



BETRAYAL

The Dhamon Saga • Volume Two

Jean Rabe





CHAPTER ONE

NURA'S CHOICE

Inside the cave the darkness was an impenetrable blanket that cloaked the creature sleeping within. Only its breath gave it away—this raspy and uneven, echoing hauntingly against the stone walls and escaping as a breeze to tease the coppery curls of the child who stood just beyond the entrance.

She was no more than five or six, cherubic and clothed in a diaphanous dress that at first glance appeared to be fashioned of pale flower petals, but on closer inspection seemed instead to shimmer as if it were made of magic. The fingers of her left hand were clenched about the haft of a glaive, an axe-bladed polearm more than twice her height that looked far too unwieldy for her to manage. The fingers of her right hand playfully stroked the giant fern leaves that helped to conceal the cave mouth. The green of the ferns was intense, brightened by a fiery late afternoon sun and made slick with humidity. Droplets of water beaded and gleamed like diamonds.



“Mumummmm-ummm,” she sang when she spotted a furry caterpillar, striped orange and golden-brown, standing out starkly against a diamond-dotted frond. She stared at it for several long moments, then gently picked it up and held it before her wide, blue eyes. “Soft,” she pronounced. “Very pretty.” The thing slowly wriggled, and in response she laughed in a voice that was not at all childlike. She popped the caterpillar into her mouth and swallowed it, just as she stepped inside the cave and was swallowed by the darkness.

“Master?” she whispered, as she instinctively padded forward, her bare feet slapping against the stone. It was an enormous cave, whose depths she couldn’t guess, no matter if dozens of torches had been merrily burning. It was one of several the creature had in this part of Krynn, all connected through underground tunnels that the child was occasionally permitted to wander. This particular cave was the most familiar to her.

Though well shielded from the sun, the interior was stifling, the air damp and close and filled with the strong, sweet-sour stench of decay. The child inhaled deeply, holding and relishing the scent, then almost reluctantly releasing it.

“Master?”

A pause, then again she repeated the word, no longer a question now, as she effortlessly tossed the glaive to the floor, its blade clanging against the stone. In response, twin globes of dull yellow appeared in the middle of the blackness. They were eyes, larger than wagon wheels and cut through by murky catlike slits. Though there was a thick film on them, they gave off a faint light, eerie and just enough to illuminate the creature’s massive snout and the child who was dwarfed by it. The girl stood on her toes and reverently stretched a hand up to graze the edge of the creature’s jaw.



"You summoned me, O Very Old One?" Her voice was husky now and had an edge to it, a sultry woman's voice.

The creature's raspy breath was broken by a rumbling of words so sonorous and loud they caused a tremor to ripple through the ground. "Nura Bint-Drax," it said, each syllable excruciatingly drawn out and returning as an echo. "Nura. My very young servant."

"Your chosen one." The child smiled and shifted back and forth on the balls of her feet, spread her arms wide. She turned her head this way and that so the hot breeze of the creature's fetid breath could wash over her. "Your very loyal servant."

There were no more words for a time. The creature silently regarded the child, and the child basked in the creature's presence. Then the great eyes blinked, and the child haltingly stepped back, thin arms falling to her sides, shoulders squaring, unblemished face fixed forward, standing like a soldier at attention.

The rumbling started again. The words came so ponderously slow that the child had to concentrate to understand.

"Yes, Master. I have made a selection, a most suitable one. You will be quite pleased."

She felt the next question as much as heard it, the tremors shivering through the stone floor and tickling the bottoms of her feet.

"His name is Dhamon Grimwulf, Master. A human."

There was another silence, this one seemingly interminable, as Nura's legs and arms tingled from remaining straight and motionless for so long. She breathed shallowly and somehow managed not to blink. Finally, the creature's breath quickened and it raised its head, tucking its jaw into its neck and tilting it so as to look sharply down upon the child, eyes narrowing disapprovingly.

"A human," the creature stated, the two words uttered with such contempt and power that when the



ground shook this time Nura had to struggle to keep her balance.

The child bravely thrust out her chin. "Yes, Master. Dhamon is a human, but he is the one, I believe."

The creature growled, as bits of rock and dust fell from overhead like the beginning of rain. "You are certain, Nura Bint-Drax? You have no doubts?"

"He is the one." She tipped her head, and a corner of her mouth turned slightly upward. "I have been testing him, O Very Old One."

"I know." The ground vibrated softly this time, as though the creature was purring. It opened its eyes wide again, giving light to the cave interior. "Tell me of this. . . ."

"Dhamon Grimwulf." Nura's head angled back as far as she could manage, her wide child's eyes meeting the creature's steady gaze. "He was a Knight of Takhisis, Master, a commander of men. Once he rode a great blue dragon into battle, but he turned from the Dark Knights, anointed by the powerful goodness of an aging Solamnic, further touched by Goldmoon, who made him her champion. This is proof he can be swayed."

Nura paused, picking through the complex rumbling that followed. "Yes, Master. Dhamon Grimwulf was that man, the one who led a band of mortals to the Window to the Stars to confront the five dragon overlords. He was victorious that day, though not a single dragon died. Victorious because he took a stand and lived. A pity he did not recognize what he had achieved."

The rumbling intensified, and Nura put all her effort into keeping her balance and deciphering the words. When the ground quieted, the child waved her hands in front of her face and shook her head. "No, O Very Old One, he is Goldmoon's champion no longer. He no longer struggles against the overlords. Now he has no cares beyond his own pleasure. There are very few who call him friend."



"A fallen hero," the creature stated.

"Yes, Master."

"A common thief." There was a near-painful skritch sound, of something sharp being scraped across the stone, then a throaty growl that encouraged her to continue.

"Master, I believe Dhamon Grimwulf's spirit and honor died when he decided the dragon overlords were unstoppable. His beliefs in a better world and in himself as a catalyst to achieve that are buried deep in his heart. Hope does not exist for him."

The creature canted its head and gave a nod.

"Dhamon has been battered by life . . . or rather by a living death that seems to pursue him and instead claim the lives of close friends and charges. To be close to Dhamon Grimwulf is to risk corruption and death, it seems."

She moved closer to the creature, as it lowered its great head so she could tease the barbels that hung from its chin. "A young green dragon slew his men in the Qualinesti Forest," Nura added. "Then Dhamon killed his own second-in-command in the throes of drunken self-defense. Though there are many things that have gone wrong in his life, I think that act was the final blow that turned him completely inward. He has lost confidence in himself and in Krynn. Yes, he is a fallen hero, Master. But he is the one."

The creature closed its eyes, and the cave was plunged into darkness. Vibrations raced through the stone, intense and echoing. The child clamped her hands over her ears and stepped away. The creature rested its head on the floor, and eventually the vibrations slowed, before ceasing, to be replaced by the raspy uneven breath of its slumber. When it awoke several hours later, the child was patiently sitting nearby. The eerie light of the creature's eyes showed Nura's own eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"More," the creature stated.

"Regarding Dhamon Grimwulf?"



"Yes. More. You must do more so that I can be certain."

Nura digested the words and put a meaning to them. "You wish me to test him further, Master?"

There was a harsh grating sound that the child understood as affirmative.

"Indeed I shall test him more," Nura said, the excitement thick in her voice. "I shall test him to the very limits of his existence. If he dies, I shall have been proved wrong, and I shall search for another. If he does not die, and if he can be thoroughly broken, swayed to our side, made useful . . ." She let the words hang in the foul air. "If this Dhamon Grimwulf can survive my tests . . ."

". . . then indeed he is the one," the creature finished. It turned its head, eyes looking past Nura and to a wall of mist that was forming before the cave mouth.

The child wheeled to see what it was the creature was observing in its magical vision. Forming across the face of the mist were trees and ferns and gently-swaying lianas, the varieties indicating the scene was far from this cave. It was night in the image, but there was the faintest hint of a flickering light.

"It must be a torch," the child said. A moment later her keen eyes recognized the torch-bearer, and she softly laughed. "That human woman with the red hair," she stated, "and the dark man who follows her . . . they are of no consequence to us."

The creature snarled almost imperceptibly.

"As you wish, O Very Old One. I will attend to them. I live to serve you."

