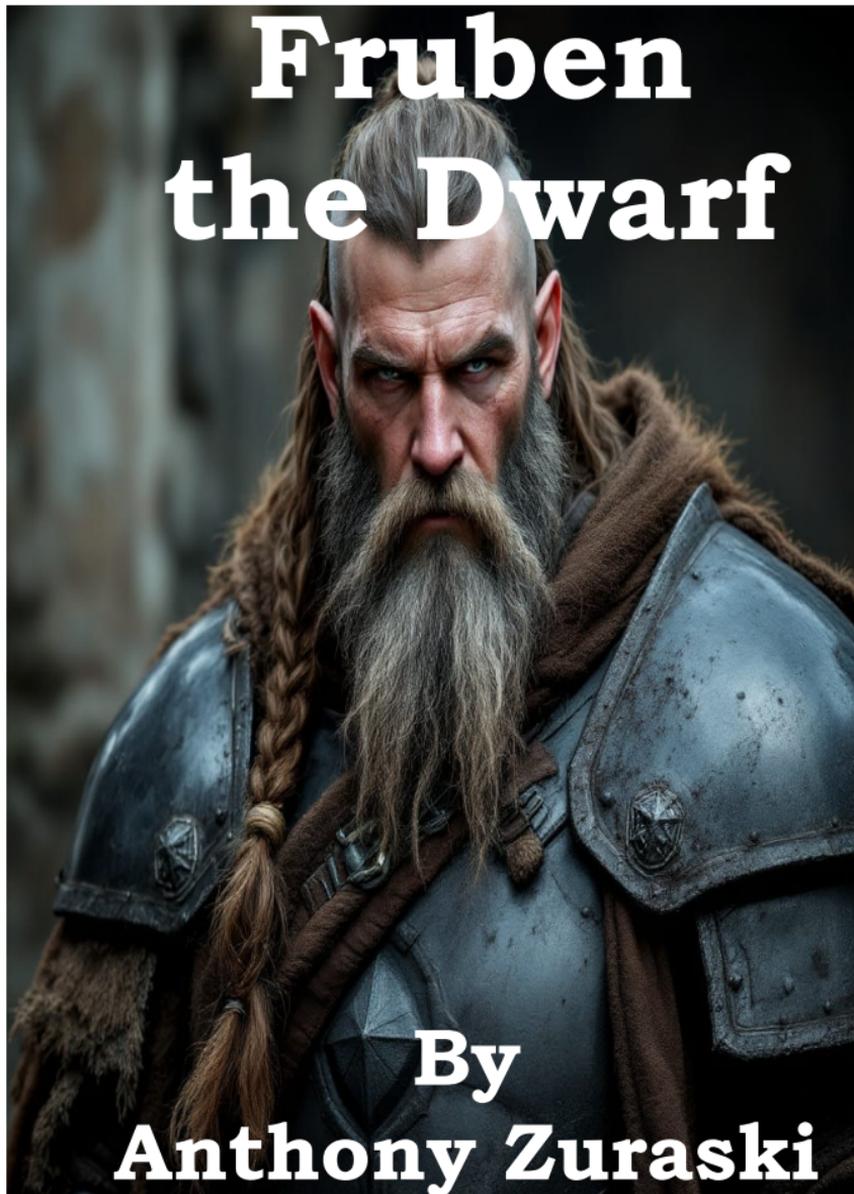


Fruben the Dwarf

By
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Fruben followed the main tunnel until it opened to the city within Grimstone Keep, home of the dwarves like Fruben and clan Battlebeard. The cavern that held the city itself was enormous. The buildings were all carved from stone. Some were built into the walls, some from stalactites and others still from stalagmites. Bridges crisscrossed going from all directions at all heights throughout the cavern going from one building to another and one section of the city to another.

Veins of various polished ore could be seen on the surface of the walls. He looked up to the ceiling, it appeared as a night sky. Most of it was dark with little spots of silver which gave the appearance of stars. Centuries ago, dwarven mages of the lost city of Drakenstone created some illusions of light clouds along with protections of the cavern, it was breathtaking to behold. Along the north wall however were some thin veins of precious gemstones, known as Nightstones. They reflected light as they formed zigzagging lines down from the top of the north wall to the bottom. The stone also changed colors which gave it the appearance of multicolored lightning streaking down from the heavens. He marveled at the sight every time he came through the great hall.

Fruben took in a deep breath, taking in the smell of the ore and forges. Even on the upper levels he could

smell them. He walked proudly through the halls heading for the main gate, stroking his brown beard. He was a cleric of Tharadin, god of the dwarves, and today was a happy day, the blessing of the Great Gates. It was a ceremony they performed once a year, praying for the protection of Tharadin on their homes and for the prosperity of their people. As always, Fruben was excited to participate.

“Well, would ya look at dat boyz, golden boy Fruben Battlebeard be coming.” A voice said, “we all best be on our best behavior.”

Fruben noticed Grafire Dagkin along with several of his kin standing not far away. The Dagkin clan were adversaries of Fruben and his kin. The Dagkin clan specialized in jewels and gemstones, this made them one of the wealthiest families of Grimstone Keep.

Grafire was tall for a dwarf with a broad powerful frame with hair red as a bright flame. He wore an elegant cloak that draped over finely crafted dwarven armor that bore the Dagkin crest on the breastplate.

Fruben’s clan, the Battlebeards, were not native to Grimstone. They originally hailed from the city of Drakenstone, city of the dwarven mages. Some migrated here before the city’s collapse, starting work in metalwork. Between their metal work and magecraft the Battlebeards grew to one of the most prominent

clans in the city, which put them at odds with clan Dagkin.

Fruben had been an infant when Drakenstone collapsed, not that he lived in the great city. His parents lived in a village not far from Drakenstone that fell to bandits around the same time as Drakenstone fell. Fruben's father died in the attack and his mother not long after. The survivors brought him to Grimstone, where he grew up.

Fruben ignored them as he walked past, he was determined not to be late for the ceremony.

"Aye, looks like we ain't good nough to talk to," Grafire said. "Sad son of Tharadin if I ever seen one."

Fruben stopped in his tracks. "Well, if ya weren't such a rock-brained, wine drinker, ye'd know it be da blessing of da Great Gates today," he said coming nose to nose with the red-haired dwarf.

Grafire smiled, "aye we be know'n, not sure why yer bothering going, don't need any pretenders dere."

Fruben was faster, headbutting Grafire in the nose, breaking it with a satisfying crunch. Grafire stumbled back in surprise as several of the other Dagkin dwarves tackled Fruben. Punches and kicks, passed between the combatants along with enough of dwarven curses to make all of the nearby dwarves blush and cover the ears of the young.

Horns blew grabbing the attention of all and stopping the brawl. The dwarves knew that the sound meant the approach of the king, and there wasn't a dwarf alive that would dare fight in front of the king without permission. The dwarves parted in the center of the pathway as King Pantum Onyxarm, and his procession made their way through. Everyone knelt on one knee as the king stopped by Grafire and Fruben. Both dwarves had several bruises and blood was still flowing from Grafire's nose.

King Onyxarm frowned. "It be look'n like two o me advisors don't be know'n how to behave when their king be coming through. Maybe I be need'n new advisors."

Both dwarves kept their heads bowed, saying nothing. The king paced back and forth several times before continuing.

"Rest o ya be on yer way," King Onyxarm said, his hands on his hips. "I'll be need'n a word wit dese two."

"Get up," Onyxarm commanded once the others were gone. "What ye be tink'n. Ain't I have enough problems without you two rock-brained idiots fighting? And don't ya be say'n not'in till I says."

The king scowled as he paced back and forth in front of the pair. "I be hearing your complaints for too

long. Ye sort it out, an quick, or ye both be scrubbing me chamber pot wit yer tongue."

Both dwarves winced. "Aye me king."

"Now ye be healing Grafire first Fruben, den yerself," Onyxarm said.

"Aye me king," Fruben said. He raised his arms to start casting his healing magic but noticed a fist full of red hair still in his hand, then noticed the king scowling at him.

Fruben brushed off the hair before casting the spell on his rival. A soft blue glow surrounded the dwarf. After a moment, Grafire's nose moved back into place as the skin stitched itself back together. The bruises on his face faded and his swollen lip returned to it's normal size.

"Better," Onyxarm said with a nod, "now be on yer way Grafire."

"Aye me king," Grafire said with a bow. The dwarf scurried off heading back into the city.

As soon as he was out of sight, Onyxarm punched Fruben in the face, knocking him prone. "A son o Tharadin should be acting better than dis. You be acting better than dis."

"Me king..." Fruben started but the king raised his fist as if to strike again.

“No!” Onyxarm said angrily. “Ye be need’n to set an example, and what kind are ye set’n? Fight’n in da streets. Curse’n like a dirt-ridden mushroom kicker! Ye been accusing Dagkin wit no proof for years an I be expect’n better. Act’n like a dim-witted gnome lover ye are.”

Fruben had no words he sat on the ground looking up at his king trying to hold back the tears that were threatening to form. Everything the king had said was true. He knew Grafire and his clan had been trying to discredit the Battlebeards for years, sabotaging supplies and caravans, destroying metalworking tools, but somehow, he always lost the proof he needed.

The king took a deep breath, then extended a hand helping the cleric up. “Take some time to think on what I said, and don’t ya be coming to see me til ye do.”

“Yes me king,” Fruben said with a bow.

“Come now,” Onyxarm said with a smile. “We have’n a blessing to do.”

Beldur and Pike waited near the main gate for Fruben. The two brothers were part of clan Battlebeard and cousins to Fruben.

“Aye Fruben!” Pike called out waving his arms.

Fruben raised an eyebrow. "Aye cousins," he said approaching the pair. "What be dis about?"

The two pulled Fruben in close. "Ye be right cousin," Pike said.

"Aye. We be hear'n dose Dagkin's talk'n bout the gate," Beldur added.

"Where?" Fruben asked, his eyes lighting up with anticipation.

Pike frowned, "don't be know'n, but it be here somewhere, dat for sure."

Fruben sighed, "argh. I can't be poke'n me nose around. Da king be furious and Dagkin's be watching me close. You two have to be doing it, take da others but not many."

The brothers nodded. "We be come'n back when we know where," Beldur said.

Fruben grabbed the pair by the collar. "An be careful. Dey may be dirty, but dey ain't stupid. Find out what ye can an get out."

Beldur and Pike crept down the tunnel slowly and as quietly as they could. They were following Zan of the Dagkin clan, Grafire's assistant. They were outside the city in the underground tunnels coming up to an

old, abandoned outpost on the southern side of the city past the mining tunnels. A single tower was all that remained intact of the outpost, the rest of the buildings were nothing but rubble from years of neglect.

Pike felt naked and cold without his armor, but Beldur was right. The armor would have been too noisy to follow Zan in. Zan walked past two Dagkin guards going into the tower without saying a word.

"Hmm. Strange to be have'n guards here," Pike said looking over the boulder they hid behind.

"Aye, me tink'n too," Beldur agreed. "Best have a closer look."

"Aye," Pike said creeping closer pulling out his hammer.

"No," Beldur said putting a hand on Pike's shoulder. "Can't be let'n dem know we here."

Pike sighed, "aye, ye be right. Have'ta find a way in."

The pair circled around finding a window to crawl through. Inside they saw that the some of the upper levels of the tower had collapsed onto the stairway making it impassable. The pair nodded to each other before moving down to the lower levels.

The stairs went down spiraling around a center column as they went. The pair continued moving down

with Pike leading the way. The stairway eventually ended in a hallway that led to a circular room.

The room was roughly seventy feet in diameter and had entrances to other hallways all around it, eight in total. In the center of the room was a pedestal with a large glowing ring on top of it.

"What's dat? An where did Zan go?" Beldur asked but Pike continued to stare at the glowing ring.

"Ouch!" Pike exclaimed after Beldur bonked him on the head. "What's dat fer?"

"What ye be about?" Beldur asked.

Pike pointed at the glowing ring. "Do ya know what dat is?"

"No," Beldur said shrugging.

"It be a Minos Gate," Pike said. "I remember dem from when I was a babe in Drakenstone. Dey could take you to far places."

"So?" Beldur asked not following.

"Dey all supposed to be gone, destroyed," Pike explained.

"So where does dis one go?" Beldur asked.

"Not know'n. We have to go through," Pike said moving closer.

Beldur looked around nervously as they approached. "You sure?"

“Nope,” Pike said touching the ring. The pair teleported away in a flash of blue light.

The ground dropped away from them as their vision was filled with streaks of blue and white light. The ground came under their feet again as the teleport completed. They immediately fell on their backsides sliding to the same side of the room since the floor in this room was tilted at a steep angle. They came down in a crash against the far wall. The room was pitch black and the air was stale. Beldur looked around then up the floor they just slid down his vision not effected by the dark. Stuck in the opposite wall at the top of the slope he saw the other Minos Gate.

“Ya think dey would clean dis up da goblin lovers,” Pike complained.

“Yer da one dat touched da durned ting,” Beldur said.

“Over der,” Pike said pointing at a door in the room.

As they pair approached the door an explosion sounded in the distance. The sounds of battle could be heard as well. The pair crept through the door. They

exited the room finding themselves on the outskirts of what appeared to be a ruined underground city.

Pike fell to his knees. "Drakenstone," he said barely above a whisper.

The cavern was huge, and the ceiling had glowing ore and gemstones in different patterns that changed color along it much like in Grimstone Keep. Broken statues littered the whole cavern and most of the buildings around them were destroyed and were now not much more than piles of rubble. There were bones of the dead everywhere with scorch marks here and there from great fiery blasts. Down one of the streets a group of dwarves were fighting against large, winged lizards. The battle was fierce, and the dwarves were not doing well. A short distance away was Zan and another dwarf they didn't recognize.

"We need'n a base of operations," Zan said. "Grafire be committing everything to dis. All da treasure needs to be locked up safe fer da new king."

"An when Grafire be coming?" the other dwarf asked crossing his arms. "We be need'n more boys to push da lizards back."

"We need to go," Beldur said grabbing Pike by the shoulders. "We need to be tell'n Fruben."

"I... but..." Pike stammered, his eyes filling with tears. "Aye," he finally conceded.

The pair ran back into the room with the Minos gate, teleporting themselves back to the abandoned outpost. They made their way back to the tunnels and right into the path of seven Dagkin warriors.

“What do we have ere?” One of the warriors asked.

“Looks like snoopers to me,” another said.

“Best be take’n em back to Grafire,” said the first one.

Metal on metal rang out in the tunnel as their weapons clashed. Pike slashed from right to left then back to the right before stabbing his opponent in the chest. He pulled back immediately ducking out of the path of the next dwarf’s sword. Pike was really wishing he had his armor now. Beldur glanced to the side, two of the seven were down but he had a bad gash on his left arm that was bleeding.

“Run!” Beldur told Pike.

“No, we stick together,” Pike said deflecting another strike.

“We ain’t be win’n dis. Now run!” Beldur yelled.

“Ain’t happening,” Pike said stubbornly.

Beldur growled charging forward. He swung his Warhammer deflecting the right opponent’s strike. He kept his momentum going ducking the left opponents swing as he spun clockwise bringing his hammer into

the leg with a crunch. He dove forward into a roll coming up beside Pike slamming the hammer down on one of his brother's opponents.

"Ye see, we got dis," Pike said as two crossbow bolts took Beldur in the chest.

"Run," Beldur said barely above a whisper before collapsing to the ground.

"No!" Pike screamed. He saw the two crossbow men were reloading and knew this was his only chance, so he ran. Pike ran down the twisting tunnels as crossbow bolts flew past him. He knew his pursuers were close, but if he could get into the city, they would have to stop their pursuit.

Fruben walked through the mining tunnels, it was quiet here, a good place to listen to the stone and Tharadin. He closed his eyes as he reached out touching the nearby wall. He felt the course pours of the rock, felt the connecting between the wall, and the floor and the ceiling above. The city was connected to the tunnels which connected to the mountains all around them. Everything felt... right... or almost right. Fruben felt as if something was out of place, something small that he couldn't quiet detect.

He opened his eyes. "Something be happening, something da land be sensing."

Footfalls broke him from his thoughts. Pike came stumbling around the corner, several crossbow bolts sticking out of his back.

"Pike!" Fruben yelled running to his cousin. "Who did dis to ya? What happened?"

"Beldur dead... Dagkin got'em," Pike said with a raspy voice as blood was dripping from his mouth.

"Hold still, I'll heal ya up," Fruben said.

"No," Pike said pushing him away. "They'll be here soon. Ya got ta run, don't let'm see ya."

"A pigs arse I will," Fruben said pulling out his hammer.

"No, too many," Pike said kneeling on the ground. "Grafire has a Minos Gate. Stealing gold an crown'n himself king o Drakenstone."

"What? Where?" Fruben asked as Pike collapsed face down on the ground.

"Pike!" Fruben said shaking his cousin, but Pike was already gone. Voices from the tunnel told Fruben it was already too late. With a heavy heart and one last glance at Pike, Fruben did what his cousin had begged him to do, run. Fruben ran all the way back to the city, heading straight to his home where he found Thorkreg Battlebeard waiting.

"Thorkreg?" Fruben asked surprised to see the leader of his clan at his house.

"Fruben," Thorkreg said, his arms crossed over his chest. "I be need'n to have a word wit ya, in private."

"Aye, and I you," Fruben said.

Thorkreg sat at the small round table next to the fireplace, an angry look on his face. Fruben had just Thorkreg everything, and he wasn't happy to hear his two sons were just killed.

"I'm gonna be wearing dat Grafire's inards as a necklace." Thorkreg said gripping the mug so hard it burst under the pressure.

"So, we go to da king," Fruben said.

"Ya get kicked in da head or something ya idget?" Thorkreg asked throwing the mug across the room.

"What ya mean?" Fruben asked taking a step back.

"What proof ya got?" Thorkreg asked. "What bloody proof?" He asked flipping the table over. "Both me boys are dead, and we got no proof."

Fruben blinked several times. "But..."

Thorkreg took a step forward. "Ye know where dey have dis gate?"

"No," Fruben said.

“Ye know where dey be take’n me boy’s bodies?”

Thorkreg asked taking another step.

“No,” Fruben said backing up against the wall.

Thorkreg put his face so close that their noses were touching. “Ye got anything dat backs what ye claiming? Anything!”

Fruben looked away, “no.”

“No,” Thorkreg said calming down. “No, ye got nothing but me boys last words, but that be something.”

Fruben looked at Thorkreg in surprise and confusion. “What?”

“We didn’t know what dem Dagkin be doing, but now we do.” Thorkreg said standing the table back up and taking a seat. “We ain’t got no proof, but me boys didn’t die for nothing. Now we be watching an waiting.”

“Yeah?” Fruben asked daring to step closer.

“Not you,” Thorkreg said in a stern tone. “Ye got a different task.”

Fruben stepped up to the table, “but...”

“No buts,” Thorkreg said, “Ye be making enough racket lately. Dagkin and da king be watching ya but da king still be trust’n me. I’ll be advising for now.”

“Well, what am I gonna do, sit on me arse and twiddle me tumbs?” Fruben asked getting angry.

“No,” Thorkreg said, “ye need ta leave Grimstone an make a journey.”

“Journey?” Fruben asked. “Ye push’n me out?”

Thorkreg took a serious look. “Not do’n any push’n. Ya have friends out there, and somewhere out der is de help we be need’n. I seen ya on a journey that save more dan clan Battlebeard.”

Thorkreg was a cleric of Tharadin like Fruben but was gifted with visions. No one knew why, not even Thorkreg himself, but the clan trusted his visions.

Thorkreg patted Fruben on the shoulder. “Find out about dese Minos Gates. Find out what ya can and when ya ready, we’ll be here. I’ll be keep’n Grafire busy don’t ye be doubting.”

Fruben walked out of the main gate packed for the road. He drew in a deep breath taking in the fresh air. He loved Grimstone, but he did miss the road as well.

Thorkreg’s vision still bothered Fruben more than a little, but with nothing else to go on he decided to just put one foot in front of the other. He was heading to Lunas, a human city far to the southwest, with any luck he might run into a friend of his, perhaps even get some help from Javek, gods be willing.