

Chapter 1

The Reunion

Nahor trudged up the dark mountain pass shin-deep in snow. The packed ice crunched under his heavy boots. Used to walking about barefoot, he disliked having to cover his feet, but even his tough skin could not resist the frigid weather. The snow had been falling for only a few hours, but had accumulated quickly. A bitter wind howled through the slopes and crags of the Throal Mountains. The temperature plunged as the sun dipped below the jagged peaks. Nahor wrapped his cloak tight around his body and pulled the hood over his head in a futile attempt to stop the snow from stinging his face. For two weeks he had traveled through the mountains using timeworn trails and passes. The weather, though cold, had been pleasant for most of the

trip. The storm had come up suddenly the night before, and had picked up momentum by morning. Now it brought its fury down upon the mountains with the force of a dragon's roar. Luckily, Nahor was nearing the end of his journey.

Turning a bend, Nahor saw his destination, The Dainhome. A fire's faint glow seeped through frost-covered windows. Violent winds batted the inn's sign to and fro. Rusty hinges squeaked with each swing. Nahor imagined the roaring fire within and warm drinks with Valinar. The year had passed quickly, but it seemed longer since Nahor had last seen his friend.

When Nahor entered the inn, many patrons turned to look at the newcomer. As he unwrapped his cloak, clumps of snow fell onto the floor. Under his cloak Nahor wore a blue tunic and brown breeches, both dirty and wet from his travels. His clothes were meant for warmer climates, but his woolen winter cloak and his naturally resilient skin helped to keep him warm. Nahor pulled down his hood and shook his bald head. Ivory colored tassels, dangling from his headpiece swung back and forth as he turned his head and looked around the inn. The fire's orange light glinted off the polished manacles Nahor wore. Broken chains dangled from them and engravings showed Lochost and Dis, Passions of freedom and slavery, entangled in battle.

Some customers gasped when they recognized the green and muscular obsidiman standing in the door. "It's Nahor, purifier of the Purifiers," they whispered.

The Dainhome wasn't a large establishment compared to other mountain inns, but it was always busy because of the dwarven mines

nearby and its proximity to a well-used trade route. People from all over Barsaive stayed at The Dainhome when stopping for the night. The main floor had a common fire that served as the main source of light and heat. The fire hissed and crackled as wood turned to ash. Tables surrounded it so diners could sit close and keep warm. Most of the smoke rose to the roof where it escaped through a small hole, but a gray haze still floated about the inn. Those who wished to conduct business or talk with a bit more privacy sat on either side of the inn in wooden booths and tables. Dim candles illuminated the room, but not enough for Nahor to really see who was there. Nahor carefully looked around, but did not see his friend. He looked to the bar in the back. Valinar was not there. He must have gotten a room already, Nahor thought.

When the kitchen closed for the night, the common room became the sleeping quarters for those who either couldn't afford or wouldn't pay for a private room, all nine of which were on the second floor. Two sets of stairs led to the second floor, one on either side of the inn. Nahor looked up and wondered which room Valinar had gotten for them.

A young barmaid carried drinks and steaming food—mutton, roast chicken, and potatoes—from the kitchen. Sweat beaded on her face. As she passed Nahor and the smells of warm stew with potatoes, carrots and a rich, deep broth reminded him that his last home cooked meal was when he left the Liferock.

Nahor made his way slowly through the crowd to the bar. His wide frame allowed for little movement between the tables. He excused himself when he jostled sitting customers. Some cursed over their spilled drinks and would have said more had they not looked at who bumped

them. Nahor moved by as best he could, but no one was untouched. Nahor was big, even for an obsidiman. He was over six and a half feet tall, nearly as tall as a short troll, and almost as wide as three humans. At one point Nahor became frustrated when he could not pass between two tables. He shoved aside one table where a dwarf sat and was about to take a forkful of spiced mutton. Nahor put the table back, smiled, and told the irritated dwarf his food looked delicious.

Finally, he reached the bar. “Jorngar, my friend,” Nahor said, raising his voice over the din. A swarthy troll, taller than Nahor, wiped his hands on a dirty apron, reached over the bar, and embraced the obsidiman.

“Nahor! Has it been a year already?”

“Aye, it has. Time passes quickly in the mountains. The Dainhome seems quite lively considering the weather. Is business good?”

Jorngar nodded and turned to brew a mug of Nahor’s favorite drink, hot chocolate. When Nahor came to The Dainhome he asked neither for a stein of dark dwarven ale, nor a glass of sweet elven wine. Instead he would request a frothing mug of melted chocolate, mixed with warmed milk and rare spices. It was a delicacy among the northern parts of Barsaive and only a few were able to get the ingredients imported from the Southlands. Not one for sweet things, Jorngar never tried it; he drank troll spirits—ale so strong it could be used to strip the paint off a Crystal Raider’s airship (and sometimes was, as Jorngar would tell Nahor, before downing an entire mug of the stuff).

Jorngar handed the steaming mug to Nahor. “Business is good. The dwarves from the mine come here regularly. Groups of would-be heroes coming up the mountains looking for some adventure also stay. Most

likely they'll just find nothing more than an irritable cave crab and get frost bite.”

Nahor chuckled into his mug and stared at the bar, losing himself in the past. He remembered his days of wandering with his friends.

“I know what you are thinking,” Jorngar said.

Nahor looked up at the troll, whose lower tusks, yellow and worn from age, protruded from his mouth and whose horns spiraled upward from his head. “And what is it that I am thinking?”

“You’re thinking, ‘I used to be one of those stupid adventurers, risking life and limb for what? Glory and fame, and maybe a place in the books at the Great Library of Throal?’ Well obsidiman, you still are an adventurer. Just because you have lived over five troll lives does not mean you are an old man! You are still young compared to some of your kind, and an infant compared to the elders, if the legends be true. For Passions’ sake, I don’t know what I’d do with myself if I lived over twelve-hundred years!”

Nahor smiled. “You would probably still be running The Dainhome.”

The troll’s cacophonous laughter filled the inn. “You are probably right. Let me refill your mug.”

With calloused hands Jorngar grabbed the empty glass. “I remember when you and your friends first came to this inn, thirty years ago. I wasn’t more than a pup back then. I remember there was a terrible snow storm almost as bad as the one we’re having.”

Jorngar’s story paralleled Nahor’s memories. He and his four friends had finished tracking and killing a pack of Gnashers, squat Horrors with

giant maws full of dagger-like teeth that devour everything in their sight. They had been attacking a village's herd of mountain goats. When the goats had all been eaten, the creatures ate the villagers. Nahor and his friends had been on their way back to the town, when a nasty snowstorm struck. Fortunately, they had spotted The Dainhome.

Jorngar's voice rammed into Nahor's thoughts, "There were five of you that came in that dreary day asking for one room, you, Giddeon, Celdorn, Dante, and Valinar, all weather beaten and a bit bloodied too, if I recall correctly. I remember being amazed by all of you. You were dirty and tired but you looked regal, like heroes in children's stories. Tales about the Purifiers were already spreading across the mountains. I was so eager to be near you that I snuck up to your room and put my ear to your door to listen. I don't think any of you heard me either, otherwise I don't think I'd be alive to retell the tale. You all seemed so wary."

"Oh, we knew you were there. Giddeon had summoned a spirit to watch outside our room and it told him of your presence. That and the creaking floorboards didn't aid you in your stealthy enterprise. But we knew you were no threat."

Jorngar slapped his hand on the bar. "And here I thought I was being sneaky!"

Nahor raised his brow and snickered, "A quiet troll is like a goodly horror—they just don't exist."

"Hey now, we trolls can be quiet if need be, maybe not as quiet as a street rat from Kratis, but quiet none the less! May I continue?" Nahor nodded, let out a chuckle as he took another sip of his drink, "I was saddened that night by what I heard, for it was the last time the great

Purifiers would be together as a whole group.”

“We had adventured together for many years, but personal matters conspired to split us apart, and while that night was our last as a whole, we vowed to meet here once a year to renew our bond of friendship.” Nahor shivered as he felt a cold breeze that snuck through the wall cracks assault him. He dipped his finger into his drink then sucked the sweet chocolate residue from it.

Jorngar eagerly added, “Yes, you met here on the anniversary of the night that the Purifiers broke.”

Nahor shook his head. “We did not break. We each went our own way. Dante sought the long forgotten Paladins, Celdorn his mother, and Valinar left to better serve his queen. Only Giddeon and I remained together. But I know that our thoughts were always on each other. Our hearts never strayed.” Reminiscing about the night he and his friends parted saddened the oft-immovable Nahor. So many times did he long for the past—to adventure again with his friends. Every year when the five friends met at The Dainhome it was as if the Purifiers had never parted. Alas, time took its toll, and the group’s numbers dwindled. Now only Nahor and Valinar remained.

Jorngar saw the sadness carve its way into Nahor’s face. He slammed his meaty hand onto the table and shouted, “Come, let us not think of such sad things! This night is for renewing old bonds. So drink and be merry!”

Nahor smiled, raised his drink to Jorngar, and drained the mug. “Speaking of old friends,” he said as he put the mug on the bar, “am I the first to arrive?”

Grabbing the mug to refill it, Jorngar answered, “No, your blood elf friend showed up a few days ago with a lady friend. She seemed quite the lady, if you take my meaning, and the two were very amorous, despite her condition.” Jorngar gave Nahor his drink and turned to the waiting barmaid, who gave him an order.

Nahor was puzzled. “Her condition? What is wrong Valinar’s companion?”

Jorngar grabbed a stein and began wiping it. “Oh, the woman is fine, but very pregnant.” He finished drying the stein, then filled it to the brim with a brew so dark it looked black. “Here you go lass,” he said with a smile and wink, and gave it to the barmaid.

Nahor contemplated the news. He knew Valinar to be quite the charmer, but none of his letters suggested he had settled down or was going to be a father. Nahor furrowed his brow and took another sip of the sweet chocolate, relishing the feeling as it slid down his throat, warming him from the inside out. Who, he wondered, was Valinar’s friend?

A scream flew from the second floor. People stopped what they were doing and looked up. Jorngar looked up. The barmaid dropped an order of food. Nahor and the other customers warming themselves by the fire looked at each other. Many stood up and brought their hands to their swords, an almost unconscious action. A second scream pierced the air. Nahor stood up and scanned both sides of the second floor, fists clenched at his sides.

Bursting from a room, a woman ran down the stairs carrying a wrapped bundle in her arms. Through the woman’s tattered clothes

Nahor saw the many thorns protruding through her skin, the mark of a blood elf. The woman looked over the crowd, and when her eyes rested on Nahor's scarred face, she walked up to him. As she approached, Nahor was about to ask her what was the matter, but she gave him no time. With narrowed eyes she spoke, her words oozing hatred.

“Here. Take it. I don't want that bastard's child!”

These were not the first elvish words Nahor expected to hear after being away for so long. The woman thrust the infant into his arms. Nahor was dumbstruck. He could only look on as the distraught blood elf wove around the tables and inn's customers towards the door. She brandished a bloody dagger to any who tried to stop her. Once at the door, the blood elf flung it open. The door slammed against the wall, its hinges cracking from the force. The woman glanced at Nahor, her icy eyes briefly making contact with his. Then she disappeared into the blizzard, wearing only her threadbare clothes and clutching her dagger.

Howling winds and snow blew into the inn, stirring the coals of the common fire. Customers hunkered down and put their hands around warm mugs of hot ale or spiced wine. Many looked at Nahor. Their scraggly faces asked for an explanation, but Nahor, confused as they were, gave them none. Jorngar rushed to close the rickety door—the old inn was already drafty enough with all the little cracks and gaps in its frame.

Nahor unswaddled the blood soaked rags. Inside he found a sleeping elf baby. Almond-shaped and sloping, its eyes moved back and forth in a flurry of motion under delicate lids.

“My son . . .” A weak voice fluttered down the stairs into the

common room.

Looking up, Nahor saw Valinar, one of the most skilled swordsmen in all of Barsaive, drowning in his own blood. Valinar tried walking down the steps, but was so weak that he stumbled and crashed down the stairway.

With the baby still in one arm, Nahor rushed to Valinar and leaned him against the bottom stair with his free hand. Despite his gargantuan size, Nahor had the grace and tenderness of an elf maiden as he swept aside blood-matted hair from Valinar's face.

“My friend. What has happened?”

“Nahor,” Valinar said, coughing up blood. “I am dying. Ple . . .”

“Nonsense!” Nahor's golden eyes glistened as tears began to well. He held Valinar closer to him. Many of the thorns that covered his skin were broken or had been ripped out.

“You will be fine. I have my salves. Just rest. You will see,” Nahor said.

“No. I am dying. Loreenna saw to that. She has cursed me and in doing so has killed me. I should have never lain with that wench. Who knew it would produce such rank fruit.”

Nahor looked from Valinar to the elf baby. Perhaps Valinar did not want his child. Nahor had never imagined Valinar as a father. The blood elf spent too much time on missions for the elf court, spent too much time wooing the women he came to be involved with, and then not enough time maintaining his involvement. He was like a passing sun storm, coming and going within a matter of seconds. And yet, Nahor and Valinar had remained friends for over forty years. Nahor looked over

the racked and wounded body of his friend. None of his healing skills could save Valinar—the injuries were caused by magic and too severe for mundane treatment.

“And now I am about to lose my son, almost as soon as I have met him. The Passions do have an ironic sense of humor don’t they? But who knows, perhaps they will aid me in my voyage as I become free of this shell, and leave for the forest of my ancestors.”

Nahor thought about days long past, times no less dangerous than now, when the group was whole, before it had unraveled. Gideon, Nahor’s troll friend, had passed from this world long ago; Celdorn, the Shosaran elf had confronted a powerful Horror while searching for his mother, and in doing so had sacrificed himself so the others could escape; Dante had disappeared not long after the group had gone their separate ways, when he went chasing after the legend of a Paladin sanctuary in the Dragon Mountains.

“You always were a bit cynical, Valinar, but I will ask the Passion Lochost to help you. He comes to me sometimes you know, in my dreams.”

Valinar squeezed his eyes shut as pain shot through his body. Forcing open his blood-encrusted lids, he looked at Nahor. “My friend, before I go, show me my son so I might look upon his face once more.” Nahor brought the newborn to Valinar. His smooth face—rosy and filled with life—lacked the thorns that marked his father’s face and entire body. This baby was too new to have gone through the Ritual of Thorns, the magical process that elves endured when becoming blood elves. The thorns protruding from their skin caused blood elves to be in constant

pain and bleed incessantly. Many died during the process, and others went insane from the overwhelming pain. But the elves of the Blood Wood had made their choice long ago, and so any elf who called himself loyal to the queen and her court went through the ritual.

Horrors thrived on pain they inflicted. If a creature were already in pain the Horror would find no sustenance, gain no pleasure. During the height of the Scourge, the time when Horrors ran around the world destroying everything, the elves' defenses began to falter. Queen Alachia ordered the Ritual of Thorns be done to save her people. It worked, and the Horrors left the elves to find more satisfying prey. However, the elves paid a great cost. Many died and the Wyrms Wood, the elves' ancient home and a verdant place, changed forever. It soon became known as the Blood Wood because the land, the plants, animals, and elves constantly bled. Nahor recognized the logic of the Ritual of Thorns, but felt it was no longer needed, since the Horrors had receded.

With his blood-covered hand, Valinar caressed his child, leaving a red trail on the baby's forehead. The swordmaster smiled and leaned forward to kiss the newborn. He then lay back against the step.

Valinar's face turned pale; he bled out at the points where his thorns protruded through his skin. His light clothes were soaked; shallow breaths came in sputters and rasps; the elf wheezed his last words: "Raise my son, Nahor. Do not let the world change him into me. Teach him." Valinar coughed and convulsed. Blood spurted from his mouth. He closed his eyes and squeezed Nahor's hand so hard the obsidian winced from the pressure. The spasms passed as quickly as they came. Valinar's muscles relaxed, his eyes fluttered open, he looked up and half-

smiled; his last breath eased out of him like a whisper.

Pulling out a knife, Nahor slit his palm, and the words sobbed out of him. “I will raise your son, Valinar. Be at rest, my friend, my brother.” Nahor’s blue blood trickled down his green, rocky hand, and dripped onto Valinar’s blood soaked vest. “I will be his teacher and guardian. I swear it.”