

Prologue

Mitch Harkin, despite owning several hundred thousand goblin slaves, never felt unsafe in the tunnels of Brocenback. After all, he brought Brocenback wealth, being the number one ore producer on Hominia. He also owned half of Brocenback, and more of Alkhan every day.

Sure, it was just revealed that his family orchestrated the destruction of goblin civilization two centuries before, but a new way of life had completely settled in, one in which dwarves were the masters, and goblins, submissive. Nobody in the Underground really cared at all, or were surprised for that matter.

He whistled, walking down the dark tunnel leading to his small cavern home, unaware of the shadows around him. Had this been outside of Brocenback, in the wild Underground, where his mines were located, he might have noticed. But, Mitch had made the mistake of letting his guard down.

He stopped in front of his door. He put the key in the lock.

There was a sharp pain in his back as a knife slid between his ribs. Mitch screamed as he was slammed against the door and flung backwards.

Tattooed goblins kicked him with steel toed boots, breaking teeth and bone.

A goblin spray painted a skull on his door.

Another goblin spit in his face. "Krung be ordained to take control, bitch!"

Heavy thumping sounded as nearby guards heard the commotion's echo.

"Ye been notified!"

The Krung members ran off.

A few guards dashed after them, while others stopped at Mitch's body and checked for a pulse. There was one. They called for a medic.

A faint rumbling, then the other guards returned.

"Bastard whelps sealed the tunnel behind them," one said. "These ones are different."

Another looked at the door. "They ain't from around here, that's for sure. Better tell the dain. He'll know what to do."

Chapter 1

Trogg the Genius, Terrall's smartest ogre, went off to Gruck alive, had a heart attack and came back in a body bag.

His funeral at New Delta's Thagnar Temple consisted of priests thumping around a fire to drumming, throwing incense while Trogg's body burned.

There was only one problem.

That wasn't Trogg's body burning on the pyre. For one thing, the body still had tusks, which Trogg had removed some years he cracked on in a fist fight.

The real Trogg the Genius stood at his funeral with his coworkers, Alfonso Deegan, Quintanelle Fillion, Mordridakon and Eluna, the only mourners there. Trogg scribbled notes on a small screen. Eluna danced in place to the drumming.

"So let me get this straight," Alfonso said. "You fly off to Gruck, find a dead ogre in an alleyway and ship him back as yourself. Why the fuck would you do that?"

Alfonso was a scruffy human male in mid-thirties with chiseled features, short, curly hair and dark skin, like all humans. He owned the K23 Detective Agency where everyone worked. He was a leader, even if he cursed a lot, chain smoked and could be rather cold at times, especially to his father. After all, he had been married for fourteen years to Leyla Linour, a reporter with celebrity-like status, so there had to be charm beneath the gruff exterior.

"I wanted to see what my own funeral would look like, since I won't be there to see it, the eight foot, beige-skinned ogre said. " Also, New Delta University has talked me into teaching one seminar a semester. The next seminar is entitled Ogre Religious Customs. Funerals are a religious custom."

"So why not go to another funeral?" Quintanelle asked.

Quintanelle was a Teolian elf, still rather young at thirty-two. She had light skin, blond hair, emerald eyes and pointy ears. She was a mage who had immigrated to New Delta. She was hired by Alfonso on the advice of Ebb, a friend and goblin shaman who got his advice straight from Ulox, the All-Seeing, the deity who gave shamen their divination powers. She was still relatively new to being a private detective, but was a fast learner due to her inquisitive nature. Quintanelle was still just an assistant private detective, but she was hoping to take the extremely difficult Private Detective Licensing Exam within a year. Her family, particularly her identical twin sister, Metara, also had a habit of getting wrapped up in Alfonso's affairs.

"Ogre funerals only occur if non-ogres tell ogres to throw one," Trogg said. "That's because ogres are too stupid to remember."

"So how priest learn ritual?" Eluna asked.

Eluna was four foot seven, short and grey with long stringy black hair. She was only seventeen, but she rarely acted like it. Eluna was a goblin shaman, who had exceptional divination powers as well as other gifts, which women were not allow to be. This meant she was cast out of her people and spent being years raped and tortured by various criminal elements. Then a little over a month earlier, Alfonso managed to snatch her away from the Avian Syndicate, the now mostly-dismantled criminal overlords who held the city hostage for citizenship. Alfonso hired Eluna to protect her as well as have someone do back-end work so he didn't. Despite the horrors she had experienced, her connection to the divine helped her deal with her trauma, giving a sense of purpose to her life.

A few days prior, Eluna was infected by a Goblin Plague variation by former megacorp Biogenomics in a futile attempt to cover up their involvement in creating it on behalf of Harkin Consolidated Mining. While she was sick, she received a message from her deity who told her

she would go to the Underground and free her suffering people. After meeting Mitch Harkin, Alfonso agreed to take him down, everyone was about to leave on that quest.

“Note that they are trolls, not ogres,” Trogg said. “Trolls are the only reason Thagnar worship exists.”

“If ogres are so stupid,” Mordridakon said, “why are ogres still around?”

“Sheer brute force,” the ogre replied. “Same as Uthirans.”

Mordridakon was a red Uthiran, a ten foot tall, thirty foot long, fire-breathing dragon who was currently transformed into a human. He didn't know his exact age, few Uthirans ever did, but Mordridakon was somewhere around four-hundred fifty; both young and old at the same time, as most Uthirans never lived past a century, but the ones that did could live a millennium or more. Mordridakon wasn't all there, but he was very good at what he did—scaring the crap out of people to get them to talk. Despite his obsession with eating hominids, Mordridakon had grown to care during his two centuries living among them on Hominia. Mordridakon also had a sister, Selkath, who worked as a secretary for Derrick Hartigan, the CEO of Cybrix Technologies, a very old and very powerful megacorp that produced the silicone technology that allowed New Delta to reach into the sky and become the most populous city in the Terrall.

Mordridakon growled. “And why are you wasting our time with this crap instead of us being on a shuttle to Brocenback?”

“Because, I probably won't find another fresh ogre corpse lying around.”

“But, what happened to the courses you were teaching before Biogenomics had your contracts rescinded?” Quintanelle asked.

“My bosses found a troll who could finish teaching my courses. She was studying ogres as much as I was, just never in a strict academic sense, as I did.” Trogg smiled. “I have a date with her whenever we get back from the Underground.”

The priests finished their ritual, and the drumming stopped, though the body was still burning.

“Is that sufficient, Dr. Trogg?” one of the priests asked.

“That was excellent. Thank you very much.”

“Finally,” Mordridakon said. “I have a dinner date with a dwarf I need to keep.”

Eluna closed her eyes for a second. “Harkin been stabbed by Krung in Underground.”

“Damn. There goes my dinner,” Mordridakon grumbled.

“But, the Krung aren't in the fucking Underground,” Alfonso said.

“They move from here to there, it seem. Club Krung be empty now.”

“So, are we still going?” Quintanelle asked.

“Ye get official summons from royals shortly...”

Alfonso's screen beeped. “The royals are requesting we stop our ‘unfair persecution of Mitch Harkin’ and help him get the Krung out of his mine, as well as another matter that will be discussed when we arrive. Apparently, they're going to foot the hotel bill.”

“The royals making us full Underground detectives,” Trogg said. “Already has its benefits.”

“Indeed it does have benefits. Everyone gather your things and meet at the shuttle port in an hour and a half. Except for you, Quintanelle.”

“Why me?”

Alfonso pulled out a communications screen and handed it to her. “This is for you.”

“I'm sorry I've put off buying one. I just never wanted one.”

“I can see the benefits of not being bothered at all hours, but if you want to work for me, I’m requiring you to have one. Even Eluna has one, as she can’t message others without one, even though she can receive them.”

“Am I going to have to pay for it?”

“In the sense that I’m withholding part of your next salary payment to pay for it? Yes. Now go home, and get your stuff.”

Chapter 2

If one stood on top of the wild Cromag Range, they would have little idea that beneath their feet lay two great civilizations, the twin cities of Brocenback, home city of dwarves, and Alkhan, home city of gnomes. The two cities were part of a much larger system of tunnels and caverns known as the Cromag Underground, or just the Underground. The rest of the Underground was thousands of miles of caverns and tunnels, home to various mines, small settlements and an exotic array of creatures.

Both cities sat parallel to each other in the narrowest point in the range. Alkhan sat on the Alamaro Wastes side to the east, and Brokenback sat on the Forest of Illwyn side to the west. This placement was unintentional, and in fact led a long and devastating conflict that lasted off and on for four centuries, nearly eradicating both civilizations. Finally, in 7900, a peace treaty was signed, and both cities entered a new age of friendship and prosperity.

However, some might have said the cities got a little too friendly, as the races were, biologically, beginning to merge, even though it was difficult to notice, since the two races looked incredibly similar to begin with. Both races were between four and four and a half feet tall, and had pale white skin due to the lack of sunlight. Dwarves were, on average, slightly taller, stronger and hairier. Gnomes were slimmer with smaller features. They also were excellent magic practitioners, while dwarves couldn't use magic at all.

Most scientists believed that within a few more millennia, there would be one race, called the Gnarves, magic-using little people who mined using giant steam-powered machines. Finding a self-identifying gnarf was difficult, as they'd almost always identify themselves either as a dwarf or as a gnome, depending on which city they were born into. It would be hard to guess otherwise.

Trogg's detailed explanation didn't help Eluna or Quintanelle's confusion as they flew into the Port of Brocenback that evening, but they would understand in time.

The Port was a series of docks extending out into the air from the side of a mountain. Aircraft from all over Hominia delivered goods and people to the Underground, and was officially the main entrance. While Alkhan had their own port, it was only used for City of Sands and Barrenlands traffic, which was light.

The detectives stepped off their shuttle and met a representative of the royals.

"Dain Darius and Deep Queen T'ayelee will see you promptly at the Brocenback palace. We will take your luggage to the Fortress of Peace Hotel, where they've booked the hominids a luxury suite with three bedrooms and a living room with pull-out couch. The Uthiran will stay in an Uthiran cavern. The cost of the rooms is part of your payment. Come this way." They walked through the busy gangways as aircraft were loaded and unloaded by hand or with crane.

"Finally," Mordridakon said. "How come we weren't staying here originally?"

"I'm not paying a thousand credits a night. The cheap hotel we've stayed at was just fine."

"But, we were just paid four million from Biogenomics' assets."

"Which will have to cover us until the PDRA officially starts assigning cases again. The other cases we've been taking haven't paid much or at all. I'm still waiting for the payment for the serial killer you ate."

Mordridakon groaned. "You know about that?"

"Of course I fucking know. Lowry asked you to eat Enzo Montelban. Eluna spent the past few days helping me plan, organize and bill people while the rest of you were all scattered across Hominia."

In addition to Trogg's visit to Gruck, Quintanelle went home to Teolos to visit her family, while Mordridakon went to the City of Sands and dined on convicts at J'Harderith temple.

"You can't see into the past," Mordridakon said to Eluna.

"But, me could see ye reliving the moment over and over again in ye head."

"Could you stop reading my mind?"

"Me shaman. Me no stop until me dead," the goblin replied.

"Alfonso, are we seeing your father while we're here?" Quintanelle asked, changing the subject.

"Since Leyla's not coming, absolutely not."

"Leyla couldn't get her superiors to let her travel on short notice I assume," Trogg said.

"Yes. Believe me, she desperately wanted to, and I'd be happy if she were here, but we'll be fine."

They walked off the port and into the dimly lit tunnels of Brocenback. Despite dwarves being half as tall as Trogg, tunnels were built between eight and ten feet high to allow the movement of goods unimpeded. Mordridakon, on the other hand, was out of luck completely since, by Underground law, Uthirans could not be in their natural form except in very specific areas.

They made their way through the crowd of dwarves going down one tunnel or another, always seeming to have place to go and business to attend.

There were various kinds of ground vehicles that allowed quick travel, but they were restricted to designated tunnels so they didn't run over pedestrians. Almost all ran on battery power.

The dwarves glanced suspiciously at Eluna, who stuck close to Trogg's side.

"Don't worry," Trogg said. "They won't touch you as long as you're with someone. They think you're owned."

"What's Eluna's status, anyway?" Alfonso asked the representative. "I'm surprised she's allowed to come at all."

"The shaman's services are required at the palace for the duration for reasons the royals shall explain in detail," the representative replied.

Eluna frowned.

"It's safer for you there," Alfonso said. "As much as you'd love to free your kin that just isn't going to happen."

"That no be why me no frown."

"Then why are you frowning?" Quintanelle asked.

"Eleven assassination attempt or plot foiled in last four months," Eluna replied.

"That we know of," the representative added, voice shaking.

"Damn," Mordridakon said. "The royals must be unpopular."

"No, actually. The royals are extremely popular and benevolent rulers. But, like what happened in your home with the Syndicate, prejudices haunt these tunnels, and might do more harm than the Krung ever will."

The walls seemed to close in on them. They all hoped history wasn't about to repeat itself.

Chapter 3

Standing outside Brocenback Palace's throne room, the representative said, "Your highnesses wish to meet with just Detective Deegan and the shaman. I'll show you three a lounge where you can wait."

Quintanelle, Trogg and Mordridakon were led off while Alfonso and Eluna entered.

The throne room was surprisingly sparse and small. Just two iron thrones, decorative weapons lining the back wall and a small wooden door off to the side..

Sitting on the thrones were Dain Darius the Ninth, and Deep Queen T'ayelee.

"Greetings, Detective Deegan," Darius said.

"How may we be of service?"

Darius knocked on his throne. The wooden door opened, and Mitch Harken walked out looking good. He had been healed by magical clockwork machines created by specialized gnome magic practitioners known as tinkerers.

"Let me guess, ya were coming here to stop me. Well, I'm sorry to disturb ya. The Krung beat ya to it. They took my mine, too. Bastards."

"So, you want to me to help him—the guy who came into my office and threatened me?"

"Yes," T'ayelee said. "We are not in the mood to have the Syndicate Rebellion repeat itself here."

"The Krung is not the Syndicate. The Syndicate was a well-organized machine that operated with peak proficiency. The Krung are a bunch of morons who are only dangerous because of how violent they can get. Also, the Syndicate's ultimate aim was for avians to join Deltan society by gaining citizenship, but a mixture of racism and politics forced them to take extreme measures. While the Krung claim they're fighting to improve goblin lives, all they are really doing is committing grotesque acts of violence while exploiting their own kind to fund their operations. In the mine the Krung took over, nothing's changed. Those goblins aren't free. Instead of suffering under you, they're suffering under their own kind."

Eluna shook her head. "They fair worse under Krung."

Mitch cracked up. "See? She finally gets it."

"She never said they didn't suffer," Alfonso said.

"What do ya I think I do all day? Flog me whelps until morale improves? No. Happy slaves are productive slaves. They're fed three meals a day, have a bed to sleep on, get healed when they get sick and breed as they want. They just can't leave, can't slack off and no old ways."

"But you said in New Delta that—"

"Yeah, I said the whelps are tools, but tools wear out unless maintained."

"We keep a tight leash on Mitch," Darius said. "Regardless of the recent revelations, we enslaved the goblins in a hostile fashion. Always been on shaky ground because goblin freedom still in memory of Uthirans, ya companion among them."

"Well, free them," Alfonso said.

"Freeing the slaves has always been an option, but at this rate, we won't live long enough ta do it."

Mitch was about to object, but Darius silenced him. "Ya survived mining without them before—ya can do it now."

"What about the experimenting?" Mitch asked. "Gnomes benefitted, too, but everyone ignores that part."

“My father also outlawed it, and the few rogue scientists who still use them, do it outside my jurisdiction.” T’ayelee looked at Alfonso. “We’d like a few of you to help Mitch get rid of the Krung. The method will be left up to you.” She turned to Mitch. “You can leave us now. Thank you.”

Mitch turned and left.

“As for Eluna, we need her to divine the various assassination attempts being planned against us.”

“Why is everyone’s trying to kill you?” Alfonso asked. “Surely, your pregnancy isn’t the real reason. I read up on history, and this isn’t the first time a dain got a deep queen pregnant.”

T’ayelee placed her hand on her belly. “That is correct. Dain Argus the Fourth and Deep Queen Neren, in 8761. Neren was stripped of her nobility, banished from the cities while still pregnant and disappeared from historical record. Argus went on to have a fruitful reign over the next thirty years.”

“That ain’t happenin’ again,” Darius said.

“You two are obviously in love. You spend more time together than I do with my wife.”

The monarch gazed lovingly at each other, and the Darius kissed T’ayelee on the cheek.

“But, that no be reason why ye be targeted.”

The monarchs got serious again.

“We are uniting the monarchies,” T’aylee said.

Alfonso smirked. “Now, that will get you killed.”

“But, it’s somethin’ that needs ta be done,” Darius said. “Both cities have basically become one even without us. Ya know it’s fashionable for a dwarven male ta take a gnome female as a mate and vice versa. Our love isn’t the least bit unique. Beyond that, it’s not like the political and economic boundaries between the cities can disappear even more. The rest of Terrall treats us as one, might as well unite the governments, and make it official.”

“But, don’t misunderstand us,” T’ayelee went on. “Just because the monarchies are uniting, doesn’t mean the cities are. There will always be a Brocenback and an Alkhan, as they still are two distinct geographical districts with major differences in terms of features, major industries and community pillars.”

“So, who wants to kill you?”

“A mixture of crazies, eugenicists and members of our governments who are afraid they’ll lose their positions,” Darius said. “We don’t care if our subjects disagree with us. We just care if they try to kill us.”

“And when is this merging taking place?”

“The governments will merge the moment the baby is born. Boy or girl, they’ll be a symbol of a new united Underground,” Darius replied.

“That put she, not ye, in danger,” Eluna said to the dain.

T’ayelee sighed. “No, because if either one of us dies, the merging is permanently stalled unless our successors choose to merge them again.”

“Alright, I’m going to leave Quintanelle with Eluna so she’s not alone. Plus, Quintanelle is not one for explosive action sequences.”

Darius pointed up. “Remember where we are, Detective Deegan. Jeopardizing Underground stability is an executable offense with a zero tolerance policy. Not even Mitch uses high explosives unless he absolutely has to. His mines may not lie directly below our cities, but if they go into a full collapse, they could bring the Cromag down on all of us.”

“Understood.”