



# *REDEMPTION*

*The Dhamon Saga • Volume Three*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# WIND AND SCALES

**T**he creature's leathery wings beat strong and steady as it climbed into the night sky and cut its course against a violent wind. The full moon illuminated a mantichora easily the size of a hatchling dragon. It had the body and coloration of a lion, a disconcertingly human-looking visage, and a long, ropy tail ending in a clump of deadly spikes. Without warning the mantichora threw back its head and roared, an eerie sound that sliced through the howling wind and sent shivers down its three passengers' spines.

Dhamon Grimwulf sat just behind the head of the mantichora, wedged with Fiona between two of the spikes that ran the length of the creature's back. He leaned as far to his right as safe and practical, avoiding the mantichora's flailing mane, but the wind stung his eyes and caused the ragged garment's sleeves to billow and snap like a sail. He thought the wind oddly warm, despite it being early fall and so late at night, and despite their flying at least forty feet above the tallest trees of the black dragon's swamp.



Fiona's breath was warmer still, and gentler, against his neck. The Solamnic Knight's arms were wrapped around his waist, her chest pressed tight against his back. She spoke into his ear.

"I must buy a fine gown for my wedding, Dhamon. When we reach a city . . . it won't be long until we reach a city, will it?"

Never mind, Fiona, that you haven't a single steel piece in your pocket, Dhamon thought, or that there will be no wedding. Your beloved Rig is dead, and you are mad. You and I saw him die an arm's length away.

"My mother always told me I look best in blue," she added.

"Colors don't matter, lady. Only thing that matters right now is that this damnable beast is flying too fast." The grumbling came from Ragh, the sivak draconian who was perched precariously behind the Knight. "Much too fast in this strong of a wind."

He repeated his complaint twice more, getting no reply—either because Dhamon or Fiona didn't care or couldn't hear his whispery-hoarse voice above the wind and the beast's noisily flapping wings. The draconian was clearly distraught, and his legs were growing numb because he had them clenched so tight around the manticore's haunches. Ragh dug his stubby claws in for good measure, feeling the manticore's coarse hide ripple in protest. The creature roared again.

"And we're too damnably high."

Though most sivaks could fly—they were the only draconians who could naturally do so—Ragh had lost his wings to a cruel punishment and had no desire to see if he could survive a fall from this lofty position.

He kept his eyes trained on the back of Dhamon's head, sucked in a deep breath, and tried to calm himself—fighting the sensation that his stomach was rising into his



throat. After nearly an hour had passed and the air had cooled a little, the draconian indeed managed to relax—if only slightly. He decided to chance a brief look below. Peering at the darkness underneath that marked the weave of cypress branches, Ragh spotted a gap in the foliage and through this caught a glimpse of a silver ribbon, which was the moon reflecting off a river tributary. There wasn't much more of the swamp to clear now.

Training his eyes to the west—the direction in which they were headed—Ragh spotted what looked like a pane of black glass, which was the New Sea. Beyond it, barely visible, stretched the wrinkled landscape of the Eastwall Mountains of Abanasinia. A bank of pale gray clouds hung above the peaks like a mantle, and yellow threads of lightning flickered inside the clouds.

Far beneath them, Ragh sensed something worse than a storm brewing. There'd been a prickling at the back of his scaly neck ever since they had left the ground, his uneasiness growing worse by the minute. He'd told Dhamon right away, but Dhamon said he didn't detect anything. That was better than an hour ago now. They certainly seemed to be all alone up here, high in the sky. Nothing was around to bother them.

Still, Ragh took another glance down, this time after several minutes spotting . . . *something* . . . his eyes were far too keen to play tricks on him. There was something there, something definite paralleling their movement, a black shape amidst the darkness of the tree tops. No, two shapes. Maybe three. Definitely three. But everything was too murky, and they were moving too fast to make out details, save that the “somethings” had wings and were sizeable.

Perhaps he should shout to Dhamon Grimwulf and Fiona that he'd seen . . . *something*. Shout that *something* definitely didn't look right about the shapes following



them. He was certain he could be heard above the wind and the wings if he truly wanted to be heard. Perhaps the manticore should dive and hide in the uppermost canopy of the swamp rather than cut through the open sky where there was no cover.

“Fiona,” he growled. “We might have company. Fiona?”

No reply.

“Dhamon?” Ragh persisted. Perhaps the shapes were nothing more than a few giant owls, coincidentally headed in the same direction. Or perhaps the strong wind might be tossing the branches a certain way to create shadowy illusions. He craned his neck around Fiona’s slender shoulders. Dhamon had his head thrown back and was letting the wind rush across his face, enjoying the ride in the way Ragh used to enjoy flying when he had wings. If Dhamon—with all of his preternaturally sharp senses—was not at all concerned, the draconian told himself, then he needn’t be concerned either. But . . . he did see *something*.

Or did he? Ragh squinted and blinked away the tears caused by the wind, stared downward, trying to again find the shapes. There was nothing there now. He stared for several minutes. Nothing but treetops. So . . . no reason to alert Dhamon after all. No reason to be dismissed as a worrier, chided about his nerves. The sivak sighed and withdrew his claws from the manticore’s hide, placing them lightly around Fiona’s waist. Then, like Dhamon, he canted his head back, closed his eyes, and let the wind stream across his angular, silver face.

Dhamon had heard the draconian, had also heard Fiona say something about Rig. He ignored them both. He was trusting that the manticore knew the way to Southern Ergoth, to the Solamnic outpost on its western shore where he wanted to deposit Fiona. The female Knight had slipped into madness following Rig’s recent death in the



black dragon's city, and Dhamon realized she needed someone to tend to her. He considered himself neither qualified nor obligated to do so. Still, he knew that no matter how insensitive he'd been to people lately he couldn't simply abandon her. And so, this aerial voyage.

"Rig's dead, Fiona," he said, as much to himself as to her. Dead and likely filling the bellies of the foul creatures on display in the city. He doubted the black dragon's lack-eyes went to the trouble of burying anyone. Dhamon had never truly considered Rig a friend, at least not a close one, but he had respected the mariner and he had, in grudging fashion, admired him, at times envied him. The mariner's death sat uneasily on his conscience, as if there was something he could have done to prevent it. One more departed companion to add to Dhamon's list. To know me is to risk death, he grimly mused.

Dhamon sighed and breathed deep of the air, which was cooling as they flew farther and rose higher away from the heart of the black dragon's realm. He realized some part of him was relishing this crazy ride. It reminded him of the times he was paired with a blue dragon in the Dark Knights' army. He rode that swift dragon at every opportunity, reveling in flying high above the world, feeling cocooned by the air, the wind, the clouds, and the sky.

A myriad of smells filled Dhamon's keen senses: the muskiness of the manticore that bore them; the fetidness of the damp land below; and now the pleasant and salty scent of the New Sea, signaling they were finally beyond the swamp and over the water. There was also the faint sulfurous smell of a blacksmith's shop, which he attributed to Ragh—all sivaks seemed to carry that odor like a brand. Too, Dhamon could smell his own rankness, clothes covered with dried blood and sweat, skin and hair coated with days of grime. He wrinkled his nose in disgust.



Beyond the New Sea lay the mountains that were their destination. He let his thoughts drift and the wind consume him. There would be time enough to address his worries when his feet were again on the ground and when Fiona was in other hands.

Suddenly Dhamon felt the manticore tense beneath him. He opened his eyes and looked over the great beast's side. Through the beating wings he spotted three black shapes rising from the blackness of the New Sea. The shapes were difficult to discern, and if the moon was not out, their coloration would have rendered them effectively invisible.

"Spawn!" Dhamon cursed. He drew his sword with his right hand and firmly twisted his left in the manticore's mane. Fiona's sword was already out, though she kept one hand hooked in Dhamon's belt.

The manticore tucked its wings against its sides, turned, and dived on the lead creature. Ragh again dug his claws into the manticore and swore inwardly for not warning Dhamon about the *somethings* he'd seen a while ago.

They were particularly large spawn, each at least eight feet tall, broadly shouldered, and vaguely man-shaped. Glossy black against the blackness of the New Sea, their scales caught the moonlight and made them shimmer like oil. Through the wind Dhamon heard their scalloped wings beating, faintly heard their almost-in-unison intake of breath, their jaws opening wide. He braced himself.

The lead spawn was the first to release its spray of acid. Under the right circumstances, it would have drenched the manticore and its riders, seriously injuring them all and probably causing them to fall to their deaths. But the manticore had angled itself with the wind, cutting the force of the acid-spray. Only the manticore and Dhamon were hit, and only lightly.

"Aye, but you are a smart beast!" Dhamon called to the manticore. "You use the wind to our favor!"



The spawn hovered, keeping their distance and hurriedly communicating in a collection of hisses and grunts. Dhamon strained to catch the few intelligible words, but even his uncanny hearing couldn't entirely cut through the shrieking wind and the loud, insistent flapping of the manticore's wings. All he managed to pick up were the words "attack" and "ssslay," both of which seemed staples in spawn vocabulary.

Suddenly the middle creature raised its claws, and the other two flew off to either side, attempting to circle the manticore and its riders. Dhamon stretched as far as he dared, leading with his sword and swinging, but he couldn't quite reach the nearest spawn—it was just beyond his range. That meant it was also too far away to claw at him but close enough to breathe on him—and this time the spawn was on the quiet side of the wind. The spawn released a gout of acid that splashed against Dhamon's tunic and burned through to his skin. Most of the spray caught Fiona, however.

"Come closer!" Dhamon shouted at it in frustration. "Fight me, you scaly demon!"

Behind him, he felt Fiona lurch in pain, nearly dislodging him because she was holding fast to his belt. Somehow she held on and was swinging at the spawn on the other side. She shouted in triumph as she landed what felt like a solid blow.

"Fight me!" Dhamon shouted at the nearest spawn, which was readying another blast of breath. "Fight . . ." The rest of his words were lost as the manticore roared louder than before, the sound piercing him and making him so dizzy he nearly lost his grip.

Without warning, the manticore shifted its position, head thrown back so its mane fell across Dhamon, covering him like a blanket. The creature was angled nearly straight up, desperately trying to evade the acid spray, and Dhamon,





Fiona, and Ragh threw all their efforts into simply holding on and not being sliced by the back spikes that were cutting into them. As it climbed, the manticore's wings beat at an odd angle, so ungainly that Ragh was surprised the creature could stay aloft. A keening came from the frantically beating wings, a shrill whistling that drowned out the wind and filled their senses, made them feel as if hundreds of heated needles were pricking at them.

"Hold on!" Dhamon yelled to Fiona, shaking his head to work it free of the mane so he could see.

Another roar, and Dhamon believed he'd heard nothing so deafening in his entire life. Not even the roar of the blue dragons on a battlefield matched this eruption. Gritting his teeth, he barely managed to sheathe his sword and with his free hand flailed about behind him until he grabbed a fistful of the Knight's tunic.

"Fiona, hang on!" *Don't become one more name to add to the list of dead comrades*, he thought.

As the painful noise continued, Dhamon sucked in a breath, his chest achingly tight. The sound became unbearable to a man whose hearing was so sharp. The multitude of stabbing needles felt like fiery daggers now, and at the same time, as they climbed upward, he felt as if his body was being pressed down by heavy stones.

"Can't breathe."

He was growing stupefied, as if he were drunk. He felt his blood pounding against his temples, and he was certain he would black out at any moment. He clamped his teeth down on his tongue, hoping to create a different pain that would keep him alert. He wound his hands tightly in the mane and in Fiona's tunic. The sound is torturous, he thought. Does the creature mean to kill the spawn and us, too?

"Stop!" he shouted to the manticore. "You'll kill us!" Then he bit down on his tongue again and tasted blood.



The sound was also brutal to the spawn. The two smaller spawn slammed their clawed hands over their ears in a futile effort to block out the noise. Dhamon twisted, and through a haze of pain spotted the largest spawn—the closest one—the one who offered the greatest threat. But the enemy was helpless, rather than dangerous. It contorted in the air, wings beating erratically, then abruptly it bucked and seized and plunged like a rock. It finally regained control at the very edge of Dhamon's vision. It hovered there for but an instant, then resumed its dive toward the New Sea until it disappeared from his sight.

"Stop it!" Dhamon tried again, jabbing his heels against the creature's sides. "Stop the noise or we'll die!" The manticore did not pay any attention to him.

Ragh had his chin tucked into his chest and his elbows squeezed against his sides, equally beleaguered, the sound and the pressures threatening to unseat him at any moment. Fiona, too, was fighting to stay conscious in the cacophonous onslaught.

The remaining two spawn had their mouths open, screaming in pain, Dhamon felt certain, though he couldn't hear them over the manticore's keening. Blood ran from one creature's nose and mouth, its eyes were wide and fixed, its wings were beating feebly now. A heartbeat later its wings stopped, and it joined the first in a swift plummet toward the water far below. The last spawn held on, its eyes narrowed, flitting between each of the passengers, lingering on Dhamon—who was the only one able to return its hate-filled glare.

Lips quivering in a snarl, the spawn dropped several feet below them, gaining some distance, only to swoop up suddenly on the other side. The spawn darted in, slashing at the manticore's wing, then retreated to a safe position again—all the while its mouth parted in a hideous, pained



expression. Dhamon saw blood glistening in the moonlight, a long rent in the manticore's wing that looked ugly and raw. Still, their massive mount managed to beat its wings, keeping its odd position, its keening continuing unabated as it shifted ever so slightly to once more surprise the spawn by materializing in its path. Then the manticore roared, whipping its tail and flicking out its spikes to catch the spawn in the chest.

The spawn defiantly inhaled to fuel yet another gout of its caustic breath, but the spikes had caused mortal wounds, and the spawn burst in an explosion of its own acid. The manticore howled, as it bore the brunt of the blast. The acid ate away part of its mane and bubbled and hissed against the hide of its forelegs. The manticore had caught some of the deadly acid directly in the face and on the undersides of its wings, too.

Its wings slowed, the keening subsided. The pounding against Dhamon's temples stopped too, and he could breathe easily again. Dhamon released Fiona and felt around behind him to make sure she was OK. He saw she had dropped her sword.

"Fiona." Louder, "Fiona!"

"I'm all right." Dazedly, she placed both hands around Dhamon's waist.

Ragh was grumbling behind her, glancing down to make sure no more spawn were coming. He gingerly withdrew his claws from the manticore—they were covered in the creature's blood, he'd dug them in so deep.

The three spawn were but a token force from Shrentak, a city rife with spawn. At least Dhamon felt certain the spawn had come from Shrentak, no doubt sent to exact revenge for the trouble he had caused there. In that city, several days earlier, Dhamon, Ragh, and Dhamon's best friend Maldred had located an old sage whom they believed had the power to cure Dhamon's malady—the



dragon scale embedded in his leg that haunted and tormented him. While the sage was indeed able to remove all the newer, smaller scales that had sprouted around the original scale, she'd done nothing to remove the large scale. In fact, she had disappeared, leaving him and Ragh alone in the catacombs beneath her tower. Maldred had become separated and lost.

Trying to find Maldred or leave, Dhamon and Ragh took a wrong turn and found themselves in the dungeons of the black dragon. Among the prisoners they freed were Fiona and Rig, two old comrades on a foolish quest of their own. During their struggle to leave the city, Dhamon had freed this manticore from a cage in the marketplace. They had left Maldred behind, fleeing to save their lives against overwhelming odds.

"Left Maldred behind," Dhamon muttered to himself. "Perhaps he's dead, too."

Dhamon guessed that despite the still-ferocious wind, it would take the manticore less than two hours to cross the New Sea and reach the coast of Abanasinia. He was right. It was dawn by the time they made it to the mountains. The creature landed clumsily along the edge of a trail, clawed feet scrabbling in earth made slick by the light rain coming down. Dhamon attempted to examine the manticore's wing, but the creature would have none of his indulgence. It licked the wound, then curled up as a dog might and quickly fell asleep. Ragh settled himself nearby and stared grumpily up at the clouds and the thin arcs of lightning that played overhead.

The landscape was as dismal as Dhamon's mood, the scrub grass dead and plastered against the ground, the scant trees leafless and wedged between rocks—everything brown and gray and chill. Fall had a firm grip on the place. He knew all of this country probably wasn't so depressing, that farther down the trail in either direction



would be villages, and that quite a bit farther to the north would be larger towns. There would be fires burning. Pleasant conversation and warm food inside dry homes. There would be life.

“And I all I think about is death,” Dhamon muttered to himself. He stood several yards away from the others, keeping a wary eye on Fiona. He saw that the skin of her sword arm was bubbled and scarred from the spawn’s breath and that part of her hair was melted away. Her cheek and neck also had been hit by the acid, and Dhamon knew she would never look beautiful again. Yet she behaved as though in a trance, showing no awareness of her injuries.

“You’re going back to Shrentak, aren’t you, Dhamon?” the draconian asked after a long silence. His eyes continued to follow the flashes of lightning. “For your big friend Maldred?”

“Aye,” Dhamon said, watching Fiona stretch out under a rocky overhang. The ground looked reasonably dry there. “As soon as possible I will go back. Maldred will trust I’ll come looking for him.” He paused. “If he’s alive.”

“You’ve still got Nura Bint-Drax to slay,” Ragh added. “She might still be in the city.”

“If she crosses my path.”

Nura Bint-Drax, a naga and agent of the black dragon, had caused Dhamon all manner of problems in the past months. Ragh had been her slave, and she’d bled him countless times to create spawn and abominations. Ragh would be her slave still, had Dhamon not liberated him.

“I will make sure her path crosses ours, Dhamon Grimwulf. We will slay her together.” The draconian studied him, waiting for a reply and receiving only silence.

The rain had plastered Dhamon’s long, black hair against the sides of his face and made his tan skin gleam.



He was striking and formidable looking, with intense black eyes that held mystery, a firm jaw, and a thin but muscular body that was draped in acid-ravaged clothes. Through a rent in his right pant leg, a large black scale was visible. It was shot through with a line of silver. All around it Dhamon's skin was pink, tender-looking. Ragh had been with Dhamon when the old sage removed the smaller scales. Dhamon was unconscious when the sage proudly told Ragh that she could remove the larger one, too, cure Dhamon completely—for a price. She said Ragh was the price, and the draconian reacted violently, slaying her and hiding her corpse. When Dhamon woke up, the draconian told him that the old woman had given up and left.

The draconian was convincing. Dhamon believed him.

Ragh felt only mildly sorry about the lie. The draconian had come to . . . he mulled over the words, finding *like* too strong, but *tolerate* inadequate . . . he had come to *accept* the company of the human. Ragh appreciated Dhamon's strength and drive. And he intended to keep him close by to aid in the matter of Nura Bint-Drax.

"She will cross our path, Dhamon Grimwulf," the draconian repeated his vow firmly. "I promise you that. And we will slay her." Then he lay down, and despite the rain fell quickly asleep.

Dhamon woke the draconian several hours later with a none-too-gentle nudge. "I was a fool to let us rest in the open." It was still raining, a spitting drizzle. He nudged the draconian again. "Move, and be fast about it."

Ragh lumbered to his feet, catching a glimpse of Dhamon's leg. A dozen new small scales already had sprouted around the larger one. "Dhamon . . ."

"Fast."

The draconian scowled to note that a puddle had deepened around him while he'd slept and that half of his body



was now coated with mud. He began brushing at the dirt and mud, but Dhamon repeated the order and gestured toward the manticore, with a drenched and blank-faced Fiona already perched on its back. Then Dhamon nodded east toward the New Sea. Above it, specks of black hung like ink spatters in the dismal-looking sky.

The draconian squinted and shook his head. “You’re thinking that’s more spawn?” A growl grew from deep in his chest. “Could be birds. A flock of big ones.” But there was that prickling at the back of his neck again.

“Aye, they’re spawn.” Dhamon headed toward the manticore. “From the look on your ugly face, I don’t think I have to tell you.”

“I’d rather face such a foe on solid ground.”

Dhamon would have preferred to face the spawn on land too—if Maldred was at his side, and *if* Fiona had her sword and her wits about her. They might stand a chance, then—a small chance. When he spotted the spawn minutes ago his first thought had been to fly on the back of the manticore to safety in the closest town. But spawn wouldn’t be deterred by a town, and their presence would only endanger the citizens there. No, the best chance was to lose them in the sky, evade a fight, something Dhamon found decidedly distasteful.

“We can’t fight them in the air again from the back of that beast,” Ragh continued.

Dhamon made a snorting sound and was quick to climb up and settle himself in front of Fiona. “I count nearly three dozen of them, my silvery friend. We’ve got one sword among us. They’ll be here soon, so hurry if you want to join us—or stay here and face them alone on your solid, muddy ground.”

For a brief moment Ragh considered hiding himself in some crevice, letting the spawn follow Dhamon—no doubt he was their intended target because of the havoc he



had wrought in Shrentak. But the draconian didn't want to take the chance that some of the spawn would linger behind and find him alone—he didn't mind dying, but not yet, not with his revenge against Nura Bint-Drax unsated. Besides, Dhamon would be useful in the fight against Nura Bint-Drax—if they could out-fly these devil spawn.

Dhamon tapped the fingers of his right hand on the pommel of his sword and grabbed hold of the manticore's mane with his left. The creature spread its batlike wings.

Ragh was quick to lodge himself between a pair of back spines and dig his claws into the creature, as before. "I hope this beast has some more flying tricks."

"They're some distance behind us," Dhamon said, as the manticore bunched its leg muscles and vaulted into the air. "I'm hoping we can lose them in the clouds." He pointed toward a thick, dark bank high to the west. "Or we can get far enough away that they'll just give up and go home."

The wind was almost nonexistent over the Eastwalls, and the fine rain came down gentle and soothing. But it was also cool, and as they climbed and headed west, the temperature continued to drop. When Dhamon rode a blue dragon with the Dark Knights, his uniform was thick and designed to protect him from the extreme elements. The tattered clothes he wore now were thin and soaked. While he registered the cold, he was not bothered by it. Fiona, however, also wore tatters and shivered uncontrollably against him.

"What is happening to me?" Dhamon whispered. He knew by all logic he ought to be shivering too, uncomfortably cold—and thoroughly exhausted. He'd stood guard while the others had slept for several hours. He hadn't slept in nearly three days. Yet he was only mildly fatigued. Rather than feeling pleased about his surprising fortitude, he was worried and angered by it. In the past several





hours he had watched as the small scales had again materialized around the large scale on his leg—all of the old sage’s work apparently for naught. His thigh itched constantly, and he suspected more scales were forming.

“There is no cure. I should’ve never gone to Shrentak looking for one.”

Black spawn wouldn’t be chasing them if he’d stayed away from Sable’s city. He wouldn’t be stuck on the back of this wounded beast headed toward the white overlord’s frigid land. Maldred would still be alive, safe, and planning some grand scheme to get riches for both of them. Rig and Fiona? Well, if Dhamon hadn’t gone to Shrentak, they’d likely *both* be dead, victims of beatings and starvation in the dungeons.

He felt Fiona shiver again. Despite her madness, her courage was admirable—she didn’t complain, not about the spawn, and certainly not about the cold.

But you’re going to get even colder before the day is out, Dhamon thought. That was only a certainty, provided they could escape the spawn and eventually reach Southern Ergoth. The island continent—save one stretch of land on its western coast—was covered in ice and snow, courtesy of the white dragon overlord, and the winds that whipped across the land were intensely bitter. But they had to fly over the frigid island, or at very least over one of its glacier-filled bays in the south, to reach the Solamnic outpost on the western shore.

If they couldn’t lose the spawn, they wouldn’t have to worry about the cold, the ice, or anything any more.

The manticore roared as it climbed higher, and Dhamon could make out words.

“One chance,” the manticore said.

They were the first words the creature had spoken since Dhamon had rescued it from the foul city of Shrentak, and as payment had agreed to carry them to Southern Ergoth.



The manticore banked southwest, to where the clouds in the distance were the darkest. While the creature had fared well against the trio of spawn the night before, the manticore knew those coming now were too many to handle. The manticore roared again, loud and long and disturbing.

"The storm," Dhamon understood the creature to say. "We will lose them in the storm. Or we will lose ourselves."

For the better part of the day, the manticore somehow managed to keep a long lead on the spawn, and for a time Dhamon believed they might actually outdistance the vile things. But with the setting of the sun, the manticore tired, its sides heaving from its work. They'd passed over the road that ran between Solace and New Ports, only a few merchants on it this dreary day. Their course also took them over the Darken Wood and past Haven, then over Qualinesti, the ancient forest homeland of the elves. The scent of the rich loam was so strong it reached high enough to tease Dhamon's keen senses. They had nearly cleared the forest when a shout from Ragh let them know the spawn were gaining.

"There are *more* than three dozen!" the draconian yelled with as much volume as his whispery voice could summon. "The Black must hate you fiercely, Dhamon Grimwulf, to send a small army after you!"

The prickly sensation was stronger, and the draconian was certain now it was more of a link than a warning, an indication that spawn he had "fathered" were near. Some of those in the pack that was closing in on them must have been made with his blood and Nura Bint-Drax's heinous spell. The draconian reached a talon up to trace the thick scars on his neck and chest, where Nura had bled him to make the creatures.

"Dhamon! Urge this beast to go faster!" Ragh shouted,



as he punched the manticore in the side in frustration. “I’ll not fall to spawn! I must live to see Nura Bint-Drax dead!”

The manticore was struggling to go faster, sides heaving, and voicing what sounded almost like human gasps. The creature was steadily working its way closer to the thickest of the storm clouds. From the heavy scent of rain in the air, the increase in the wind, and the frequent rumblings of thunder, Dhamon could tell it was a considerable storm indeed. He had no real desire to fly into the midst of it—as a Dark Knight he had ridden a blue dragon, one that could summon a storm, and he knew from experience that it was far from pleasant to pass through a storm with lightning dancing all around.

For a moment he considered commanding the weary manticore to land so they could take their chances on the ground, as the draconian had suggested. Then the manticore finally cleared the forest and the shore and headed out over the sea. A short time later they were under the storm clouds, and the rain and wind were pounding them.

The rain felt like icy darts, driven by a wind stronger than that they’d flown through yesterday. The manticore was having trouble staying aloft. Dhamon shouted to Ragh, but the draconian couldn’t hear him. Just as the manticore banked, Dhamon struggled to look behind him, but they were inside the clouds now, and all he could see was an angry mass of swirling gray and occasional bright flashes where lightning arced. When the thunder came, it boomed so loud it shook them, and the wind gusted so strongly the trio were nearly dislodged from the manticore’s back. Dhamon desperately gripped the manticore’s mane, and Fiona held onto him tighter than ever.

This is madness, he thought, again wondering if he should have stayed on the ground. At least the spawn were an enemy he could fight. This storm—a worse enemy as far as he was concerned—was battering them



mercilessly, and they could do nothing to defend themselves.

Dhamon was uncertain how long they'd been in the midst of the clouds, minutes most likely, though it felt much longer. His fingers ached from holding onto the mane so tight, and with each breath he sucked in chill rain. Finally, the cold began to settle over him, seep into his bones, and he wondered how Fiona, even Ragh, could endure the same torture.

How long does the mantichore intend to stay in the storm clouds? Dhamon wondered. The cloud bank had looked immense, and it seemed as if the storm could stretch all the way to Southern Ergoth. How long could the mantichore keep flying in this foul weather?

As if in answer to his question, the mantichore roared and wheeled, dropped, wings tucked close, slipping below the clouds for a look to the east. The creature wanted to see if the spawn had given up.

Dhamon tried to peer through the haze and rain and the whipping mane, leaning to look beyond the mantichore's head. "By the memory of the Dark Queen," he cursed. There they still were, nearly a dozen spawn still coming, fighting their way through the abominable storm. Well, they'd lost at least some of their pursuers, he thought, until Ragh shouted a warning, and he felt a splash of acid on his back. Some of the accursed spawn had managed to work themselves above them and were attacking the mantichore.

Twisting, Dhamon drew his sword just as the mantichore spun about again. The rain came at Dhamon sideways, blinding him so all he saw were shifting masses of gray, flashes of lightning, and the streak of a spawn's black claw. The spawn's sibilant cry blended with the rush of the wind as it raked Dhamon's sword arm. At the same time it breathed a gout of acid almost straight in the mantichore's



face. The creature bucked and rolled but somehow kept its equilibrium, as it tried to dodge the spawn.

Flying alongside them, the spawn taunted Dhamon. Fragments of words were heard above the wailing chorus of the storm.

“Grab you,” it said. “Take you.”

Dhamon shuddered as he swung recklessly at the creature. He put all of his strength into the blows, as he was also fighting against the wind. He finally managed to connect, but it was a glancing blow. The spawn darted in and swooped back, clawing him and cackling. “Capture you.”

“No!” Dhamon shouted. “You’ll not take any of us!” If the spawn didn’t mean to kill him, then it must plan to return him to Shrentak to face some obscene punishment or to be turned into a spawn—Nura Bint-Drax had tried to do that to him once before. “We’ll die first!” Dhamon meant it. He was certain the scales on his leg were killing him slowly anyway.

“Take you!” another repeated, as spawn surrounded them.

A swirl of black moved in front of Dhamon, howling with the howling wind. Another swirl. Dhamon swung at one, as he felt the mantichore jerk and thrash. He felt another splash of acid mixing with the beating rain, his tattered tunic dissolving and falling in shreds, his skin burning. The mantichore shrieked in pain and struggled to keep its balance, stay aloft. Now he heard Ragh screaming. More splashes of acid.

The mantichore roared, words Dhamon barely made out. “Blind. I am blind.”

By all the gods of Krynn! Dhamon thought as one more blast of acid caught him and splashed over all of them and the mantichore. He continued to swing wildly, so wildly that Fiona, hanging on to his belt, nearly lost her grip.



Behind Fiona, Ragh was flailing with one clawed hand, ineffectually batting at a particularly large spawn that was dogging him. Despite the gale, the spawn could maneuver—awkwardly—but its stinging breath was offset by the angle of pursuit and the storm’s deluge.

“Solid ground!” Ragh muttered. “We should have stayed on the ground!” Then he felt a solid strike of acid wash over his back. The manticore felt it too. The creature’s hide rippled and twitched, its tail was flung back to whip its spikes at a foe it couldn’t see.

“Grab you!” a spawn above Dhamon shouted, the words mere whispers in the heinous storm. “Take you to the massster!”

Which would be Sable, Dhamon thought. We’re nothing, insignificant, he told himself again. Nothing next to an overlord. What damage I did in Shrentak was nothing in the dragon’s scheme of things. How could such a massive dragon be so petty as to command its forces to pursue us?

“I’m nothing!” he yelled as he drove his blade straight up, the effort nearly toppling him and Fiona.

The blade would have struck home, was aimed where the spawn’s foul heart beat. But at that very moment, another spawn had managed to slice through one of the manticore’s wings. The manticore gave a deadly cry and plummeted, as its passengers desperately tried to keep their grip.

“Grab the man!” one of the spawn shouted. The shout was repeated, other words mixed in. “Ordersss!” “Take the man!”

The cries were all whispers to Dhamon. His world became a swirling mass of gray, the sheet of punishing rain, the bludgeoning wind. Beneath him, the manticore made a heroic attempt to stop its fall, but its muscles worked futilely in an effort to beat its useless wings. The



creature whipped its head frantically as it dropped, and the rain-slick mane slipped from Dhamon's fingers.

An instant later, Dhamon's sword slipped from his hand.

Spawn claws fumbled desperately to grab Dhamon, but they only closed on air. Dhamon fell from the manticore's back, then Fiona and Ragh too, heartbeats later. The wind spun around him, the rain hammered him, Dhamon tried to right himself and grab onto . . . anything. A few spawn buzzed in close, clawed hands outstretched and reaching, but none could catch him as he twisted and plummeted.

"I'm sorry," Dhamon screamed, aiming the apology at Fiona. "Terribly sorry." Sorry for tricking her, months past, to get her and Rig to help him and Maldred free some ogre slaves. Sorry that he let her and Rig go off alone to Shrentak to try and save her doomed brother. Sorry she ended up in the black dragon's dungeons. Sorry that Rig was dead and that she would be joining him now. To know me is to die, he thought. To . . .

His musings ended as he slammed into the storm-tossed sea.

