

# CHAPTER 47

A young dwarf, barely more than a scrub of fiery red hair on his bulging cheeks, stood firm against a group of five or six heavily armored dwarves. There were human men with them.

That was something Hal didn't expect.

"That's me," Durvin said, stepping up and, to Hal's surprise, *into* the memory of his younger self.

The older Durvin disappeared into the younger. He looked over his shoulder at Hal. "I been thinkin' about this day for a long time, lad. Oh, but it hurts like the devil to see meself so weak and small again, but I reckon I need to face this alone."

Hal nodded and stood back, but readied himself just in case.

"Durvin Steelheart!" one of the men barked. "You will kneel before the true King of the Anvil. Pledge your allegiance to him and the Iron Throne, and we will allow you and what retainers remain to live."

"Just kill him and be done with it," said a snobbish dwarf behind the legs of the taller humans. "The Steelhearts are done for, the Anvil is safe, and it gives its thanks to the new Founder for his service. The Anvil will not forget."

Durvin, still looking at Hal, said, "Ye aren't the first that benighted fool Rinbast has hurt, lad. And ye won't be the last. He wanted the dwarves behind him, but when the old king got sick—me da'—things got hairy, ye could say."

"I heard about this," Mira muttered as Durvin turned back to say something to the assembled men and dwarves. "It was a big thing a few decades or so ago, well before my time. The old king was falling ill and the houses of the Anvil, where most of the dwarves claim as birthright on Aldim, were all jockeying for position."

Hal's brow crumpled in confusion. "That was Durvin's dad though," he said, motioning. Now the young Durvin was gesturing wildly. "He should have been next in line, right?"

“Aye!” the young Durvin said. “It’s me da’s throne so it’s mine by right!”

“You are young, dwarf, and that alone is the only reason you are allowed to live,” one of the humans said.

The regal-looking dwarf with more gold than hair in his beard stepped forward. He looked like the pompous sort that, when pulled over by the cops, would scream, “DON’T YOU KNOW WHO I AM!?” and honestly expect that to save him any sort of inconvenience.

Granted, visioning a dwarf driving a car was both a terrifying and hilarious mental image. Hal struggled not to laugh.

“Yerself is lucky yer head ain’t on a spike!” the dwarf said. He shook his beard. It rattled like a maniac’s wind chime. “The law says ye can’t ascend to the throne till ye’re properly bearded! Well, lad, I can see plain on yer face that all ye got is scruff. But even still, ye fought for it, ye dunderhead! Ye should get yer neck replaced by a spike, but I’m being *magnanimous*, see?”

Durvin tilted his chin up.

*Uh-oh*, Hal thought. He’d only seen Durvin do that once or twice, but it always ended up with the other person out flat on their back.

But then Hal remembered, with all his Warrior Levels locked, he might actually be just as weak as he was back in this memory.

Even still, as the older dwarf berated and belittled him, he grew large and stronger and Durvin seemed to shrink before this behemoth of a dwarf.

Mira stepped forward, brandishing her spear, but Hal threw out a hand to stop her. “This is for him to deal with. We are merely here to lend our support.”

“Yeah?” She jerked her chin toward the now menacingly armored human guards. “And them?”

Hal grinned and dropped his hand. “They are for us to play with.”

Mira matched his smile and *Jumped*. She was the only person he had ever seen that could do so *horizontally*. She rocketed down the wide hall and into one of the heavily armored guards.

Now with full control of Gold Kol’thil again, Hal used *Dominare* on one of the guards, turning him into an ally and forcing him to attack the others.

A blur of steel and the sound of screams echoed around the hall as Hal's *Dominated* man fell, only to be replaced by another. The [Magicite] in his hand dimmed as golden lightning streaked out and assumed control of his latest victim.

Now that he was stronger and his Gold Kol'thil had ranked up considerably, this felt like child's play. And it was a joy not to see his Experience being eaten up for his efforts.

Hal dismissed the Experience notifications with a mental swipe as the men fell. In a short span the hall was quiet again with only the young Durvin and the menacing dwarf left, now bereft of allies.

"Ye killed me da'!" Durvin was screaming at him, and as he did, his body grew and his beard lengthened. With every word of rage he had once left unsaid, Durvin changed from the young, scrawny baby-cheeked lad to the full-grown dwarf Hal knew and loved.

"He was sick!" the regal dwarf said, stumbling backwards over the body of a dead guard.

Mira aimed a spear at his back, but Hal shook his head and she stepped away with a shrug.

*The only way out is through*, Hal thought as Durvin advanced, picked up a proper dwarven axe from one of the guards, and lashed out at the other dwarf.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Durvin put his demon to rest. This was clearly something he had thought *a lot* about, and he had turned the Dungeon's trap on its head by being prepared to meet it.

Gasping from a large gash to his chest that stained his gold and jewels tangled in his beard a bright crimson, the dwarf reached out a pleading hand to Durvin. He gurgled out a faint, "I am... yer king, ye must—"

Whatever Durvin must or must not was never known as the axe came down and silenced him for good. Durvin, breathing heavily as if he had just sprinted up a mountain in full armor, was staring at his blood-slicked hands.

The erstwhile king had turned into a floating orb of swirling mist with the axe lodged firmly in its glassy surface. It shivered once, wisps of light leaking out like mist, and then shattered into a gloriously blinding explosion.

Hal shut his eyes and reached out with his senses, then remembered himself and reached out *through Vorax*, who had much better senses than any human could ever dream of.

*There*, he thought, seeing Durvin and Mira, but also the [Memory Receptacle] that had just died.

In that flash of white light, the hall ahead vanished, replaced by a large wall and an age-darkened wooden door. The sort that would take a battering ram and twelve men to even make a dent in.

Hal watched it all through Vorax's senses, amazed at what the mimic could see with all that blinding light. Brick by brick, the Dungeon reconfigured itself to deal with the latest threat, likely bringing a different [Memory Receptacle] into the fray.

Dropping a hand onto Durvin's shoulder, Hal blinked watery eyes and said, "If it's anything like Elora's, the deeper we go, the older the memories will get."

"Aye," Durvin said distantly. "This 'uns almost a happy one."

"Well, it sure as *shirt* is now!" Mira said happily. "You really walloped that guy. What was his deal anyway?"

"He killed me da', the king, as ye heard."

"That makes ye—I mean, you—a prince, then, doesn't it?" Mira asked.

Durvin looked at his hands, no longer covered in blood. "Aye. By blood and steel, the Anvil is mine, but it were taken."

"Do you—" Hal began to say.

Durvin held up a thick hand to stop him. "I ain't ever asked fer yer help in me troubles, lad. Yer a good sort, but this ain't yer fight. Ye seen yon men?"

Hal leaned against the wall. "I did." He moved to sheathe his sword, but then remembered Vorax and, with a simple mental command, a tendril of shadow from within the folds of the cloak reached out and did it for him.

*I could really get used to this*, he thought.

It was like having essence limbs without using any effort of his own.

"They helped poison me da'," Durvin said, struggling to keep the rage from choking his voice. "When it was clear the Steelhearts wouldn't go down

easy, they enlisted the help of the newfangled Founder. Weird hiddlin' stuff with that man. Even me own memories of him ain't quite right, not sure why. I feel like I remember him multiple times, which don't make any lick o' sense."

"What're you saying?" Hal asked.

"Not much," he admitted, crossing his burly arms. "But I ain't fer wantin' yer help."

Hal looked around at the Dungeon.

Durvin shook his head. "I don't mean here, lad. I mean... out there."

Then it dawned on Hal, but Mira was the first to say something, "You're going to reclaim your throne?" she asked.

"I've been givin' it a mighty thought or two," he admitted. "With yer Mark there, Hal, ye'd be an awesome force o' death and dismay, and no mistake! But yer to keep wide o' this battle. If the time comes, and I'm sayin' it's an '*if*' in the definite sense! If a battle there will be, I want yer word that ye won't be stuffin' yerself into the conflict."

Hal understood. He didn't like it, but he understood. However, he couldn't stop himself from saying, "And if there's interference again? It happened before."

"Aye, ye got the right o' it. I would be honored to have ye there at me back guardin' me and my own. I don't want ye settin' a foot in the Anvil though, and no fighting the dwarves. If yon Founder wants to mingle his little fingers in our home, then ye have my blessin' to cut 'em off like the bleedin' fumehearted man he be."

With a slightly insolent grin, Hal bowed flamboyantly. Vorax picked up on his mood and made the cloak rustle and flap as if in a breeze, despite the still air of the Dungeon. "By your leave, my king."

Durvin snorted loud enough to startle a dragon. "Yer one to talk! But aye, in this I'd have ye doin' as I say and be durned glad o' it! Now, we gonna keep flappin' our gums here all day or we going to get on with it?"

"By all means," Hal said, motioning toward the large door at the far end of the hall. "Just remember, this is going to get a lot worse before it gets any better."

“Aye, I reckon it will, at that.” Durvin squared his squat shoulders, cinched up his belt and stomped toward the door.

While they passed the shattered glass orb that was the [Memory Receptacle], Hal stooped down and picked up a few shards. Mira gave him a look, which he answered with a grin and they all went through the next door as the Quest updated.

### *New Quest: Long Live the King*

*Protect Durvin long enough for him to reclaim the lost portion of his soul and ensure he does not succumb to the memories that haunt him. Like many other Dungeons, there appears to be a Memoria Crystal here. With your familiarity of Dungeons, you can sense its presence alongside the Dungeon Core. What you do to the Dungeon Core is your choice, but you will need to bypass it in order to approach the Memoria Crystal.*

### *Objectives*

- *Keep Durvin alive.*
- *Destroy [Memory Receptacles] 1/4*
- *Decide the fate of the Dungeon Core*
- *Attune to the Memoria Crystal*

### *Rewards*

- *Variable Experience and Sparks.*
- *Dungeon Lore.*

Hal slipped the [Fragment of Memory] into his Inventory as a wave of light washed over all four of them and their ears were assaulted by the sound of shouting and the clanging of metal.