



OATH OF NERULL

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The blow was vicious. Ember's sight blurred in rainbow agony as she struggled to keep her footing on the suddenly rolling pavement. A man in a red half-mask stood before her, grinning as he readied another blow. He'd come from nowhere.

Caught off guard, Ember struck back reflexively with *shi kune*, the "stunning fist." The shock of a strike traveled from her hand up her arm, telling her she'd hit something. Because of the haze behind her eyes, she couldn't be certain whether it was her ambusher or the nearby wall.

The darkness disgorged another figure. Red-masked, the figure collided with her companion, Brek Gorunn the dwarf. Despite the drumbeat of pain, she heard the grunt and clatter when the dwarf was bowled over by his assailant. She knew Brek was not nimble, and his chain mail overcoat was a heavy burden.

Warm liquid trickled into her left eye—blood, of course. Ember wondered if it was her own or her attacker's.

She shook away both stars and blood and took stock: She and Brek fought five people in red masks, purpose unknown, in a

cobblestone alley. The night sky was dark under low clouds, with no moon. It was an ambush. Their attackers, whoever they were, had hoped to overwhelm her and the dwarf before they could react.

Too bad. I'm ready now, thought Ember.

One red-masked attacker lay at her feet, stunned or dying. Surprise or not, Ember was well trained in the martial arts of hand, fist, and foot. Her reflexive blow had brought her first attacker down.

Another man in a red half-mask sneered and rushed forward, executing a series of whirling strikes. She affected *bahng ah jah se*, the right guarding stance, and deflected two open-handed attacks and one elbow. Melting from guarding to offensive stance, she caught the retreating elbow with one hand and delivered a hammer blow to his elbow joint with her off hand. The man fell back with a cry. His arm hung loosely from the elbow, the joint shattered. Ember allowed herself a grim smile.

Brek Gorunn grappled with his assailant. Brek uttered a battle cry, pious by dwarf standards; Brek was an adherent of the dwarf god Moradin. The red mask's arms were wrapped around the dwarf's chest, preventing Brek from drawing his iron-shod warhammer.

Ember decided the dwarf could handle one red mask, and moved to block two others rushing forward. The dwarf could handle one, maybe, but not three at once.

"Kill them, kill them, kill them!" screamed a voice from the darkness. The voice was thin, piping, and alien.

Who . . . what said that? thought Ember, as she peered through the darkened alley.

Two figures resolved in the gloom, both similarly hidden under red masks. One continued to advance, weaponless, his stance suspiciously similar to her own. The other remained

behind, observing. Something squirmed on his back—a sack?

The advancing ambusher charged. The thin voice laughed, a cacophony of splintering wood.

Ember shifted to *cha riut*, the attention stance, hoping to deflect the brunt of the attack. The snarling man still managed to land a kick to Ember's forehead. Pain blossomed like a poisonous flower. She grunted, reeled, and avoided a fall through iron determination.

“Yes! Death to the Enabled Hand! I am the Child, and I command it!” screeched the voice, almost certainly issuing from the bulging sack on the last red mask's back.

Through her pain, Ember wondered who the “child” was and why it hated her?

Brek Gorunn broke from his attacker's hold, scrambling to his feet. His enchanted warhammer fell firmly into his grip.

“You made a mistake with us, bandits. Hide your faces all you want. You can't escape Moradin's justice . . . *oo!*” Brek's attacker landed a whirling kick to the dwarf's midsection, but the dwarf remained on his feet. He looked over to Ember, and gasped “Ember, are you hurt?”

Ember waved one hand reassuringly, hoping she didn't look as bad as she felt. Weakness pulled against her every move like unseen spiderwebs. She had to end this fight quickly. Ember struck with her left hand, drawing on all her training. It was the *ah sang bo*, the swaying snake feint. Her attacker took the bait and shifted to block; Ember spun in the opposite direction and chopped his neck with her other hand. The red mask fell without a sound.

Brek Gorunn's attacker realized the tide had turned. He twisted to run. Brek roared, and his warhammer caught the man once, twice, thrice . . . and he, too, was down. The last ambusher, the one with the passenger on his back, turned and shot off down

the alley. The goading voice screamed out defiantly, then faded into the distance.

The dwarf cleric gave chase, but stopped short when he saw how hurt Ember actually was. For her part, Ember felt like a glass shot through with tiny cracks. One more hit, and she'd shatter. She slowly sat down, breathing through her mouth.

Looking at her friend, she said slowly, "Brek . . . I have the feeling those were not simple bandits."

"No? Why not?" said the dwarf, as he moved back to look after Ember's hurts. He rammed his warhammer back into his wide belt, and examined Ember's wounds with a clinical air.

Ember said, "Didn't you hear that voice? 'Death to the Enabled hand,' it said. The Enabled Hand is my monastic order. Too specific for a random gang of city ruffians. And that thing riding the back of the last one. It was otherworldly."

Ember grimaced around her pains as she spoke.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," said Brek, distracted.

Ember recognized the distraction—the monk presumed that Brek was visualizing his connection to the divine. With the right prayer, his became the hands of a healer, mediating the grace of Moradin.

The dwarf chanted a short prayer, and where he touched, Ember's wounds healed as if they'd never been . . . all except for a headache that was determined to remain.

So be it, thought Ember, as my old instructor Kairoth said so often, "pain is weakness leaving the body."

New strength grew in her, welling up from a hidden reserve and from the healing power of Brek.

"So, you think these red-masked ambushers are connected to the troubles of the Enabled Hand?" wondered the dwarf.

Ember reflected. The Enabled Hand had several chapters. Her chapter was here in the city of Volanth. Of late, the chapter's luck

was down. First that terrible fire, then the thefts. Recently, monks had gone missing. That was when the order hired Brek Gorunn to investigate with her. Brek was a long-time friend of the order. The dwarf felt that Moradin's work coincided with the interests of the Hand. She and Brek were checking a clue concerning one of the missing monks when they were attacked.

"I don't know, but I wonder. I do know one thing."

"What's that?"

"We should return to the chapter house. I have a bad feeling," said Ember. She stood, flexing her arms. Her pallor faded, leaving her skin its normal shade of ebony. She walked up to a fallen red mask, the one whose arm she'd broken. He still lived. She bent down and removed his mask. Below the red covering, his face seemed normal, unremarkable.

"I wonder if these fellows are responsible for the missing monks. If we hadn't been stronger, we would have gone missing, too. Why the red masks, and who are they working for?"

The unconscious man told no tales, for now.

Ember continued, "I noticed something else very troubling. The ambushers were proficient in the art of the hand, foot, and fist, the same as we teach in my order. How do you explain that?"

"A rival monastery?" offered Brek.

The dwarf's face creased in thought. His fingers tapped a silent rhythm on his warhammer, his weapon and holy symbol to Moradin the Dwarffather.

Ember shook her head, frowning, and said, "I can't recall any rival. If we have such a rival, it is new." The monk turned back to the ambusher with the broken arm. "Help me with this one. The master instructor can question him."

So saying, she grabbed a limp arm, unconcerned that it was the broken one, and Brek Gorunn grabbed the other. They carried their unconscious prisoner down the alley and out onto the street.

Volanth, a trade city, was unremarkable in its architecture. Simple, one-story wooden buildings were the rule. In the residential section, where Ember and Brek were attacked, all was dark save for a few buildings that showed lights behind drawn shades. The Enabled Hand chapter house, their destination, was located on a street called Bridge Place, a walk of little more than a quarter mile. Ember and Brek moved briskly despite their unconscious burden. As in any city, many people were abroad by night, though few paid them any heed. Those who noticed the trio assumed that the human woman and dwarf were helping an intoxicated friend home after a too-boisterous celebration in a local tavern.

As they walked, Ember's disquiet grew. She should have reported back to the chapter house earlier. They had been too busy, too close to what they thought was a lead. Instead of them finding it, the lead had found them.

When they sighted the chapter house, Ember's uncertain feelings woke into outright alarm. Normally, a golden lamp shone above the main entrance. There was no glow now. The lamp was smashed. Ember dropped the arm of the captive and ran forward.

"Ember, be careful!" cautioned the dwarf.

But she was beyond caring. She rushed into the building, past an open door that should have been closed and locked.

Inside, she found a slaughter.

"By the Dwarffather, they are worsted," murmured Brek Gorunn.

The dwarf cleric moved up alongside Ember. She stared in stunned silence. Distantly, she wondered if Brek had secured their captive.

Silence ruled the courtyard. Windows were smashed, paving ripped up, the central fountain was befouled, but worst of all, Ember's fellows lay dead. The destruction and horror were so

complete that she half expected to hear echoes of the violence that had raged there, but heard only the splashing fountain and her beating heart.

Ember was strong. Her spirit was fierce and at the same time more disciplined than most others, even other members of her own order. The sight before her, however, was too much, too terrible, too extreme. Brek Gorunn barely caught the monk as she fell, senseless and despairing.