

### The Palm of the Mountain

“I was born in these caves,” Vail said, “and I plan to die as far from the ground as I can get.”

“You can barely walk from the mine to the alchemist for the Stone Draft,” Escar urged.

“There is no shame in laying to rest in the Halls of the Dwarves.”

“I don’t want to rot until there’s nothing left of me to care for.”

Rock Lung, in Vail’s opinion, was the most traumatic way for a dwarf to die. The mines weren’t inherently dangerous. The dwarves had been hollowing it out for generations. Unfortunately for Vail, some pockets were more dangerous than others. It wasn’t a cave-in or a path of soft stone that could swallow a dwarf whole before he had time to scream. Rock Lung progressed gradually, after years of mining and breathing in the odorless gas. By the time it bothered most dwarves enough to get a diagnosis, Stone Draft was the only prescription someone could offer before death came.

“Vail, there are more than enough of us to take care of you,” Escar said, fussing with the long braids in her beard, “you should stay.”

“I wouldn’t want to do that to you. Do you remember Old Lerons? His family was going in and out of his doors at all hours of the night, forcing Stone Draft down his throat while he begged for them to stop. The whole family are ghosts now. The only kind thing is to disappear. Let you see me die suddenly rather than watch it stretch out for weeks.”

“I don’t want to see you die at all!”

“Then this is what we need. If I leave, you can imagine it as if I went off to war and never returned. You can write that I died in a cave-in or some sudden, faster illness. I want my daughter’s last memory of me to see me standing on my own two feet and not mad with pain. Let me die with dignity. Please...”

Escar took a few more hours to convince, but she did concede. “But...the Palm of the Mountain? It feels like sacrilege to go where the gods stand. Mad Garris Roomar dared to try and he never came down.”

“If they strike me down,” Vail shrugged with a smile, “at least it will be quick.”

The argument lasted a few hours longer, but Escar yielded to Vail’s uncomfortable hacking. The look on her face said more than a thousand nights of “talking it over”. She knew as well as

Vail that he was already dead.

Instead of a funeral, Vail insisted on a party. The miners in his unit all came over with barrels of mead, beer, and one bottle of the finest whiskey Vail had ever tasted. Family from all levels of the great mine came to say their farewells. By the time everyone came and emptied the first round of drinks, the guests had picked through most of Vail's belongings. Nothing went to waste, save for one pair of tattered undergarments which became the great joke of the evening. The town criers all came to speak with Vail as the first dwarf in a century to be present for his own funeral. The drunk dwarf insisted on calling it his 'Death Festival'.

After a couple of days to sleep off the ensuing hangover and settle his cough, Vail left one morning with very little fanfare. Only Escar knew about it and she woke as the Dawn Brigade came through to light the torches that signified the coming morning. He only had a simple pack with some food and a few more bottles of Stone Draft. The tincture would keep him comfortable, but it was never meant to keep him alive. Escar watched from the porch of the home she'd inherited from her father. Their goodbye had been short, but tearful. Vail knew Escar would be well taken care of, but it was the hardest leaving of his life. After he looked away from her for the last, he refused to let himself even glance over his shoulder.

The great left ages of civilization in its wake, fashions in architecture changing as Vail walked through the ages. After leaving his home, it was about two miles of similar stone structures that changed to a lighter color as he got closer to the surface. Statues of rulers and kings stood in town squares in the middle of stone courtyards. Vail had never been one for history, but he knew stonework. Citizens treated the most masterful buildings as living monuments to the great architects. Visitors revered the first house of the Dreer family as much as any temple that Vail passed by.

Vail encountered other dwarves along the way, though fewer as he got closer to the surface. Though he looked haggard and sounded like a growling animal, they treated him as an honored guest. A few of the more generous mason orders let him spend the night in vacant rooms. Though he professed his intention to spurn the gods before dying, he could sleep on the steps of a temple when needed.

When Vail saw the sun for the first time, it was a long, stretching ray that reached down into

the tunnel like a greedy hand. Vail had been sleeping in the mason houses and thought he would lose his sight the first time he woke to the blazing star. A few of the dwarves who lived in the Ore Mason house calmed him and helped him as his old eyes adjusted to the bright, blinding fire that went on for eternity. When he finally felt he could, Vail took a powerful swig of Stone Draft and trudged toward the light. The stone structures gave way to wooden houses from before the mine had struck anything more valuable than stone. These were old houses of the oldest families, rarely occupied and kept more as a reminder of where Dwarven Kind had come from.

The wind bit at him as he walked toward the sun, no longer a long beam of light, but a guiding ball of light to lead him out. The first time he'd taken a breath of air out of the mine, Vail nearly forgot the heaviness of his lungs. It was sweet and cold, like a drink of fresh water after a week of digging out tunnels. His eyes watered with wonder, though some pained tears escaped as the disease reasserted itself at the front of his thoughts. Vail took another swig of his Stone Draft and only one bottle remained...the restoring liquid kept in the wine bottle he'd drank from at his Death Festival.

The mountain loomed over, a sharp point that pierced the sky and forced the canopy of clouds open. The mine's entrance was nearly halfway up the edifice, bearing down on the verdant forests below and looking up at the stone face of the mountain. Vail was almost grateful he was so far up. The sun was enough excitement, he doubted he could survive the forests and all the horrors that lurked within. His goal was the other direction, up through the clouds.

The switchbacks were rough and narrow, but no problem for a dwarf worth the stone under his boots. Vail was unsettled by the quiet at first, but soon preferred his solemn march to the coughing fits that would make him stop. The sun lasted forever, rolling through the clouds overhead and spiting the mountain itself as it crested the great peak. Vail stopped in the darkness when he came across a small indent in the mountainside. After a few hours of coughing and shivering, Vail managed to find a few moments of rest between the Rock Lung's persistent pain. After a few hours of rest, Vail rose before the sun to complete the climb.

As the switchbacks became rougher and less defined, the air thinned. Vail could only see birds if he looked down, but doing so made his head spin. Many times, the goal seemed foolish and even stupid. He nearly threw himself off the trail just to get solid ground under his feet

again. He managed to stop himself, however. At least dying on the Palm of the Mountain would mean he wouldn't be eaten by scavengers. Defying the gods seemed more dignified than becoming buzzard food.

His cough got worse as he climbed higher. Blood came up on occasion and forced Vail to stop more. Rationing the last half of his bottle of Stone Draft until he made it to the top. It wasn't much of a last drink, but the relief would be sweeter if he saved it. His wide, dwarven feet crushed stone beneath each heavy step, trudging up to the very apex of the dwarven world. The sun was setting when he finally stopped at the level ground.

The Palm of the Mountain was a wide, flat plateau. Long fingers of stone stretched out, partly curled and pointing out into the horizon. The very top of the mountain had been shorn off by the gods themselves, according to legend, leaving this withered hand of rock in its wake. Standing in the middle of the massive hand, the curve of the palm's thumb protected Vail from the elements.

The realm stretched out beyond Vail's sight. Not only the mountain range or the wild forests, but planes of great desert and miles and miles of ocean. He could see the tiny 'V' of a formation of birds and the tips of the castles that dotted human cities. Everything seemed to move, but it was all so still at the same time. The clouds rolled by, entire storms moving over the land in a few seconds of Vail's time. He could raise his thumb and block out entire countries as easily as smudging ink on a page.

The sun passed beyond sight and the sky came alight with stars. The sunlight was intense and horrifying, but the stars were gentle. They twinkled and sparkled like diamonds in a vein of dark granite. Threads of color danced across the sky like the fabric of the world frayed. Vail felt he could reach out and grab the threads, but feared doing so would unwind his home with a careless tug. It only felt like an hour of sitting in the darkness, staring upward and watching the sky spin. Vail felt the faintest amount of heat on his cheek as the sun started to rise far, far in the east. He turned away from the sun and saw the palm was not empty.

"Well, well," Vail coughed, his voice not so strong. "And here I thought I'd be alone in the end."

The shriveled remains of Mad Garris Roomar looked almost untouched. The Palm was so

high up that decay couldn't desecrate the mummified remains. He was wearing heavier clothing, but it hadn't been enough to save him when he finally reached the top. It was impossible to tell what killed him, but Vail guessed the old dwarf had forgotten he needed to go back down. Mad Garris had died with a book open in his lap and Vail walked closer to it.

Sitting, Vail moved closer to Garris's body and looked at the book. It was an exquisite sketch of the view from the thumb. The stone fingers obscured parts of the world below, but Vail was able to finish the view in his mind. It all looked so small from up here, but Garris had spent his last moments capturing it.

"It is a view," Vail rasped, pausing to take a swig of Stone Draft. "A once-in-a-lifetime view..."

This was a sacred place, but it was holy in a different way. He wished every dwarf in the mountain, every human who walked in green fields, every living thing that considered itself the height of creation could see it. When the world was so small, how could something like a few miles of land cost millions of lives? It wasn't that it seemed pointless. The view made him consider the bloody history of the world and how little of the world there was. It was worth fighting for, but not worth dying for. Vail wished he could share it with someone.

Vail glanced at the notebook in Garris's lap, the pen still in his grasp. Prying open the fingers, Vail took the pen and set it to a fresh page in the notebook. The brittle pen snapped, but the nib was still enough to write a short note in his rough, shaky hand. They were hardly the words of a great prophet, but Vail was glad to have any last words at all.

The dwarf closed the book and bound it with his belt. He coughed and hacked a little, some blood spilling onto the flat face of the Palm. Walking to the middle finger, Vail tried to estimate where the entrance to the mining city would be. It would be too much to hope that it reached the bottom, but this was as close to a leap of faith as Vail could manage.

Though Vail's health had failed him and Garris's mind had failed him, a stronger party might be able to make it. Vail took one final drink of his Stone Draft, emptying the bottle and letting the moisture cover his throat and calm the dry ache. With his last bit of strength, Vail waited for a pause in the raging wind before throwing the small book out into the air. It hung for a moment like it would float off into the sky. Then it dropped with the length of leather fluttering from

behind.

With a final breath, Vail walked over to the thumb and settled down next to Garris again. He set the empty bottle down by his waist and closed his eyes. The pain would come back before long. He would die here. Even if the gods struck him down before his lungs failed him, Vail had gotten the final word.

“Find Peace in the Palm.”