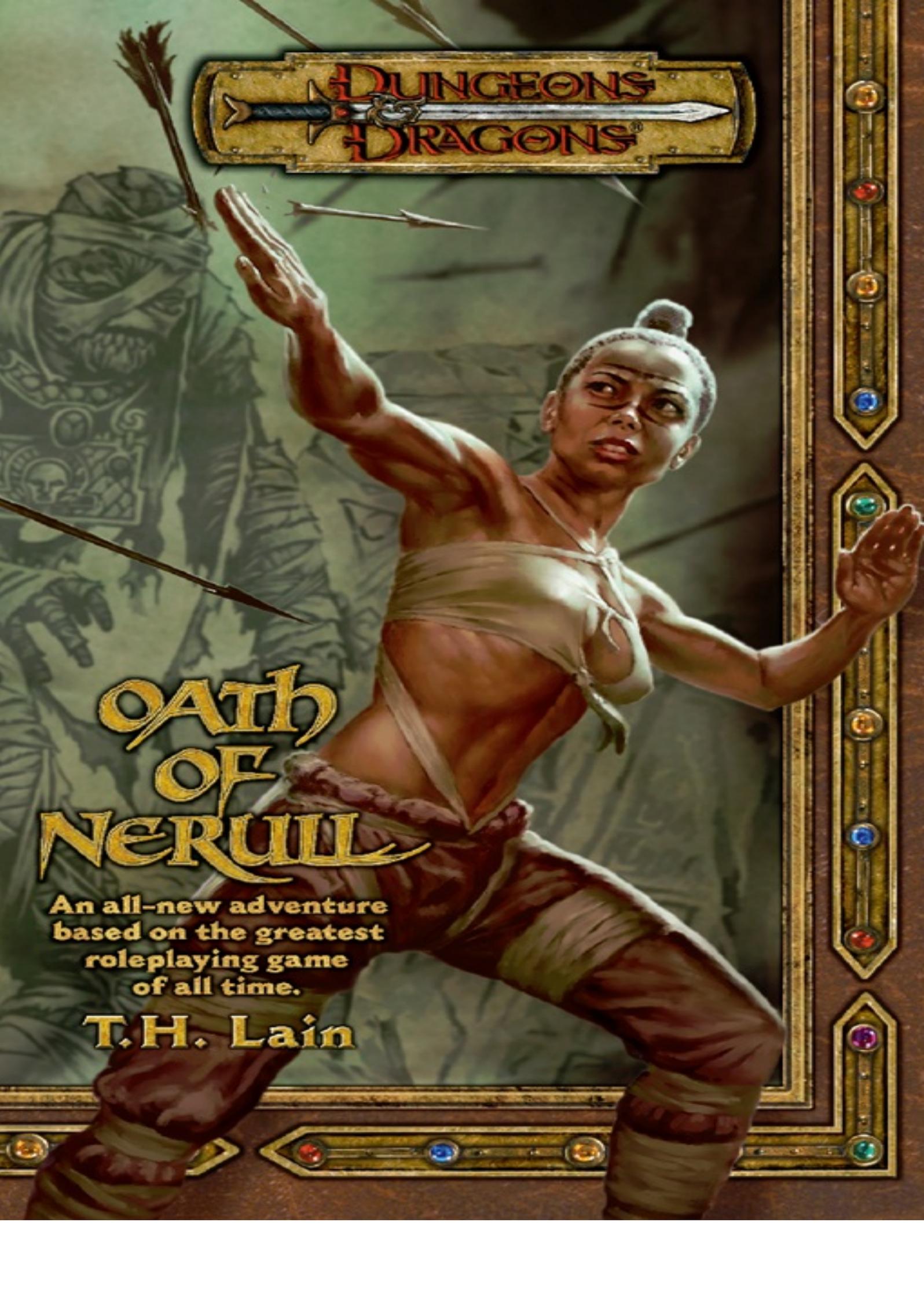




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**OATH
OF
NERULL**

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T.H. Lain

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By T.H. Lain

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OATH OF NERUILL

T.H. Lain



OATH OF NERULL

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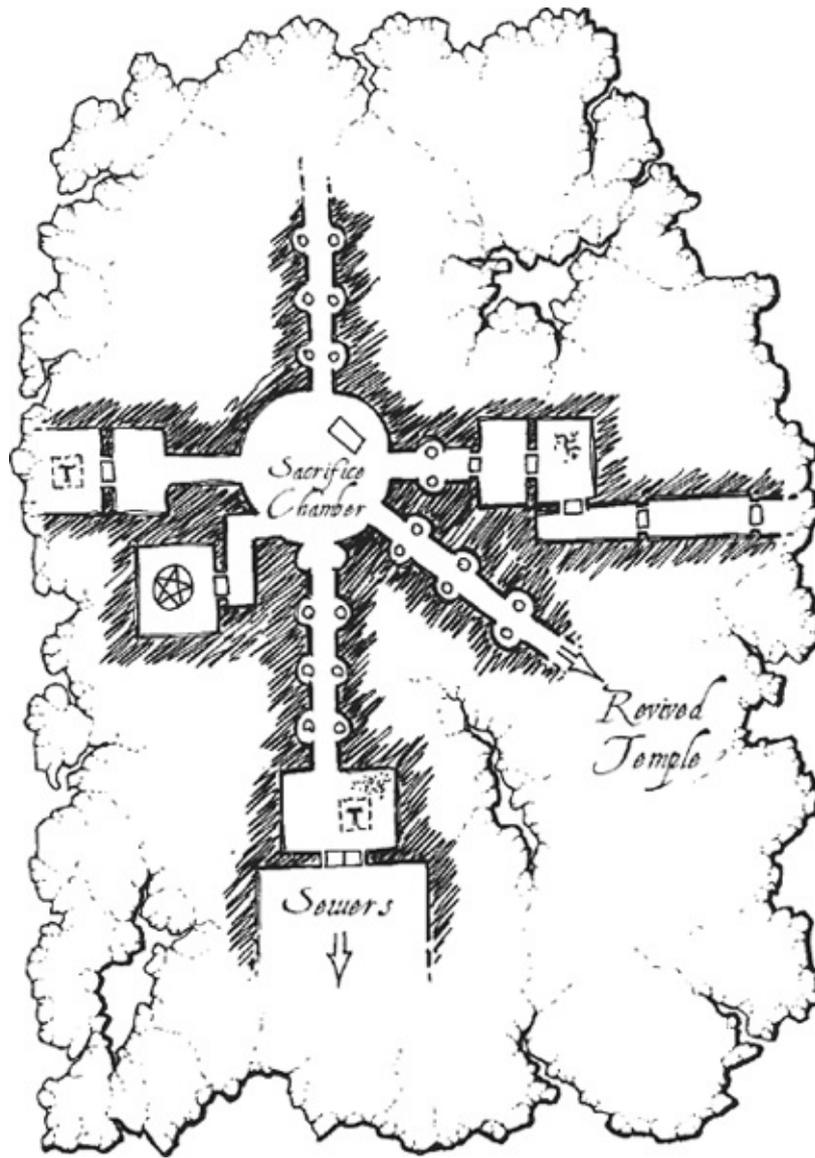
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The blow was vicious. Ember's sight blurred in rainbow agony as she struggled to keep her footing on the suddenly rolling pavement. A man in a red half-mask stood before her, grinning as he readied another blow. He'd come from nowhere.

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 ... *oof!*" 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 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 would 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 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 theft. 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 the 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, it 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 the lead finding them, 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.

Ember woke, but kept her eyes closed. Her head still pained her, but a hollow, deep ache pulsed through her. Why? For a second, she could not remember. It lasted just the second, and when it passed, she wished she could call that precious moment back.

One thing was clear to her. If she was to survive, emotionally, she must harden her spirit. She must quiet her heart-loss, for now, to discover who was behind the atrocity.

Fainting damsels may be something commoners expect, but I will have no more of it, she mentally vowed.

Spurred by this thought, Ember drew her new resolve around her like a cloak, opened her eyes, and looked around.

Brek Gorunn had been busy—she must have lain unconscious for a few hours. The worst of the horror was cleared away so that she was not immediately faced with the sight of her slain compatriots. She owed the dwarf a debt of gratitude for that kindness. She lay on folded tapestries, apparently procured from a nearby wall by Brek. Near her, the captive ambushers lay securely trussed. His mask was missing, and his face glared back at Ember with undisguised hate, but he said nothing.

Ember rose, called, “Brek?”

Hearing no answer for the moment, she approached the captive. He continued to glare.

Ember told him, “I suppose you know we intend to find out who you are. You might as well tell me now. Brek Gorunn, my dwarf friend, will not be so merciful as I.”

Ember knew neither she nor Brek would stoop to the tactics of evil, but hoped the bluff would have some effect.

It did not. The man just glared.

Ember approached closer, thinking that perhaps she wasn’t only bluffing after all.

“The pain you visited upon those here will be returned to you threefold if you do not speak, *now!*” she yelled, ending with all her volume.

The man’s glare gave way to uncertainty. She had him. He knew that she was not the sort to make idle threats.

The captive opened his mouth, and she saw what she had not seen before. The man had no tongue. He would not tell her or anyone anything. Ember shook her head and moved away. She restrained herself from kicking him, though she wanted to desperately.

Instead she looked at the man and said, “You are not worth it. Do you know why? Because cruelty is a tool for the weak.”

Looking around again, she called to Brek once more. This time the dwarf appeared from an antechamber, wiping his hands on another piece of shredded tapestry.

“Ember, I’m so sorry. I ...” The dwarf was at a loss for words.

She shook her head. “Brek, if I am to get through this, mourning will follow after. Right now, we must get to the bottom of the attack. And he—” she pointed to the mute captive.

—“is useless.”

Brek nodded. “He and his friends did seem awfully quiet when we were attacked, except for that one awful voice. Now we know why.”

The monk pondered a moment then said, “The red masks’ plans may not be limited to the Volanth chapter house of the Enabled Hand. The threat called out by that ‘child’ did not limit itself to only Volanth. My warning came too late, here, to my eternal shame. But there is something I can do to make up for that. I need to travel immediately to the Motherhouse of the Enabled Hand, to the root of our order. They must be warned. At the very least, I need to report what was done here. I owe that to Kairoth.”

Brek raised an eyebrow. “Your old instructor?”

“Yes, him.” In fact, Ember had received a letter from Kairoth only the day before. Ember carried Kairoth’s letter in her satchel. She and her teacher had maintained friendly correspondence over the years. Kairoth was *sa bum nim*, an honored instructor in the Motherhouse. He sat with the elders of the Enabled Hand. In his letter, he wrote, among other things, about the recent Day of Fasting. “Kairoth will know what to do, if anyone.”

The dwarf said, “You’ve told me stories about him. Anyhow, what about the local authorities—the Volanth Watch should be contacted.”

Ember paused for a moment, then continued. “If we involve the Volanth Watch, valuable time will be lost. A day at least, as we testify to the magistrate—possibly a week. I need to be on the road today toward the Motherhouse in New Koratia. The elders must be warned. We can’t spare time here.”

“The city of New Koratia is a good distance,” mused Brek Gorunn. “But of course the warning must be made. Allow me to join you on the road. After all, I was attacked by the red-masked men while I was in the employ of the order. Plus, Moradin’s ire has been pricked,” concluded the dwarf, his face grim.

Ember allowed herself a look of gratitude. “Then, let’s gather what stories we can from the destruction here, and move out. I suppose I should retrieve the gems in the chapter house treasury and bring them to the Motherhouse.”

Brek sighed. “Ember, the treasury is looted. I looked around while you lay asleep. The vault is open and empty.”

The monk closed her eyes but said nothing. She mentally moved into the *gunnun* so g posture, the walking stance, drawing calm from its strength.

“But,” continued Brek, “I also found this. It explains much, while raising even more questions.” He produced a small ring. It bore the insignia of a skull and sickle. “I recognize this symbol,” Brek said. “It is the sign of the death god Nerull, called the Hater of Life, the Reaper of Flesh, and other more terrible names.”

Ember looked up, startled. “But the last of Nerull’s priests were unmasked and ejected from civilized lands years ago. How could this be?”

Brek nodded. “Nerull-worship was banned, yes, but banning something doesn’t erase it. Especially Nerull. His is an evil that does not sleep. Nerull and those who revere him remain in the world, hidden, however much we comfort ourselves by thinking otherwise.”

The dwarf squeezed the ring hard, and continued, “This ring proves that at least one of those who attacked the chapter, if not all, owe their allegiance to the Hater of Life. All the more reason to find out who they are and where they nest, so we can stamp them out.”

“Very well,” Ember sighed. “A banished cult has killed my chapter and looted the treasure. Still, there may be something they didn’t get ... something the order may need. It would do no good to leave anything of significance here.”

So saying, Ember walked to the edge of the fountain.

The basin was carved from green-veined marble. In it stood a statue of a man carved from the same block of stone. He wore loose clothing, not unlike Ember’s own dress, and stood in a ready stance, palms upward and slightly cupped. It was from his cupped hands that water spilled to splash into the wide basin.

Ember studied the fountain and said, “This is Loku, the founder of this chapter. He was a great warrior. The chapter honors him, as does the whole order. Did you know he once saved the Motherhouse from destruction? So say the histories. We keep no relics in the strict sense of the word, but we do treasure one of Loku’s cast-off possessions. It was kept here, hidden in the fountain.”

The monk walked into the basin. Bloody water splashed around her ankles. She knelt and reached into the murk, groping for a hidden mechanism.

“Ah, here it is.”

Brek Gorunn, watching Ember, said, “Ember, there’s something else you should know. It’s about some of the monks’ bodies I cleared away. A few were ... melted. No, that’s not the best word for it. They were dissolved, as if acid or some corrosive, alchemical mixture had been poured on them.”

Ember did not pause in her activity, but her breath caught and her eyes narrowed. “They shall pay all the more.”

She didn’t want to hear the dwarf’s words, so she concentrated on finding the second cavity to the secret vault in the fountain. A rush of bubbles marked her success. Ember extended her hand into the cavity below the waterline and yanked. With a click, two panels popped open in the arms of the sculpture. Inside each hidden recess lay a leather arm band. The bracers were pristine, and in fact seemed to glisten with a faint, golden light. The woman lifted the bracers out and held them up.

“These are Loku’s Bracers. By taking them from this reliquary, I symbolically disperse the Volanth order of the Enabled Hand. And so it is done; Volanth chapter is no more.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“Wear them, of course. They are woven round with spells of defense. I expect I shall need their protection on the road to New Koratia.” Ember strapped the bracers on and stepped across the basin’s edge. “I don’t think Loku will mind, since I’m the only member of the chapter remaining.”

Wearing the bracers, Ember felt emboldened, magnified. The dwarf looked at her with admiration. Ember wondered whether the relics should have seen the light of day earlier. Perhaps if someone had worn them, instead of locking them away, the tragedy might have been averted. On her arms, the bracers felt as if they had been custom made for her.

Brek cautioned, “I know you want to get started immediately, but we both need rest, after all. Let’s sleep for what remains of the night anyway, then leave at dawn.”

“Agreed. New Koratia can wait those few hours.”

“You think so? Then watch!” said the small man—or, more precisely, said the gnome.

These small-statured, nimble-fingered folk made up for their lack in size with enthusiasm. At least this gnome did. He wore an elaborate coat with many pockets, and goggles pushed up on his forehead. His name was Nebin Raulnor, and he was explaining the superiority of his craft to his friend, Hennet. Nebin and Hennet shared a table in a roadside tavern called the Fair Warrior.

Hennet was a young, human male from the distant east. His dress, barbaric by civilized standards, consisted of leather leggings, spiked bracers, a wide belt, and a suitably dramatic cloak. Two entwined dragons were tattooed on his chest. Hennet, like Nebin, was also a student of the craft, though he came at it from a far different direction than the gnome. Their differences, often enough rubbing both the wrong way, were in truth the bond that continually strengthened their easy camaraderie.

Nebin screwed up his face, as if recalling something complex. The gnome chanted a few unintelligible syllables, gesticulating with his hands. Called by his arcane manipulations, a ten-foot ball of red fire appeared in the center of the tavern. It burned like a piece of Hell itself, though it made no sound.

Hennet watched the display with a single, raised eyebrow. The other tavern patrons reacted less calmly. There was a stifled scream, many shouts, and the crashing of overturned chairs. Cries of “Fire!” brought the taverner from the kitchen, a bucket of water in one hand. He hurled the bucket, and the water passed through the globe of fire as if it wasn’t there. And a second later, it wasn’t.

“By Pelor’s blinding eyes, who’s working magic in my house?” bellowed the taverner. He glared around the room.

Someone in back murmured, “It was only shadow magic. Any fool could see that.”

Another patron laughed, if a bit nervously. A few people hadn’t even stood, including those at the table where Hennet and Nebin sat. The gnome ducked his head.

At still another table, a dwarf in a mail overcoat scowled. The dwarf’s companion, a capable-looking human woman wearing a travel-stained cloak, returned to her meal as if the sudden appearance of balls of flame was commonplace. Hennet was struck by her easy manner. Soon enough, everyone returned to their seats, righting chairs and laughing at the prankster, whoever he was.

The taverner sighed and returned to the kitchen. As he moved from sight, he yelled, “The Fair Warrior is a tavern, not a carnival. No more magic, or you’ll be out on your butts!”

Nebin peered after the retreating taverner and said, “Again, I’ve demonstrated the advantage of wizardry, Hennet. That was a minor spell, but with it I create the image of anything I can imagine. That’s just one of the many wonders I have recorded here.” Nebin patted a heavy, metal-bound book he carried on a shoulder strap.

The young man scratched his chin. “A wonder? More a spectacle. Of course I’ve seen you pull that one off before. You’re lucky the taverner didn’t see you. I doubt I’d have stood up for you. It is cold out tonight.”

The sorcerer laughed, and Nebin sniffed.

“Him? I doubt he’d trifle with someone of my obvious talents.”

Hennet smiled as they settled into one of their favorite arguments.

He said, “Besides, you’ve just admitted your weakness. Once you have expended your magic, you’re no different from anyone else. You have to return to your book of spells to study, or be completely bereft of enchantment. But me? Once I master a particular piece of the craft, I never forget. It becomes part of me, and I, it.”

Nebin chuckled. “So you say. True, you never consult a spellbook. But, be honest, it’s no secret that raw workers of the craft, such as yourself, are limited to only a few spells. We’ve been together a long time now, and I can see it’s true. Take me, on the other hand. I’m only limited by what I can scribe in this book.”

Again, the gnome patted his metal-bound tome.

It was one of Nebin’s favorite gestures. Hennet thought it was the most annoying in a long extended list of habits, all of which were annoying to various degrees. Despite that, Hennet liked the gnome and considered him a friend. Trading barbs was one of their favorite pastimes, and on the road to attend the Duel Arcane, it was expected.

Neither Hennet nor Nebin had previously attended the Duel Arcane, held in New Korat every three years. Both knew of it for years, though, and had thought about it since taking up studying the craft, each after his own fashion. The Duel Arcane was the most prestigious magical competition in the region. Merely attending the event was an honor. They were both nervous, but neither would admit that to the other. At least Hennet wouldn’t—he wasn’t entirely sure if Nebin’s bravado was real or feigned. Their arguments, with their bluster and straightforward hauteur, helped to keep nervousness at bay.

Hennet looked back at the gnome. Nebin had been speaking, but Hennet wasn’t sure of the topic. To rattle his friend, Hennet broke in, interrupting the gnome’s speech.

“Nebin,” he said, “I’ve been meaning to ask you—do those even do anything?”

Hennet waved a finger at the goggles the gnome wore pushed up onto his forehead. It was the gnome’s habit (another one) to pull them down over his eyes when he faced a dangerous situation.

Nebin paused mid-speech, looked vaguely disturbed, then continued where he had left off, ignoring Hennet’s question altogether.

Hennet grinned, trying to take in the gnome’s point. It was the classic sorcerer versus wizard argument, something they’d talked to death many times. By round-about fashion, the gnome would imply that sorcerers like Hennet could never truly experience the wonder a wizard (such as the gnome) felt upon discovering a new spell and scribing it into his spellbook.

To forestall another pat on the book, Hennet interrupted his friend once more, but this time with a serious question: “Do you think either of us has a chance at winning the Golden Wand?”

The prize awarded at the conclusion of a Duel Arcane was highly coveted, even though it was awarded only to mages competing as novices. The prize earned by experienced magicians

was a closely guarded secret, known only to those who had won. Both Hennett and Nebin expected to someday learn for themselves. For now, the Golden Wand was their goal.

“It should be a snap,” said Nebin, displaying his characteristic overconfidence. “Though I apologize in advance for taking that honor from you, my friend.”

Nebin laughed good-naturedly, showing his statement was meant as a joke. Hennett joined in, then finished his drink.

After more talk about the competition, the two mages retired to their shared room. Neither was flush with cash, and the city of New Koratia, where the duel was to be held, would be expensive.

The Fair Maiden had a second story filled with clean rooms set aside for travelers. The night before, all the rooms were filled, so they felt lucky not to be camping alongside the road as they had done too many times in the past.

Nebin shrugged out of his coat and kicked off his boots, then took to his cot immediately. Hennett sat on his cot, boots off and legs folded, and began his nightly reflection before sleep. He mentally examined secrets of power and magic he knew, and used those secrets to probe for deeper secrets that lay latent within him. Most nights, he came away with nothing, but not always. Sometimes a new insight, a new twist on old knowledge, blossomed under his inner scrutiny. Such was the way of sorcery. Soon enough, he would drift into sleep, perhaps with a tiny, new coal of arcane power smoldering at the back of his mind.



A noise woke Nebin from sound sleep. He cocked his head, listening for it again—nothing. He smiled, all too familiar with the figments of his mind. Then he frowned. He was sure he had heard something scratching at the door.

What an unnerving possibility, he thought. Should I check to make sure? I’ll never get to sleep otherwise, the gnome realized.

He considered waking Hennett, but decided against it. If it was nothing, he would only have disturbed his friend’s rest.

Better to check first, Nebin decided.

The gnome’s fingers trailed across his spellbook as he quietly slipped from bed. He’d cast one of his spells earlier, and it would take too long to renew it. Contrary to what he’d told Hennett, the enchantment he’d loosed earlier in the tavern’s common room was one of his most potent illusions. He always felt a little naked without its subtle presence in the back of his mind.

The gnome minced across the cold floor toward the door. With his small stature and without his leather boots, he made no sound. The door was bolted on the inside. Nebin listened for just a moment, making sure the hall was silent, then he drew the bolt back, pulling it so slowly he could barely see it move. He pulled the door toward himself until a sliver of black appeared between it and the jamb. The hallway, which would have looked black as pitch to Hennett’s human eyes, stood out in dim but distinct outlines to the gnome. Nebin’s problem was that, peering through the tiny crack, he could see less than half the hallway. Most of it extended the opposite direction.

Mustering his nerve, he eased the door open wider and slipped his head through the opening into the hall. He quickly scanned both directions. Three small skylights allowed

waning moonlight into the corridor, casting soft, almost imperceptible shadows. Nebin could see a blot at the far end of the hallway, but in that near-total darkness, even he could not make out what it was. A large pack, perhaps? Nebin briefly wondered if one of the inn's patrons, having drunk too much wine, eaten too little food, or simply walked too many miles, might have dropped a big, bulging sack and forgotten it.

The more he stared at it, however, the more he questioned whether it really was a pack. It looked more like a sack.

No, not a sack, he thought, but a very, very large cocoon. But that was ridiculous.

With thoughts of giant cocoons in his head, Nebin's heart skipped a beat when the object suddenly appeared to shift.

Is it moving, he wondered? Is it ... looking at me?

Nebin uttered a whispery squeak and snapped back into his room. In his fright, he banged his head on the door frame, jammed his thumb as he pushed the bolt home, and stubbed his toe leaping into bed. He rolled in his blanket, shivering and gazing at the door with large, unblinking eyes. Nebin did not like that sack. He didn't believe he would ever like any sack that had eyes.

Hennet continued to sleep, undisturbed.

Seconds turned to minutes, and the silence remained unbroken.

Maintaining terror in the absence of threat, real or imagined, is a chore. Gradually the gnome convinced himself that he had seen only a discarded sack after all. It wouldn't be the first time his imagination conjured frightful things in the night. It was a good thing he hadn't awakened Hennet, he decided. The sorcerer would have enjoyed a good laugh at the gnome's expense—frightened by a sack! Finally, white-knuckled, sheet-clutching fingers relaxed and shivering gave way to snoring. Nebin's sleep was untroubled the rest of the night.



A scream, loud and shrill, roused the guests of the Fair Warrior at dawn.

Hennet jumped from his bed. He grabbed his cape for a robe and dashed for the door. Nebin sat up bleary-eyed, questioning.

"Hennet, are you going out for breakfast?"

Hennet shook his head and stepped into the hallway.

He hissed back at Nebin, "There's trouble, be ready!"

A few other groggy travelers milled about, and more exited into the hallway from the other rooms looking as disheveled as Hennet. The largest group stood near a door at the end of the hall. A small, human woman pushing a cleaning cart was crying loudly. People were comforting her. Hennet pushed his way through the press. No one hindered him, and he peered into the far room. It was another guest room, very much like his own—except for the body.

A woman lay half-on, half-off her cot. She was clearly dead. Her left leg was missing from mid-thigh on down. What remained of the stump was tattered and charred, as if it had somehow been melted away. Hennet felt bile rising in his throat, so he turned away. Looking back down the hallway toward his own room, he saw Nebin gazing out with wide eyes. The sorcerer shook his head sadly and made a slashing motion across his neck. Nebin's eyes narrowed to slits.

He doesn't seem surprised, mused Hennes.

Like so many of the wizard's mannerisms and habits, this one was well known to the sorcerer. The gnome knew something about this murder.

Ember, Brek Gorunn, and their captive made good time after leaving Volanth, hiking along a well-traveled road toward New Koratia. The Fair Warrior Inn was a welcome respite to camping along the road. Ember shared a room with Brek and their captive for security. But in the morning, a scream disturbed Ember's sleep.

She rose from her cot, reaching smoothly for her sandals. One was laced up before she realized that Brek was gone. And the prisoner was gone, too! Ember uttered an oath and laced up her remaining sandal in record time, then dashed into the corridor outside the room. Several people stood near the end of the hallway.

If Brek rose early, she wondered, why would he leave and take the prisoner with him?

A dark-haired man in a cape stood in an open doorway. He signaled to someone passing Ember's room, a sleepy-eyed but scared gnome standing in the doorway of another guest room near the opposite end of the hallway. There was only one way to interpret the gesture: someone had died.

Ember called the dark-haired man. "You, with the cape! What's going on?"

The man looked at her, glanced back into the room, then moved up to stand next to her. She noticed his bare feet and legs, plus an interesting tattoo of two dragons on his chest.

"I am Hennet," said the caped man. "I'm afraid there is a murderer among us. A woman lies dead in that room. And she died by unnaturally cruel means. She looks partly melted. The man hesitated as he spoke this last bit, obviously unsettled.

Ember stiffened at the news. She pushed past Hennet to take a look herself. At her back she heard the taverner tramping up the stairs, yelling for guests to return to their rooms. Ember paid him no mind. In the room, she saw the scene described by Hennet.

She'd half hoped to also find Brek Gorunn (but, gods preserve, not as the victim). Brek spoke of those slain in her own order as partly dissolved as if by alchemical acid—the similarity of this woman's condition couldn't be a simple coincidence.

Where has that dwarf gotten to? she wondered.

The taverner looked into the room and told Ember, "Clear out! The authorities are on the way."

Ember didn't care to see the grisly scene any longer, anyway. She left the room and accosted the taverner. "Has anything like this happened before?" she asked.

Ember noticed that most of the guests were returning to their rooms, happy to let someone else deal with the problem. Only the caped man, Hennet, and his friend the gnome remained interested.

The taverner gave Ember an appraising look. "Happened before? Of course not. What a good idea!" he said, rubbing his nose nervously.

Ember continued, "Fine. Have you seen my companion out and about this morning? You remember, the dwarf I arrived with last night? It is unsettling to find a murder and a missing

person on the same morning—I'm worried about him.”

Hennet moved to stand closer to the taverner, fixing him with a penetrating look, and a few beads of sweat broke out on the man's brow.

“Why ask me? I haven't seen your dwarf friend or anyone else this morning. I just woke up. Perhaps he went outside for a breath of air.” The taverner rubbed his nose again. Ember tried to meet his gaze, but the man stared determinedly at the door to the victim's room. He continued, “Now, excuse me, I must investigate—the Duke's Rangers must be told of this tragedy. Stand aside, let me pass.”

Ember gave ground with poor grace, allowing the taverner into the murder room. The gnome from the end of the hallway moved up to Hennet and handed him some leather leggings and boots. Hennet dressed himself without embarrassment in the hallway. Ember paid no attention; she watched the taverner. All that nose-rubbing and sweating ... the man was hiding something.

The taverner walked without much confidence into the room, gazed on the sight, and gagged. When he turned away, his eyes were glazed. He was whispering to himself, apparently forgetting Ember's presence at the door.

“I've got to get them out of here. Out! No amount of money is worth more of this.”

With a wheeze and a gasp, he rushed back into the hallway and thundered down the stairs two at a time.

Ember glanced at Hennet, who was fully dressed, and said, “The taverner—he knows what happened.” Without another word, she glided down the stairs after him. The man and the gnome followed her.

The stairs emptied into the common room on the main floor. It held neither Brek Gorun nor the taverner. Ember heard a clatter in the kitchen. She darted through the half-door separating the two rooms. Fire danced in a fireplace, and herbs and meats hung from the ceiling. A scattering of iron pots and pans lay on the floor near a wooden rack on the wall. Otherwise the kitchen was orderly and empty.

Hennet and the gnome followed her in, both breathing hard.

“Wait, we want to help!” said Hennet. The gnome looked surprised but said nothing.

Ember paused, then replied, “Fine. What do you suggest?”

The gnome lowered a pair of goggles over his eyes and said, “I'm Nebin Raulnor, a wizard of the arcane arts. Last night I saw something odd in the hallway. I thought it was a dream. The gnome ducked his head, as if ashamed.

Hennet clapped

The gnome on the shoulder. “Are you saying you went out into the hallway last night and saw something there? Why didn't you wake me?” As he spoke, Hennet studied the kitchen. “Those fallen pots seem strangely untidy, compared to the rest of the place.”

Ember rushed to the utensil rack from which the pots had fallen. The wall seemed slightly off kilter, as if its foundation was sinking unevenly—or as if the wall had been moved slightly from its proper place. She put a hand against the iron rack and pushed. With a click, the wall swung away, obviously on a hinge. Beyond was a lightless stairwell leading downward.

Hennet looked into the darkness and said, “How did you know the wall was false?”

“Lucky.”

Nebin approached more slowly, looking down the stairs. “You want to go down there?”

asked, looking at Ember, then Hennet.

In answer, Hennet spoke a few words of magic, and his index finger burst into light, bright as a torch, though it gave no heat.

“Show off,” sniffed Nebin.

Ember took the lead, followed by Hennet, then the gnome. The stairs were old and worn, not smooth. Dust was heaped along every margin and corner. Hennet’s enchanted light showed a clear path of footprints through the dust.

He whispered, “More than one person has gone this way.”

The steps led down to a closed door. A seam of light spilled from beneath it, brighter than Hennet’s light. Ember heard murmuring voices. She motioned for silence and sidled up to the door, putting her ear to it. Two voices spoke. One was the taverner, sounding scared. The other voice didn’t speak, it just grunted, yet it seemed somehow familiar, which disturbed Ember. In the background, she heard a snatch of prayer—Brek Gorunn?

Ember slammed the door open. Beyond was an earthen chamber supported by stone columns, hung round with greenish lamps. The taverner spoke to two men in red masks! The masks were pulled down around their necks so that their faces were visible. Behind them, a red-masked woman bent over the dwarf, Brek. He sat stiffly with his back to a stone column. His beefy hands were lashed behind him and around the pillar.

“Face me, Nerull-worshippers!” yelled Ember.

She launched a flying kick at the taverner’s back. Her foot connected, sending the heavy-set man sprawling into the shadows.

All were caught off guard, including Hennet and Nebin, who stood dumbfounded on the stairs. Neither of them had seen or even heard of these red-masked strangers before, obviously, or heard the name of Nerull spoken in anything but a child’s rhyme. It was painfully obvious, however, that the people in the room were up to no good, if the trussed-up dwarf was any indication.

One of the kidnappers regained his composure ahead of the rest. He sprang to attack Ember, using his hands and feet as weapons. Again Ember wondered what deranged order these red-masked devils represented. The man leered at her, his mouth gaping—it was her tongueless former captive! His broken arm and all of his other, lesser injuries were healed, clearly the work of magic. As recognition flashed on Ember’s face, her opponent barked out a grating, self-satisfied laugh.

The other red-masked man, more portly and slower than the first, stood back and began chanting. A sickle hung at his side, stained and rusted from much use and little upkeep. On his finger flashed a ring inscribed with the symbol of the skull and sickle. He was a priest of Nerull!

The woman near Brek Gorunn straightened and grabbed a light crossbow slung from her side. It was already cocked. She tried to draw a bead on Ember, but couldn’t get a clear shot. She shifted her aim to Hennet, who still stood in the doorway.

Hennet was not unprepared. As the crossbow came up, he released two bolts of his own from his already glowing fingertip. The sorcerous missiles of enchanted force unerringly slammed into the woman. She gasped, but remained upright and fired her crossbow back at the sorcerer. The bolt, retracing the path of Hennet’s magical strike, caught the sorcerer in his left arm.

He grunted in pain and surprise. Nebin stepped up next to his wounded friend. The gnome still wore his goggles over his eyes, and in his hands he grasped a wand. It was carved of alder and tipped with a tiny, shining stone. The gnome sighted along the wand, and a splash of clashing colors sprang from the tip to strike the woman trying to re-cock her crossbow. She yelped and dropped to the floor, senseless.

Nebin crowed, "I got one!"

Ember's foe was more cautious than when he last faced her in Volanth. This time he held back, fighting defensively. Three kicks were deflected, and four brutal open-hand blows came to nothing. The man danced to the side, ducked, and backed away, taking little real hurt from her onslaught, but he refrained from exposing himself with attacks of his own. Ember had little time to wonder what he was waiting for.

The portly man's chanting ceased; the priest of Nerull had finished his invocation. A spark of pale green light appeared in midair. The spark gained volume and shape over the space of a heartbeat, and a horror materialized from the sickening light.

The beast was shaped something like a newborn human child, crossed with a giant slug. It was almost man-sized, but it oozed along the floor like a worm, dripping with pale green slime. Its visage was pure horror. The gnome quivered for a moment, then turned and ran.

Ember felt a wave of fear break over her. Her insides churned as her throat constricted to a knot. She wanted to scream, to faint, but most of all to flee. She shot a desperate look at Hennet. The sorcerer seemed to be wavering on the doorstep. Terror twisted his face into a grotesque mask, yet the look from Ember galvanized him.

He yelled, "Nebin! Get back here!"

But the gnome's footfalls were already fading up the stairwell. Ember was glad for any company at all.

The priest of Nerull called aloud to the slug-thing, "Serve us, as we have served you, O Abyssal Child, oh Servitor of our lord Nerull." He clutched his sickle and moved toward Ember.

The horrid child-face of the slug regarded Hennet. Then it spoke in its cracked, pipe-organ voice, declaring, "I'm going to eat you. First your hands, then your feet, then your heart."

The sorcerer recoiled in disgust. As the abyssal child squirmed toward him, Hennet made a great leap over the thing's back. The creature snapped at him but missed. Ember breathed easier when she saw the sorcerer dart up to Brek Gorunn's side.

If I don't do something to even the odds, thought Ember, these two will finish me.

As the priest's scythe arced toward her, she moved as if to step backward. Lured on by the ruse, the priest stepped forward only to meet the full impact of Ember's circle kick to the crown of his head. She felt the blow travel up her arch into the muscles of her leg. It was a good strike, and the priest fell like a stone.

The abyssal child wormed toward Hennet, who sawed frantically at Brek Gorunn's bindings with a dagger.

"Come on, man!" yelled the dwarf, with his eye on the monster.

Not a second too soon, the line parted. Hennet fell back and the dwarf leaped up and to the side, toward the corner where his captors had tossed his warhammer.

Whirling and striking at the same time, the dwarf swung his hammer desperately and bounced it across the creature's rounded back. Even that glancing blow brought a scream.

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