

OF TRUTH AND BEASTS

A NOVEL OF THE NOBLE DEAD



BARB & J. C. HENDEE



A ROC BOOK

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BY BARB AND J. C. HENDEE

THE NOBLE DEAD SAGA—SERIES ONE

DHAMPIR
THIEF OF LIVES
SISTER OF THE DEAD
TRAITOR TO THE BLOOD
REBEL FAY
CHILD OF A DEAD GOD

THE NOBLE DEAD SAGA—SERIES TWO

IN SHADE AND SHADOW
THROUGH STONE AND SEA
OF TRUTH AND BEASTS
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THE VAMPIRE MEMORIES SERIES

BLOOD MEMORIES
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OF TRUTH AND BEASTS

A NOVEL OF THE NOBLE DEAD



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ROC

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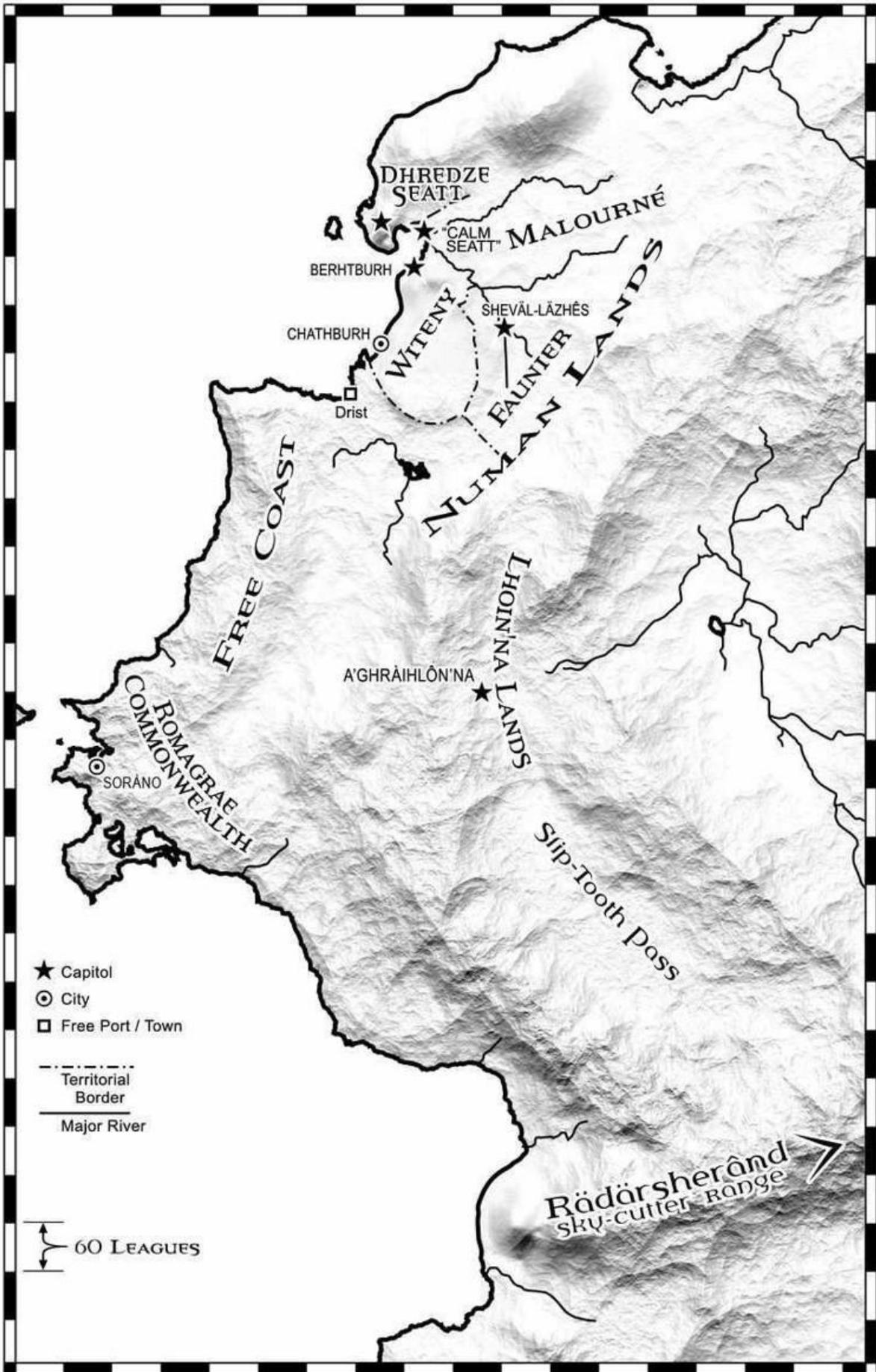
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THE MIDDLE CONTINENT COASTAL CENTRAL



PROLOGUE

. . . never close your eyes again . . . not ever . . . not until they all die. . .

Byûnduní—Deep-Root—halted in the dark of a chamber so tall and empty that he heard the frightened clench of his own massive hands. And why should there be light or sound in the temple of his people? The hall of the Bâynæ, the dwarven Eternals, was now a place filled only with false hopes. The people’s greatest ancestral spirits had abandoned them.

Suddenly, he heard the pounding behind him, though it seemed to hammer within his skull, until it took shape in a thunderous gale of breathy, tangled voices.

. . . they will kill you, if they can. . . They will; you know this . . .

He wanted to scream in rage at the chorus of overlapping whispers in his head. They had torn at him for so long, he could not tell if those words of warning were his or theirs. He could not remember when he had last closed his eyes, though he felt as if he were asleep. Not in a dream, but in an endless nightmare where silence had been slain.

In the depths of Bâalâle Seatt, there was but one long ever-night of fear and madness.

The pounding would not stop, and he could almost feel it upon his broad back. He turned about and stared in panic at the great doors of the chamber of the Eternals.

Each was the height of four dwarves. Each had been hewn whole from the trunk of a great oak and was as thick as his forearms were long. Yet he could hear those who crowded outside the doors, pounding . . . so many of them it began to sound like a rain of stones upon the wood. They were pounding to get in, though their voices could not breach the barrier like the hammering of their fists.

“What are you doing?”

Deep-Root spun at the threatening whisper and reached to his belt. All he saw at first were the great silhouettes in the dark. They reached to the hall’s impossible heights. Three lined the wall of the door, and three more stood at the far side. All these statues of his people’s Eternals were silent, their stone faces lost to sight.

A flickering light caught his eye.

An approaching flame wobbled toward him. Behind it was the reddened glow of a craggy old face, perhaps worn down and shriveled like the corpse of a human. The closer it came, the more he made out its features—and the two black, olive-pit irises of one of his own people.

Broad featured and gray bearded, the elder’s eyes widened in wariness, exposing bloodshot whites around his irises. The torch glimmered upon the steel-shorn tips of the black scale armor of Master Kin-of-Far.

“You would let them in!” the old stonewalker accused.

“No . . . not anymore,” Deep-Root denied.

“Liar!” the other hissed, and his free hand dropped to the black-lacquered hilt of one of his daggers.

In reflex, Deep-Root reached for a blade sheathed at his own waist.

“Where have you been?” Master Kin-of-Far asked, cocking his head. “To your prattling brother? Is that how it started?”

The elder stonewalker watched Deep-Root with one eye, while the other tried to see whether the doors had been opened as he crept forward.

“All of them turned against us once the siege began,” he continued. “What deceits did you spit into the people’s ears . . . through your brother?”

And the whispers rose like a torrent in Deep-Root’s head.

. . . no one left to trust . . . never turn your back . . . they are coming for you. . . .

Deep-Root released his dagger’s hilt and slapped his hand to his head.

But one voice, so much louder than the others, cracked through his mind.

Listen only to me—cling only to me.

The other voices began to grow again, making it too hard to think.

“No . . .” he whispered, and then gripped his head with both hands as he shouted, “*Leave me be!*”

“Leave you be?” asked the elder, feigning puzzlement. “Why would I? You—you did this to us, traitor. You and your brother . . . made them come for us!”

“No . . . my brother has no part in this.”

“More lies!” shouted the elder, jerking his blade from its sheath.

Do what is necessary and come to me.

Deep-Root closed his hands tighter upon his head.

The elder dropped his torch and charged, raising the dagger as he shouted, “Keep your treachery, Byûnduní!”

Do not listen. Come to me.

And again the other voices raised such a cacophony that he tried to cling to the one clear voice. He tried to crush the others from his head.

Byûnduní—Deep-Root—snatched out one dagger at the sight of his caste elder coming for him.

This tainted place had to end. There would be sleep and silence once Bâalâle fell and was forgotten.

CHAPTER 1

Wynn Hygeorht paced the floor of her room inside Calm Seatt's branch of the Guild of Sagecraft. Shade, a large wolflike dog with charcoal black fur, lay on the small bed, watching her through crystal blue eyes.

Wynn was in trouble, and she knew it.

Only one night before, Wynn and Shade, and her other companion, Chane Andraso, had returned from Dhredze Seatt, the mountain stronghold of the dwarves. In that place, Wynn had disobeyed every order and every warning from her superiors. The repercussions were staggering. By now, word of her return had surely spread through the guild to its highest ranks. It was only a matter of time before she would be summoned before the Premin Council.

"Where's Chane?" she whispered absently, still pacing.

Whatever happened tonight, he'd want to know. He'd taken guest quarters across the keep's inner courtyard, but it was well past dusk, and he was late.

She nearly jumped when the knock at her door finally came. Pushing strands of wispy brown hair away from her face, she hurried to open it.

"Where have you . . . ?"

It wasn't Chane outside the door.

There stood a slender young man only a few fingers taller than Wynn. He was dressed in the gray robe of a cathologer, just like her. His shoulders were slumped forward, as if in a perpetual cringe.

"Nikolas?" Wynn said, then quickly dismissed her confusion and smiled. He was one of the few friends she had left inside the guild.

He didn't smile back. In fact, he wouldn't even look her in the eyes.

"You . . . you've been summoned," he whispered, swallowing hard halfway through. "Premin Sykion says you're to come straightaway to the council's chamber. And you're supposed to leave the . . ." He glanced once toward Shade. "You're to leave the dog here."

Wynn just stared at him. But she'd known this was coming. Hadn't she? She straightened, smoothing down her own gray robe.

"Give me a moment," she said. "Go tell the council that I'll come directly."

He hesitated nervously, then nodded. "I'll walk slowly. Buy you a little time."

Wynn gave him a sadder smile. "Thank you."

She watched him disappear down the passage, but she closed the door only partway. She took a breath before turning about, for the next part wouldn't be easy.

"Shade, stay here," she said firmly. "You cannot come."

Wynn used as few words as possible, as Shade's understanding of language wasn't fluent yet.

With a low rumble, Shade flattened her ears and launched off the bed.

Wynn was ready. She spun through the half-open door and jerked it shut. The door shuddered as Shade slammed into the other side with her full bulk. Then the howling began.

"Stop that!" Wynn called through the closed door.

With no time for Shade's drama over being left behind, she gathered up her robe's skirt and hurried down the passage to the end stairs, and then out into the night air of the courtyard.

She made her way across to the old stables and storage building, long ago converted to workshops, laboratories, and, of course, the guest quarters. Slipping through one outer door, she headed upstairs to a door she knew well. These were the same quarters once used by her old ally, Domin Ghassan il'Sänke of the guild's Suman branch, far to the south. She knocked lightly.

"Chane, are you there?"

No one answered, and anxiety swelled inside her. Where could he be? She had to at least let him know she'd been summoned.

She knocked again, more sharply.

"Chane?"

A scuffle rose beyond the door, followed by the sound of rumpling paper and a sudden screech of wooden chair legs on a stone floor. This time, the door opened, but the room beyond was dark. Wynn looked up at Chane Andraso towering over her, his face pale as always.

"What in the world were you . . . ?" She stopped midquestion.

Chane's clothes were wrinkled, and his red-brown hair was disheveled. He blinked several times as if she'd just roused him from dormancy. And . . .

"Umm, you have a piece of parchment stuck to your face."

His eyes cleared slightly, and he reached up. Instead of grabbing the torn scrap, he swatted at it with his hand, and it fell past Wynn into the passage.

"Did I wake you?" she asked in confusion.

Chane always woke the instant the sun fully set. Light from the passage's small cold lamp seeped into the guest quarters' outer study. The chair behind the old desk was pushed at an awkward angle against the wall. A pile of books and papers was lying haphazardly all over the desk, and some had even fallen to the floor.

"I must have read too late . . . near this morning," he rasped in his maimed voice.

Wynn raised one eyebrow. Chane had fallen dormant at the desk, not aware that dawn was coming? She shook her head, for they had larger problems.

"I've been summoned."

Realization spread over his handsome features as he came to full awareness.

"I am coming," he returned instantly, stepping backward to grab the room key off the desk.

Then he hesitated, glancing down at himself. He still wore his boots from the night before, along with his rumpled breeches. He quickly began tucking in his loose white shirt.

Wynn didn't care how he was dressed. It didn't matter.

"Only me," she said. "I was even ordered to leave Shade in my room."

Chane froze. He knew Shade almost never left Wynn's side. The dog rarely tolerated that. He returned to tucking in his shirt.

"I am as responsible as you," he insisted, "for all that happened. You are not facing them alone."

As he came to the door, Wynn looked up, meeting his eyes in silence. She felt ashamed by her relief at the thought of his standing beside her to face the council. But

that wasn't the way this would work.

"I don't think they'll let you—"

"I am coming," he repeated, and stepped out, closing the door.

He headed down the passageway toward the stairs before she could argue further. Without intending to, she sighed—in relief, resignation, or at the weight of her burdens. Perhaps all three.

Wynn still felt cowardly in her relief at Chane's presence as they climbed the stairs to the second floor of the guild's main hall. With all that had happened in the Stonewalkers' underworld, deep below Dhredze Seatt, she could imagine the Premin Council like some Old World mock court. Its verdict would be predetermined before any trial began.

But it wasn't a trial. This was a guild matter, and what she'd done would never be revealed publicly. She would have no statute of law to protect her against any unofficial conviction.

She glanced up at Chane beside her, his expression grim with determination. Perhaps his presence might keep the council in check, for there were internal affairs they might not raise before an outsider. But she doubted it.

When they stepped onto the upper floor, two sages waited outside the council's chamber down the broad passage. Chane never slowed, and Wynn tried not to falter, but the closer they came to the council chamber, the odder it all looked.

A middle-aged woman in cerulean, from the Order of Sentiology, and a younger man in a metaologer's midnight blue stood in silence on either side of the great oak double doors. Wynn didn't immediately recognize either one, although, with their differing orders, they made a strange combination. She'd never seen attendants outside this chamber before.

Both watched her as she approached, which made her nervous. Then they both reached out at the same time and opened the doors without a word.

Inside, standing about, waiting, was the entire Premin Council. And Domin High-Tower, the only dwarven sage and head of Wynn's order, was present, as well.

Folklore of the Farlands, Chane's world, spoke of dwarves as diminutive beings of dark crags and earthen burrows. High-Tower, like all of his people, was an intimidating hulk compared to such superstitions. Though shorter than humans, most dwarves looked Wynn straight in the eyes. What they lacked in height, they doubled in breadth.

Stout and wide as he was, he showed no hint of fat under his gray robe. Coarse reddish hair laced with gray hung past his shoulders, blending with his thick beard, which was braided at its end. His broad, rough features made his black-pupiled eyes seem like iron pellets embedded in pale, flesh-colored granite.

He glowered at her from where he stood beyond the council's table. Suddenly, his glower turned to an incensed glare, quite disturbing from any hulking dwarf. He rounded the table and tall-back chairs, coming straight toward the opened doorway, his long red hair bouncing with each stride.

"Does your impudence know no limits?" he rumbled, halting within arm's reach.

For an instant, Wynn had thought Chane was the domin's target, but High-Tower's

anger was fixed on her.

“This is a guild matter,” he growled. “It is no business of any outsider!”

Wynn glanced up at Chane—who stared down at the broad domin.

“You need to leave,” she said quietly. “Wait for me in my room.”

“No,” Chane rasped.

Wynn stiffened. Most times, she no longer noticed his maimed voice. But there was warning in that one word. Chane passively looked at everyone inside the chamber, and this only heightened Wynn’s tension.

Chane’s resolve might have given her relief at first, but now it was making things worse.

“You will leave,” someone else said flatly.

Wynn followed the sharp shift of Chane’s eyes.

Premin Frideswida Hawes of Metaology stepped straight toward them in a smooth gait that didn’t even sway her long, midnight blue robe. Within the shadow of her cowl, her hazel eyes watched them both. She stopped six paces off and focused fully on Chane. In place of High-Tower’s anger, she appeared mildly disdainful.

Chane didn’t move—and Wynn began to panic. What could anyone here possibly do to force him?

“High-Tower,” Hawes said.

The dwarven domin lunged and grabbed Wynn’s arm, jerking her into the chamber.

Chane took one step. “Release her!”

A sharp utterance cracked the air between the wide chamber’s walls.

Wynn twisted her head to see.

Hawes’s eyes narrowed as she stamped the floor and lashed out with an open palm.

The echo of High-Tower’s steps seemed to vibrate in the floor, and Chane wobbled, as if about to topple, his eyes widening.

The floor beneath his feet suddenly lurched. Its stones rolled like a wave rising on a tidal beach. He fell backward through the open doors and toward the passage’s far wall. Hawes swept forward to stand before the opening, her back to Wynn.

“Why are you doing this?” Wynn asked, and jerked forward, but she couldn’t break High-Tower’s grip.

The two attendant sages grabbed the door handles, pulling the great oak doors closed. Hawes raised one hand before the narrowing gap.

“Wynn!” Chane rasped, trying to scramble to his feet.

“Wait for me in my room!” she called.

The doors slammed shut, and he was gone from her sight.

Hawes swept her hand down with another sharp utterance.

Wynn went limp in High-Tower’s grip as the doors’ aged oak began flowing together along the passing of Hawes’s hand. The gap blended downward along the seam. In an instant, the twin doors became one solid barrier, the wood’s grain now looking as if it were cut from one piece.

Premin Hawes laid her fingertips on the wood, cocking her head as if listening.

Wynn stared numbly at the barrier as High-Tower released her. Even Chane would be hard-pressed to break his way through from the other side. More than once she’d heard Domin Ghassan il’ Sänke’s innuendos about this branch’s metaologers compared to his own. During his visit from the Suman Empire’s guild branch, he’d made plain

how little he thought of even Premin Hawes's skill as a thaumaturge.

Il'Sänke had been very wrong.

Everyone within the room remained silent for the longest time.

Premin Hawes finally turned and nodded to the others. She glided toward the long table's right end, and the rest of the council turned to follow. But her gaze fell upon Wynn as she passed. There was no malice or anger there, merely a cold and calculating study.

Council members began taking their seats, and Wynn turned to face what awaited her . . . alone.

Hawes settled silently in one of the smoothly crafted, high-back chairs at the right end of a long, stout table that stretched across the room's rear. All the chairs were now filled with the five robed members of the Premin Council.

Premin Adlam, in the light brown of Naturology, sat at the table's left end. Next, on High Premin Sykion's left, sat portly Premin Renäld of Sentiology in cerulean. Sykion, as head of the council, sat at the table's center, dressed in the gray of Cathology—Wynn's own order. On her right, Premin Jacque of Conamology had his elbows on the table. His fingers were laced together, and he rested his high forehead against them, hiding his face.

And Hawes at the far right end still studied Wynn, almost without blinking. Her hazel irises now seemed the color of the walls' gray stones.

Wynn stood straight, meeting that gaze, but then she couldn't help glancing at the sixth person present.

As with the last time she'd been called here, Domin High-Tower, her immediate superior in Cathology, returned to standing beyond the table. He wouldn't even look at her and stared out one of the narrow rear windows. He'd once been a beloved teacher, but was now her fiercest, most open opponent, trying to hobble her efforts at nearly every turn.

"Journeyor Hygeorht," Premin Sykion began slowly, "I hardly know where to begin."

Wynn shifted her gaze.

"Lady" Tärtgyth Sykion, once a minor noble of the nearby nation of Faunier, was an aged but tall and straight willow of a woman. A long silver braid snaked out of the side of her cowl and down the front of her gray robe. Beneath her usual motherly and temperate veneer, she was as untrustworthy as the rest. Tonight, there was no nurturing care in her expression.

Strangely, that took away all of Wynn's shame and fear.

She wasn't about to give them the slightest chance for a long recitation of her offenses. She wouldn't subject herself to more subterfuge hidden beneath righteous indignation, no matter her guilt.

"I request to go south," she said immediately, "to the Lhoin'na, and our guild's elven branch."

Sykion sat upright, like a willow suddenly revitalized in resistance to an autumn gale. Her eyes barely betrayed shock, but not so for Premin Jacque. He lifted his head from his laced fingers, his broad mouth gaping for an instant.

"You are not here to request anything!" he said. "You are here to answer for your actions."

Wynn clenched her jaw.

Sykion lightly cleared her throat and straightened a stack of papers. The topmost appeared to be a letter of some kind, but Wynn couldn't make out its contents from where she stood. Then she spotted the sea green tie ribbon lying beside the stack. She grew sick inside, thinking of a royal wax seal that must have bound the ribbon enclosing that letter.

"Journeyor Hygeorht," Sykion began again, "it has come to our attention that a number of journals secured with the texts are missing."

Wynn was ready for this, the first and least of her "crimes."

Six moons past, she'd returned from abroad, bearing a treasure like none before it—a collection of ancient texts from the time of the Forgotten History, presumably penned by forgotten Noble Dead. These texts hinted at an ancient enemy who'd nearly destroyed the world a thousand years ago . . . in a war that many now believed was an overblown myth or had never even taken place.

Wynn knew better.

To her shock, upon returning home, she'd lost this treasure. Out of fear of the contents, her superiors had seized the texts—along with her own journals. They'd locked everything away, to be translated in secret. Wynn had uncovered hints that the original texts were hidden somewhere in the underworld of Dhredze Seatt. Against all orders, she'd found them again, but was only able to take back her journals.

"The journals are not missing, but back where they belong," Wynn answered. "I wrote them."

Perhaps they'd expected her to be contrite. Why else would they make her stand alone before them like some miscreant schoolgirl about to be expelled?

"You don't deny that you took these journals?" Adlam asked, perhaps a little uncertain.

"They're mine," Wynn answered.

"You will return them immediately," Sykion said.

"No."

"Journeyor Hygeorht—"

"By law, the texts are mine, as well," Wynn interrupted. "I found them. I brought them back. If you make any attempt to regain my journals, I'll engage the court's High Advocate . . . with my own case to have *all* the texts returned to me."

She spoke without wavering, but her stomach knotted.

Making threats gave her no pleasure, but she'd learned a thing or two about what was right and what was necessary. This place had been her home since the day someone found her abandoned in a box at its outer portcullis. She had no wish to be expelled from the only life she knew. On the other hand, the premins wanted her gone—and yet still under their control. They couldn't have that without her continued connection to the guild.

But as Wynn's last words escaped, any pretense of formality vanished from the chamber.

High-Tower turned her way. He was not a premin, and so not part of the council. He didn't speak, but his breath came strong and hard.

Premin Renäld glared at Wynn and whispered, "And what of the loss of Prince Freädherich?"

He may as well have shouted.

This was the worst of it—her true crime. This was the reason she'd been commanded before the council. Next to the loss of Prince Freäðherich, stealing back her journals was a child's prank.

Wynn slid one foot back a half step before catching herself. She'd known this was coming, but the quick shift in their assault had caught her off guard just the same.

A gleam of righteous ire—but also horror over the consequences—sparked in Renäld's eyes.

"If the worst comes . . . you have cut our hopes in half!" he spat at her.

Wynn knew it all more than he did. During her ordeal in the Stonewalkers' underworld, she'd uncovered a dark secret unrelated to her purpose.

A prince of Malourné, thought drowned years ago, was alive and locked away in the Stonewalkers' underworld—to protect him from himself. His wife, Duchess Reine Faunier-Âreskynna, princess of Malourné by marriage, had been caring for him in secret. The family line of the Âreskynna had an ancient blood connection to the Dunidæ—Dwarvish for the "Deep Ones." A fabled people of the sea, only the Stonewalkers and the royal family knew of them.

Freäðherich had been slowly succumbing to sea-lorn sickness, carried in his blood from a forgotten ancestor married in an alliance to one of the Dunidæ. Wynn had unwittingly drawn a black wraith named Sau'ilahk into the underworld, and the threat of the wraith's presence had accelerated the prince's illness and its transformation.

Prince Freäðherich had fled, escaping to the open ocean with the Dunidæ, who always sought him out at the highest tides. Because of Wynn's actions, Malourné had lost not only a prince, but the prime emissary to the Deep Ones, and an ancient alliance along with him.

Duchess Reine had lost her husband for the second and final time.

Wynn's certainty of her choices wasn't enough to hold down her guilt. She tried not to let it show but smoothed her robe a bit too obviously. The council was watching for weakness, anything to use against her, and they had more than enough.

"If this hadn't been kept secret for so long," Premin Renäld went on, "you wouldn't be standing before us. You would be facing the High Advocate yourself, on trial for ___"

"As far as the public is concerned," Wynn cut in, "the prince died years ago."

It was a shabby, cruel response, but there was nothing else she could say. What happened couldn't be undone. She had no intention of justifying herself to those whose fears overrode necessary action, who denied obvious conclusions for all of these events.

The Ancient Enemy was returning. Another war was coming. There was no *if*; only *when*. And Wynn had to continue in her determination to stop it.

"So, you deny any part in the prince's loss?" Premin Jacque demanded.

"I deny its relevance . . . in the present," Wynn answered. "It has no bearing on my request to travel south to the Lhoin'na's guild branch."

This was her goal. In the brief time she'd regained access to the ancient texts, searching for clues of the Ancient Enemy's return, Wynn had found hints of where to look for the mystery's next piece.

Bäälâlê Seatt: a great dwarven settlement, lost in the mythical war at the end of the