Some work strengthens a people. Some work only grinds them down. Tools should travel where they can do good."

That landed well. The Great Cavern liked generosity better when it wore practical boots.

Logi nodded. "Then let the gift introduce itself."

Nara placed three stone tags on the table. She touched each one as she spoke.

"Knucklings. Clear this table. Keep food safe. Do not touch anyone's bowl while it is being eaten from. Protect hot pots. Stop if a living person says stop. Begin."

The knucklings moved.

The whole hall gasped.

One took the pepper-flake dish and placed it safely far from Sparky's elbows. Another stacked empty bowls by size. A third caught a wobbling cup before the auntie holding it realised it had been wobbling at all. Two more separated bread from ash, rescued a half-buried herb cake from beneath Smudge's sleeve, and returned a missing spoon to a troll who had not yet noticed it was missing.

The smallest knuckling climbed the side of the soup pot, checked the lid, and nudged it half an inch so the steam escaped cleanly instead of puffing into Auntie Svara's face.

Everyone stared.

Bergur stared harder.

"Well," he said at last. "That's... tidy."

"That is magnificent," breathed Sparky.

"It is unsettling," said Smudge.

"It can be both," said Mosi. "Most magnificent things are a little rude."

Then the smallest knuckling marched to a basket nearly as large as itself, hooked its little stone grips under the handles, and lifted it from the table.

The hall erupted.

Even Bergur barked a laugh.

"Put that down before I have to admire you," he told it.

The knuckling set the basket carefully at his feet. Then it looked up, clicked once, and seemed to offer to continue.

Mosi grinned into his bowl despite himself.

Nara's shoulders lowered by a whole inch.

Logi watched the room watching the knucklings.

Delight had arrived. So had curiosity. And beneath both of them, something quieter: want.

Older trolls looked at the knucklings and rubbed wrists that had carried pots for too many years. Stewards looked at the suddenly ordered table and imagined a day with less aching in it. Young trolls looked at the glowing little helpers and saw mischief wearing a useful hat.

Not bad, Logi thought.

Not simple either.

Chapter 3:

The Best Day Ever, Depending Who You Asked

By midday, the Great Cavern had done what every community does when presented with a useful marvel.

It had stopped asking whether the thing belonged there and begun asking how many it could have by supper.

The knucklings helped everywhere.

One carried hot pots between kitchens and tables. One swept ash from the walking paths. One fetched bowls from high shelves so no one had to climb a ladder that had been repaired by optimism and string. One stood by the bread racks and caught rolling lava buns with the solemn courage of a tiny baked-goods guardian.

Auntie Svara watched this last task with narrowed eyes.

"Bread is sacred," she said.

"Bread is bread," said Smudge.

"Exactly," said Auntie Svara, as if this proved her point.

The knucklings were good. Annoyingly good. The paths became clear. The pots arrived on time. Dropped spoons did not remain dropped long enough to develop a personal history. An old troll with sore knees looked at the ash-free walkway and said, very quietly, "Oh," which is the sound relief makes when it does not want to be dramatic.

Sparky adored every second of it.

He followed the knucklings around as if watching a new kind of firework: all quick limbs, clever grips, and little clicks of intention.

"Look at them," he said to Smudge. "Tiny organised miracles."

"That phrase makes me nervous."

"Everything makes you nervous."

"Correct. It is how I have survived being your friend."

For a while, even Bergur tried to enjoy it.

He told himself it was restful.

He told himself it was sensible.

He told himself he had always supported the reasonable sharing of heavy duties and was not at all attached to carrying things simply because he happened to be enormous, cheerful, and very, very good at it.

This belief lasted until the third time his hands arrived at a job half a breath too late.

First, a hot kettle. He reached for it. A knuckling was already there.

Then a stack of bowls. He stepped forward. Two knucklings carried them past him.

Then a root basket that would normally have required Bergur, another troll, and a small speech about leverage. Before Bergur had properly inhaled, four knucklings rolled it neatly away.

His hands hung in the air.

Sparky found him near the soup ledge.

"You all right?"

"Fine," said Bergur.

Two knucklings trundled a salt barrel past them.

"I am enjoying the freedom," Bergur added.

"That sounded ominous."

"It is not ominous. It is restful."

"Those are different voices."

Mosi, watching from a low wall, saw three things happening at once.

First: the most tired trolls were beginning to look younger. Their shoulders were lower. Their steps were easier. That mattered.

Second: the trolls who liked being useful were starting to drift about with nowhere to put their hands. That mattered too.

Third: the Great Cavern was becoming cleaner, smoother, quicker, and somehow slightly less itself.

That last part was hard to explain, even to himself.

No single thing was wrong. There was still chatter. There was still soup. There was still someone accusing someone else's goat of moral weakness. But little pauses were disappearing. Tasks that used to bring trolls together now finished before togetherness could arrive.

A pot no longer needed two hands.

A shelf no longer needed someone to call, "Can you hold this?"

A wobbling bench no longer caused three trolls to kneel, argue, laugh, and fix the wrong leg first.

The work had been annoying. But it had also been a way of noticing each other.

At supper, everything ran perfectly.

The bowls were straight. The pots were ready. The bread arrived unburnt except where burning was traditional. No one shouted, "Mind your elbow!" No one had to call for Bergur. No one bumped into anyone else while apologising and secretly enjoying the excuse.

For three heartbeats, the Great Cavern was so quiet that everyone could hear broth being poured.

Not peaceful quiet.

Not holy quiet.

Empty quiet.

Then someone coughed. Someone laughed too loudly. A spoon fell, and three knucklings moved at once to retrieve it.

The room resumed itself, but not fully.

Near the soup ledge, Auntie Svara stood up. She walked to a small shelf in the wall where mugs were kept for anyone taking a late drink. There, she took a chipped mug from its neat line and placed it crooked.

Then she sprinkled a pinch of grey herb ash beside it.

A passing knuckling paused.

Measured.

Straightened the mug.

Auntie Svara straightened her spine.

She put it crooked again.

The knuckling corrected it.

Auntie Svara stared down at it with the full authority of a woman who had survived four bad ladles, one minor eruption, and the Year of Unfortunate Pickles.

"Young pebble," she said, "that mug has leaned left since before your maker knew which end of a spoon was soup. Leave it."

The knuckling clicked.

It sounded, somehow, like paperwork.

Mosi watched.

Logi listened.

And at the far side of the hall, Bergur reached for a stack of empty bowls just as a knuckling lifted them away.

His fingers closed gently on nothing.

Chapter 4:

How to Ask a Stone Helper

The next morning, Nara became a teacher.

This happened because everyone wanted to tell the knucklings what to do, and most of them were terrible at it.

Lava Trolls are excellent at many things: singing too loudly, cooking enough broth for a weather event, surviving heat that would make a human kettle reconsider its career. They are less excellent at precise instructions.

Nara set up a small table near the wall and placed a knuckling on either side of it. The hall gathered around with the eager anxiety of people about to learn something useful and possibly embarrassing.

"The first rule," Nara said, "is that a knuckling does not know what you mean. It knows what you say."

"That seems unfair," said Sparky.

"It is fairer than guessing."

"Depends on the guess," said Smudge.

Nara picked up a stone tag. "When you ask a knuckling to help, you must give it five things."

She held up one finger.

"What to do."

Another finger.

"What not to touch."

A third.

"What matters most."

A fourth.

"When to stop."

A fifth.

"And who to ask if the job becomes strange."

The hall considered this.

Mosi raised a hand.

"What if the person asking is already strange?"

"Then choose a second person."

"Wise."

Sparky bounced on his toes. "Can I try?"

"No," said Logi, Nara, Smudge, Mosi, and Auntie Svara at once.

"That was hurtful in several directions."

"Good," said Smudge. "Learning has begun."

Nara sighed. "You may try. On something harmless."

Sparky looked around and pointed at a shelf piled with folded cloths, cups, and a sad little plant that had no business living underground but was trying anyway.

"Knucklings," he said grandly, "make that shelf more welcoming."

Nara's eyes widened.

"Wait—"

The knucklings moved.

One fetched cushions from three benches. Another gathered cups and arranged them in a warm circle. A third stole six lava buns because food, apparently, was welcoming. A fourth placed the sad plant in the middle and bowed to it. The smallest knuckling dragged over a blanket, tucked it round a startled goat, and clicked with satisfaction.

The goat looked more welcomed than it had ever intended to be.

Auntie Svara inspected the missing buns.

"I feel welcomed," she said, and took one.

Nara put both hands over her face.

Sparky beamed. "It worked!"

"It worked terribly," said Nara. "You asked for a feeling, but gave no borders. The knucklings chose objects that looked like the feeling."

Smudge picked up a cup. "So if I say, 'Make Sparky safer'?"

"Absolutely not," said Sparky.

"A helmet, a leash, and perhaps a small warning bell," said Mosi. "The knucklings would not be wrong."

Nara lowered her hands.

"This is why words matter. A poor instruction can still produce a neat result. Neat does not mean wise."

Karn, who had been standing silently at the back, spoke then.

"My people learned that slowly," he said. "Too slowly."

The room quieted.

"Long ago, in the Deep Below, we built tools that could move stone better than we could. We told them, 'Make the tunnels stronger.' So they made the tunnels hard. We told them, 'Make the fires last.' So they held heat in places where heat needed to move. We told them, 'Save labour.' So they removed hands from work that hands had once understood."

Nara looked down.

This was not the speech she had wanted him to give in front of everyone.

Karn's voice softened.

"The tools did not betray us. They obeyed us. Our asking was too small."

Mosi nodded slightly.

There it was.

Nara drew herself upright again. "That is why we teach the asking."

She turned to the knuckling nearest the shelf.

"Knucklings. Return the cushions to the benches they came from. Leave the buns unless Auntie Svara has already claimed them. Do not wrap the goat. Ask Smudge where the cups belong. Stop when the shelf is tidy but not lonely."

The knucklings paused.

Then, one by one, they began to fix the problem they had made.

The goat was unwrapped. It looked disappointed, which no one found comforting.

Sparky watched closely.

"So a good asking is not just an order," he said. "It's more like... telling them the job and the shape of the job and the edge of the job and when to come back if the job becomes a different job."

Nara stared at him.

"Yes," she said. "Exactly."

Sparky's glow brightened.

Mosi leaned toward Smudge. "Mark the day. The boy has frightened us by understanding something."

Smudge pretended to write it down.

From the wall shelf, Auntie Svara watched a knuckling approach her crooked mug.

"Don't you even think neatly at it," she warned.

The knuckling clicked and moved on.

Auntie Svara sniffed.

"Learning pebble."

Chapter 5:

Bergur's Toe and the Dignity of Mountains

By the fourth day, Bergur had entered a difficult period.

He called it "personal broadening".

Mosi called it "sulking with errands".

Smudge called it "large weather".

Sparky called it "probably fine," which made everyone nervous.

The trouble was that Bergur did not want the knucklings gone. Not really. He had seen old trolls walking easier. He had seen stewards laugh during breakfast instead of limping through it. He had watched one little stone helper carry a hot kettle away from Auntie Svara before she could burn her fingers, and even Bergur was not proud enough to argue with that.

But there is a special loneliness in being helped out of the thing that made you feel needed.

So Bergur began helping harder.

He carried two baskets when one was enough. Then three. Then three baskets, a stool, a kettle, and a tray of spoons balanced on his head because "there was room up there and it seemed wasteful not to use it."

"Bergur," said Logi, "put half of that down."

"I am simply demonstrating that I remain available."

"You are demonstrating that gravity is patient but not endlessly forgiving."

"I have an excellent relationship with gravity."

"You broke a chair by sitting near it yesterday."

"That was a misunderstanding."

The knucklings followed him everywhere, clearly ready to assist.

Bergur ignored them with great politeness.

"No, thank you, little pebbles," he said, lifting a sack under each arm. "This is a Bergur-sized matter."

Click-click.

"I appreciate the offer."

Click.

"I do."

Click-click-click.

"Stop sounding reasonable."

That afternoon, the Great Cavern was preparing for supper. A long low table had to be moved closer to the soup pots. Normally this took four trolls and one argument. The knucklings rolled into position.

Bergur saw them.

Bergur saw the table.

Bergur saw several trolls watching.

Bergur made a decision that would later be described, kindly, as "emotionally ambitious."

"I'll take it," he boomed.

"Bergur—" said Mosi.
"Just shifting it a little."
"Bergur—" said Smudge.
"Good for the back."
"Whose back?" asked Sparky.
Bergur lifted the table.
To be fair, he did lift it.
The Great Cavern gave an impressed murmur. The knucklings froze, little glowing eyes tracking the table, Bergur's feet, the nearest benches, and possibly the poor life choices of large people.
"See?" said Bergur.
Then he stepped backward.
His enormous toe met a small stone step that a knuckling had placed earlier to make the path safer for shorter trolls.
The step was exactly where it was supposed to be.
Bergur's toe was not.
There was a sound like a drum being insulted.
Bergur's eyes widened.
The table tilted.
The hall gasped.
Four knucklings shot beneath the table and locked their little stone backs under it. Two more caught the sliding cups. Sparky grabbed a bread basket. Smudge grabbed Sparky, because history had taught him to secure the more dangerous object.

Bergur set the table down very gently.
Then he sat on the floor.
No one moved.
His toe had become the centre of the room.
It was not a toe so much as a local landmark. It glowed purple-red at the tip, throbbed with quiet volcanic dignity, and looked large enough to require its own weather report.
Mosi crouched beside it.
"Well," he said. "The future has met your foot."
Bergur inhaled through his nose.
"I am fine."
The toe gave a visible throb.
"Your toe disagrees," said Smudge.
"It is expressing itself."
"Very loudly."
A knuckling clicked and scuttled forward with a folded cloth.
Another arrived with a little bowl of cool mineral water.
A third placed a stool under Bergur's heel so his foot was raised.
A fourth climbed onto the stool, inspected the toe, and clicked twice in the direction of Nara.
Nara knelt beside them, all business and worry.
"They have a first-aid pattern," she said. "For crushed fingers, burns, pinches, small collapses—"
"Does that include toes the size of ceremonial bread?" asked Mosi.

"It can adapt."

The smallest knuckling ran to Mosi and tugged gently at a bit of damp moss growing near his wrist.

Mosi blinked.

"Excuse you."

The knuckling clicked, pointed at the toe, then at the moss.

"Oh," said Mosi. "You need cooling moss."

Click.

"Ask next time before harvesting me."

Click-click.

"That was not an apology. That was punctuation."

Still, Mosi peeled off a cool strip of moss. The knuckling carried it back with great ceremony and laid it across Bergur's toe. Steam rose softly.

Bergur groaned.

"That is... better."

Another knuckling began wrapping the toe with a cloth.

It wrapped once.

Twice.

Then stopped, considered the size of the toe, and fetched more cloth.

And more.

And one additional strip that had previously been a napkin.

Auntie Svava leaned over.

"That bandage has used less fabric than some festival tents, but not by much."

Bergur looked down at the knucklings fussing over him. One adjusted the stool. One fanned the toe with a flat leaf. One tried to place a tiny warning cone beside it.

He frowned.

Then, despite himself, he laughed.

The laugh started small, bumped into his pride, knocked it over, and came out properly.

The whole hall relaxed.

"All right," Bergur said to the knucklings. "You may help with the toe."

Click.

"Temporarily."

Click-click.

"And not smugly."

The smallest knuckling patted his ankle.

It was impossible to prove smugness, but the room had suspicions.

Logi came to stand beside him.

"You tried too much," he said.

Bergur looked embarrassed.

"I wanted to show I still could."

"I know."

"The table was not too heavy."

"No," said Logi. "But your need to lift it was."

That was the sort of sentence elders say when they want to be helpful and annoying at the same time.

Bergur stared at his bandaged toe.

"It feels silly," he said.

"Good," said Mosi. "Silly heals faster than tragic."

Sparky crouched nearby.

"Maybe the knucklings don't replace helping," he said slowly.

"Maybe they make it harder to pretend we don't also need help."

Bergur looked at him.

"That was almost wise."

"I know. I'm uncomfortable too."

The knucklings finished the bandage. One had tied a neat little knot at the top. Another had placed Bergur's foot on the stool with such tenderness that no one quite knew where to put their faces.

Auntie Svara inspected the work.

"Hmph. Acceptable."

From Auntie Svara, this was almost applause.

Bergur pointed a finger at the knucklings.

"Very well. You help me stand. But slowly. I am still the mountain in this arrangement."

Six little stone helpers took their places.

Bergur rose carefully.

The hall cheered.

His toe, now wrapped like a sleeping boulder, rested on the ground with wounded majesty.

Smudge looked at the warning cone.

"Should we name it?"

"No," said Bergur.

"Too late," said Sparky. "Toe-gur."

"No."

"Berg-toe."

"No."

"Sir Stubs-a-Lot."

Bergur considered. "That one has dignity."

"It absolutely does not," said Mosi.

The knucklings clicked.

And for the first time since they arrived, Bergur clicked back.

Badly.

But with feeling.

Chapter 6:

When Home Gets Too Easy

The Great Cavern was not just a room.

This mattered more than anyone had expected.

It was the place where Lava Trolls checked on one another without making a fuss about it. If Auntie Svara walked more slowly, someone noticed because they were carrying broth beside her. If a young troll looked sad, someone noticed while folding cloths nearby. If a wall felt too warm, someone noticed because they leaned against it to complain about work.

The chores were never only chores.

They were also greetings.

Excuses.

Songs.

Tiny inspections.

A way of saying, "I see you," without having to be embarrassing about it.

The knucklings did not know that.

They knew tasks.

They knew bowls, pots, shelves, ash, crumbs, heat, weight, and path. They knew straight, full, empty, tidy, carried, cleaned, finished.

They did not know when a troll's joke was hiding a sore heart.

They did not know that Auntie Svara's crooked mug was not mess but memory.

They did not know that a little grey ash left beside the mug was not dirt. It was something Auntie Svara had done for years. She claimed it honoured an old cousin. Others suspected it was partly to annoy clean-minded people. Both could be true.

They did not know that the old stacking song was not about stacking.

It was about three tired stewards getting through the last work of the day together.

On the sixth morning, the Great Cavern ran so smoothly that several trolls became suspicious on principle.

This was wise of them.

Breakfast arrived without anyone shouting.

The pots were full.

The bread was ready.

The benches were straight.

The cups did not wobble.

The paths were clear.

No one had to ask where anything was, which seemed convenient until everyone realised that asking where things were had been a major part of several friendships.

Sparky stood in the centre of the hall with a full bowl in his hands.

"I should love this," he said.

"Do you?" asked Smudge.

"I love parts of it."

"Which parts?"

"The part where no one drops soup on my foot."

"Understandable."

"The part where Auntie Svara's ladle no longer threatens innocent passers-by."

"It did have a wide swing."

"The part where Bergur's toe gets escorted like visiting royalty."

Across the hall, Bergur was sitting with his bandaged foot on a stool while a knuckling stood guard beside it. The warning cone remained in place. Someone had given the cone a small painted face.

Bergur pretended not to like this.

Sparky lowered his voice.

"But the room feels like someone has polished off the fingerprints."

Smudge looked around.

"That's unsettlingly accurate."

Mosi was already moving.

He walked slowly along the wall, letting his moss brush the stone. Logi joined him by a quiet corner near the soup pots.

"There," said Mosi.

Logi placed his hand on the wall.

At first, nothing seemed wrong. The stone was warm. The floor was clean. A little shelf held cups in a perfect row. No ash. No scuffs. No stains. No old damp cloth tucked in the corner by someone on late watch.

Everything looked looked-after.

That was the problem.

"No one lingers here anymore," said Mosi.

"No," said Logi.

"The knucklings come, clean, leave."

"Yes."

"And because they do it well, no one else comes unless they need something."

Logi nodded.

The stone gave a tiny dry tick beneath his fingers.

Not a crack. Not danger. A small complaint.

Mosi frowned.

"The hall has lost its ears in this corner."

Nara, who had followed them, folded her arms.

"Knucklings can be told to check corners."

"They check what they are told to check," said Mosi. "A living person checks one thing and accidentally notices five others."

Nara's mouth tightened.

"Then I can add more checks."

"You can add named checks," said Logi gently. "But some things are unnamed until someone feels them."

Nara looked at the clean shelf.
She did not like this answer.
It did not fit in a case.
Karn stood behind her, heavy and quiet.
"Our asking was too small," he said.
Nara exhaled.
"I am beginning to dislike that sentence."
"It is an old one," said Karn.
"That doesn't improve it."
"No."
From the main hall came the start of the old stacking song.
For one line, two stewards sang together.
Then three knucklings finished the stacking before the
second line began.
The song stumbled.
One steward laughed awkwardly.
The other did not.
Nara watched.

No one had been harmed.
Nothing had broken.
The work was done better and faster.
And yet something had gone missing so quietly that it felt
rude to name it.
Sparky came up beside her.
"They're not bad," he said.
"No."
"They're really helping."
"Yes."
"But they don't know what home is."
Nara looked at him.
Sparky shrugged, embarrassed by his own seriousness.
"They know the jobs. But home is all the stuff between the
jobs."
For once, Nara had no immediate answer.
That worried her more than the crack.

Chapter 7:

The Perfect Mistake

The first real trouble came from Auntie Svara's mug.

This was not surprising to anyone who knew Auntie Svara.

The mug lived on a little shelf beside the soup pots. It was chipped, smoke-stained, and leaned left. Auntie Svara said it leaned left because it had character. Smudge said it leaned left because it was damaged. Auntie Svara said Smudge also leaned toward damage and no one moved him to a cupboard.

Beside the mug, she always left a pinch of grey herb ash.

"Tradition," she said, whenever anyone asked.

"What tradition?" Sparky once asked.

"The traditional tradition of minding your own breakfast."

The truth, as Logi knew and Auntie Svara did not always admit, was practical. Years ago, one of the old soup corners had breathed hot air through a hidden crack. Auntie Svara had learned that the loose ash beside her mug curled when the air changed. If the ash twitched, she called someone. If it sat still, she drank her broth and judged the world.

It was not an official system.

It was a mug, a pinch of ash, and a stubborn old lady with excellent instincts.

The knucklings did not know that.

They saw ash.

They cleaned it.

They saw a crooked mug.

They straightened it.

They saw Auntie Svara crooked it again.

They corrected it again.

By the seventh morning, this had become less a chore and more a duel.

Auntie Svara placed the mug left.

Click.

The knuckling placed it straight.

Auntie Svara placed it left.

Click-click.

Straight.

Left.

Straight.

Left.

Straight.

A small crowd gathered, because Lava Trolls are deeply supportive of public stubbornness.

"Should we stop them?" asked Sparky.

"Absolutely not," said Smudge. "This is theatre."

Auntie Svara leaned close to the knuckling.

"Listen here, gravel knees. That mug leans for a reason."

The knuckling clicked.

"It does not make soup taste better when straight."

Click.

"It does not improve society."

Click-click.

"It does not need to meet your standards, which are young and frankly shiny."

The knuckling considered the mug.

Then it straightened it.

Auntie Svara inhaled.

Mosi, from across the hall, looked up sharply.

Not because of the argument.

Because the ash should have moved.

There was no ash.

Only a clean shelf.

And beneath that shelf, deep under the floor, something gave a small dry ting.

Logi heard it too.

His head turned.

"Everyone step back from the soup corner," he said.

Because he said it quietly, only half the room listened.

"Everyone step back from the soup corner," he repeated.

Because he said it with the elder voice, everyone listened at once.

A bowl near Auntie Svara's elbow trembled.

Then another.

The soup pot gave a soft burp.

Not the normal kind. Lava Troll soup burps often. This was different. Tighter. Hotter. The burp of something trapped below that had found the idea of patience overrated.

The floor under the soup pots glowed faintly red along one hair-thin line.

Sparky swallowed.

"That seems bad."

"It is not yet bad," said Logi. "Which is when we prefer to act."

Nara snapped her attention to the knucklings.

"Make the area safe."

The knucklings moved at once.

Too fast.

One began dragging benches into perfect evacuation rows. Another tried to push Auntie Svara away from her own mug and nearly lost a finger to reputation. Two more rushed toward the soup pots to hold them steady. Another began sealing the little red line with a flat stone patch from the repair basket.

Logi's staff cracked against the floor.

"Stop."

Every knuckling froze.

The Great Cavern froze with them.

Nara stared. "They were helping."

"Yes," said Logi. "And that is why this is dangerous."

The red line pulsed.

The stone patch over it rattled.

Mosi dropped to his knees and pressed one palm near the heat. His moss bristled.

"Do not seal it," he said. "It is trying to breathe."

Nara went pale.

The knucklings had been told to make the area safe. To them, a glowing line in the floor was a problem to cover. A wobbling pot was a problem to hold still. Moving trolls was safety. Straight paths were safety. Fast action was safety.

They had not been told that sometimes a hot crack is like an angry nose: plug it and the whole face becomes worse.

Karn stepped beside Nara.

"Our asking was too small," he said again.

"This is an extremely irritating time to be correct," she snapped.

"Yes."

Auntie Svava pointed at the clean shelf.

"My ash would have warned us before breakfast."

The hall turned toward her.

She lifted her chin.

"What? You think I keep ceremonial dirt for decoration?"

Sparky blinked. "A little."

"So did I," said Smudge.

"Mostly," said Mosi.

"Rude," said Auntie Svava. "Accurate, but rude."

The red line widened by the width of a hair. The soup pot shivered. A spoon leapt off the table and clattered to the floor.

No knuckling moved.

They were waiting now.

That, Nara realised, was the difference.

Waiting was not the same as failing.

Waiting could be wisdom if the right living person was looking.

She took one breath.

Then another.

"New asking," she said.

Her voice shook once, then steadied.

"Knucklings. Do not fix the floor. Do not cover the red line. Do not move living people unless they are falling or on fire. Help the living helpers. Bring cool cloth to Mosi. Bring empty bowls away from the soup pots. Hold only what Bergur points to. Ask before changing anything that belongs to Auntie Svava."

Auntie Svava nodded. "At last, civilisation."

The knucklings clicked and moved differently.

Not like bosses.

Like hands.

One brought Mosi a cool cloth. Another cleared bowls away, one at a time, without rearranging the whole hall. Two stood beside Bergur, waiting for him to point.

Bergur looked at them.

His bandaged toe throbbed inside its mountain of cloth.

For one awful breath, everyone thought he would try to lift the soup pot.

Instead, he sat heavily on the nearest bench, planted his good foot, and spread his arms wide like a living gate.

"Nobody rushes the corner," he boomed. "Nobody becomes heroic without checking with an elder. Nobody trips over my toe, because it has suffered enough for one week."

The crowd obeyed.

Because it was Bergur.

And because the toe did look like it had earned a quiet life.

"Knucklings," Bergur said, pointing, "take those bowls. Slowly. You, hold that kettle handle so it doesn't swing. You, stand by Auntie Svara's mug and do not touch it unless she says so."

The assigned knuckling clicked and stood guard beside the crooked mug.

Auntie Svara softened by half a wrinkle.

"Good pebble."

Mosi pressed both hands near the hot line. Moss flowed from his wrists into the tiny gap, not to block it, but to cool the stone around it.

Steam hissed.

His glow dimmed.

Sparky knelt beside him, hands lifted.

"Tell me what to heat," said Sparky.

"Nothing near the crack," said Mosi through clenched teeth.

"That narrows it."

"Me, you flaming turnip. Keep my fingers warm."

"Oh! Right."

Sparky sent a small, careful warmth around Mosi's hands. Not fire. Not sparks. Just enough heat to keep the moss from stealing too much warmth from Mosi's body.

Mosi exhaled.

"Good."

Sparky looked pleased.

"Do not become proud," said Mosi. "I am still calling you a turnip."

"Fair."

Logi tapped his staff three times on the stone.

"Listen," he said.

The hall quieted.

Beneath the soup corner, the trapped heat knocked again.

Ting.

Ting.

Ting.

Not random. A little rhythm.

Logi pointed to a round floor stone near the wall. It was a flat slab used as a lid over a shallow steam hollow: not a secret, just one of the ordinary old features of a cave where heat liked to go places. Most trolls forgot it was there because forgetting safe things is one of civilisation's favourite hobbies.

"There," said Logi. "That lid must open a finger-width. No more. It will let the trapped heat breathe."

Nara turned to the knucklings.

"Can they do that?" asked Sparky.

"They can," said Nara.

"Should they?"

Nara looked at Logi. At Mosi. At Auntie Svara. At Bergur, sitting wide and wounded and useful. At the knucklings waiting.

Then she said, "Not alone."

That was the first wise thing she had said all morning.

"Karn," said Logi.

Karn stepped forward and placed one great hand on the wall near the round floor stone.

"Nara," said Logi.

Nara knelt with two knucklings at the edge of the slab.

"Sparky."

"Still warming the turnip moss."

"Mosi."

"Still annoyed."

"Good," said Logi. "Bergur."

"Still enormous."

"Excellent. Keep everyone calm."

Bergur nodded gravely.

"Friends!" he boomed to the hall. "We are going to let the floor breathe. This is a normal sentence in our lives and we will all pretend to be comfortable with it."

A few trolls laughed. The sound helped.

Nara gave the knucklings their words slowly.

"Knucklings. Lift the round stone only as far as Logi's staff shows. Stop if Auntie Svara says 'too much,' if Karn says 'hold,' if Mosi says any word not appropriate for children, or if Sparky's hair catches fire."

Sparky touched his hair.

"Why am I always a measurement?"

"Experience," said Smudge.

Logi lowered his staff until the tip hovered a finger-width above the floor.

The knucklings gripped the edge of the stone.

They lifted.

Only a little.

A breath of trapped hot air sighed out from beneath the floor.

Not an explosion.

Not a disaster.

A sigh.

The soup corner stopped glowing.
Mosi's moss steamed, then settled.
Sparky kept his warmth steady.
Karn held the wall.
Bergur kept the room back with his arms, his voice, and one very educational toe.
Auntie Svava crouched beside the mug shelf and sprinkled a fresh pinch of herb ash.
The ash curled once.
Then stilled.
"Enough," she said.
Nara repeated at once, "Enough."
The knucklings lowered the round stone gently back into place.
For three heartbeats, nobody spoke.
Then Old Toka, from the safe bench, announced, "Well. That was badly scheduled."
The room erupted.

Laughter came first, sharp and shaky. Then a few tears, because relief often waits until the danger passes before leaking out. Someone applauded. Someone sat down on the floor. Someone hugged Auntie Svava and was immediately told not to make a habit of it.
The knucklings stood among them, glowing softly.
They had helped.
They had also almost made things worse.
Both truths stood in the room at the same time, neither cancelling the other.
Nara crouched beside the smallest knuckling.
It looked up at her.
Awaiting.
She touched its stone head.
"Good helper," she said. "Bad asking."
Click.
"Yes," said Nara. "Mine."

Chapter 8:

The Crooked Mug Rule

The next morning, the Great Cavern looked as if a celebration had argued with a small earthquake and neither side had cleaned up properly.

Bowls sat in odd places. Three benches had moved and refused to explain themselves. The round floor stone near the soup corner had a chalk mark around it. Mosi was wrapped in two blankets, drinking broth like someone who had paid for wisdom in body heat and wanted change. Bergur sat with his bandaged toe on a stool while a knuckling stood beside it holding a fan.

The fan was unnecessary.

Bergur had become attached to it.

Nara stood near the mug shelf with Logi, Karn, Mosi, Sparky, Bergur, Smudge, and Auntie Svara. The knucklings lined up in front of them, tiny and serious.

Auntie Svara's mug leaned left.

The ash sat beside it.

The nearest knuckling stared at the mug.

The whole hall stared at the knuckling.

The knuckling clicked once.

Then did nothing.

Auntie Svara folded her arms.

"Hmph," she said. "There may be hope for civilisation."

Nara had stayed up most of the night rewriting the rules. She did not call them "system instructions", because no Lava Troll wanted breakfast with a phrase like that sitting on it. She called them the Crooked Mug Rules.

This pleased Auntie Svara more than she admitted.

Nara read them aloud.

"Rule one. Knucklings may take away dull, heavy, hot, or harmful work."

Several older trolls cheered.

"Rule two. Knucklings must not remove all living hands from places where people gather, eat, sing, watch, or remember."

The hall murmured at that.

"Rule three. Every big task needs a living keeper. Not to do all the work, but to know what the work is for."

Logi nodded.

"Rule four. Every asking must include four things: what to do, what not to change, who to ask, and when to stop."

Sparky raised a hand.

"What about 'why'?"

Nara looked at him, then smiled.

"Yes. Rule five. If the job touches home, include why."

Mosi lifted his bowl. "The boy remains alarming."

Sparky glowed.

Karn stepped forward. His voice carried the weight of deep stone and old regret.

"No tool shall call itself helpful while treating living people as obstacles."

That landed hard.

Good hard.

The kind of hard that stays.

Auntie Svava clapped her hands. "Excellent. Now that everyone has become wise and therefore unbearable, someone fetch breakfast."

The room approved loudly.

Bergur began to stand.

Six knucklings moved toward him.

He paused.

His old self would have waved them away.

His newer self, which still had a throbbing toe and slightly less stupidity, considered.

"You take the big pot," he told two knucklings. "I'll carry the bowls."

Click.

"Slowly."

Click-click.

"And one of you stays with the toe."

The smallest knuckling stood proudly beside the bandaged landmark.

Smudge looked down at it. Someone had written, in careful chalk on the wrapping:

TOE - DO NOT IMPROVE WITHOUT ASKING

"That may be the best rule in the cave," said Smudge.

Bergur looked pleased. "It has applications."

Over the next days, the Great Cavern found a new rhythm.

Not the old one.

Not the knuckling one.

Something wiser and messier.

Knucklings carried the loads that hurt backs and burned fingers. They cleaned ash from tight places where no one enjoyed coughing for tradition. They fetched heavy pots, caught rolling buns, steadied kettles, and lifted things that did not need Bergur's entire personality attached to them.

But living trolls stayed in the loop.

Some shelves were arranged by hand because shelves in a communal hall are never just shelves. They are where someone leaves a note, a spare cup, a half-eaten bun they claim to be saving, and occasionally a frog that no one invited.

Festival trays stayed communal because festival trays are too social to automate.

The old songs returned where hands still genuinely needed one another.

Not as background.

As chosen work of the heart.

Sparky still loved the knucklings. Of course he did. He loved clever new things the way dry moss loves a spark, which is to say dangerously. But he learned to pause before asking.

Mostly.

"Knucklings," he said one afternoon, "clean my worktable."

Nara cleared her throat.

Sparky sighed.

"Do not throw away anything that looks like a disaster unless I identify it as finished. Ask Smudge before moving the sketches. Ask Mosi before touching the moss samples. Do not stack anything that is currently smoking. Stop if the table begins making decisions on its own."

Nara nodded. "Better."

The knucklings began.

Three minutes later, one held up a small lump of cooled lava that looked like a potato with ambition.

"That is art," said Sparky.

Click.

"Yes, I am sure."

Click-click.

"Mostly sure."

Smudge leaned in. "The knuckling has doubts."

"The knuckling lacks vision."

"The knuckling has eyes."

"They are narrow."

Mosi watched all this with the deep private satisfaction of a person who would rather eat lichen than admit, in public, to being moved.

Logi listened to the Great Cavern and heard not perfection, but people.

That was better.

Nara wrote back to the Deep Below. Her report was shorter than the one she had planned before arriving.

THE GIFT IS ACCEPTED.

THE HELPERS HELP.

THE ASKING WAS TOO SMALL.

WE MUST TEACH THEM WHERE THE WORK ENDS AND THE HOME BEGINS.

ALSO: DO NOT STRAIGHTEN ELDERLY MUGS WITHOUT PERMISSION.

Karn read it over her shoulder.

"Good," he said.

"It is not elegant."

"No honest repair is."

That evening, supper crossed the hall in song again.

Some pots were carried by knucklings.

Some bowls by Bergur.

Some bread by stewards who could have let a knuckling do it, but chose to walk together because the song needed two voices and a complaint about the second verse.

Near the soup ledge, Auntie Svava left her crooked mug and a pinch of herb ash in the corner of the shelf.

A passing knuckling paused.

Measured.

Considered.

Then moved on.

The little imperfection stayed.

Auntie Svara smiled into her broth.

And because the Great Cavern was the Great Cavern, and because wisdom in a Lava Troll hall must never be allowed to become too solemn to eat beside, Loftur chose that exact moment to steal a dumpling, choke on his own success, and sneeze it directly into Smudge's sketchbook.

Smudge stared at the page.

Sparky leaned over his shoulder.

"Well," he said, "that's certainly more alive."

The knuckling beside the table inspected the splatter, clicked twice, and waited.

Smudge looked at it.

"Don't you dare."

The knuckling did not clean the page.

It did, however, bring him a napkin.

Smudge took it.

"Good pebble."

And the Great Cavern, which had kept its tools, its songs, its people, one crooked mug, and a very famous toe, roared with laughter all the way to the ceiling.