

THROUGH STONE AND SEA

A NOVEL OF THE NOBLE DEAD



BARB & J. C. HENDEE



A ROC BOOK

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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

ALSO BY BARB HENDEE

THE VAMPIRE MEMORIES SERIES

BLOOD MEMORIES

HUNTING MEMORIES

THROUGH STONE AND SEA

A NOVEL OF THE NOBLE DEAD



BARB & J. C. HENDEE



A ROC BOOK

ROC

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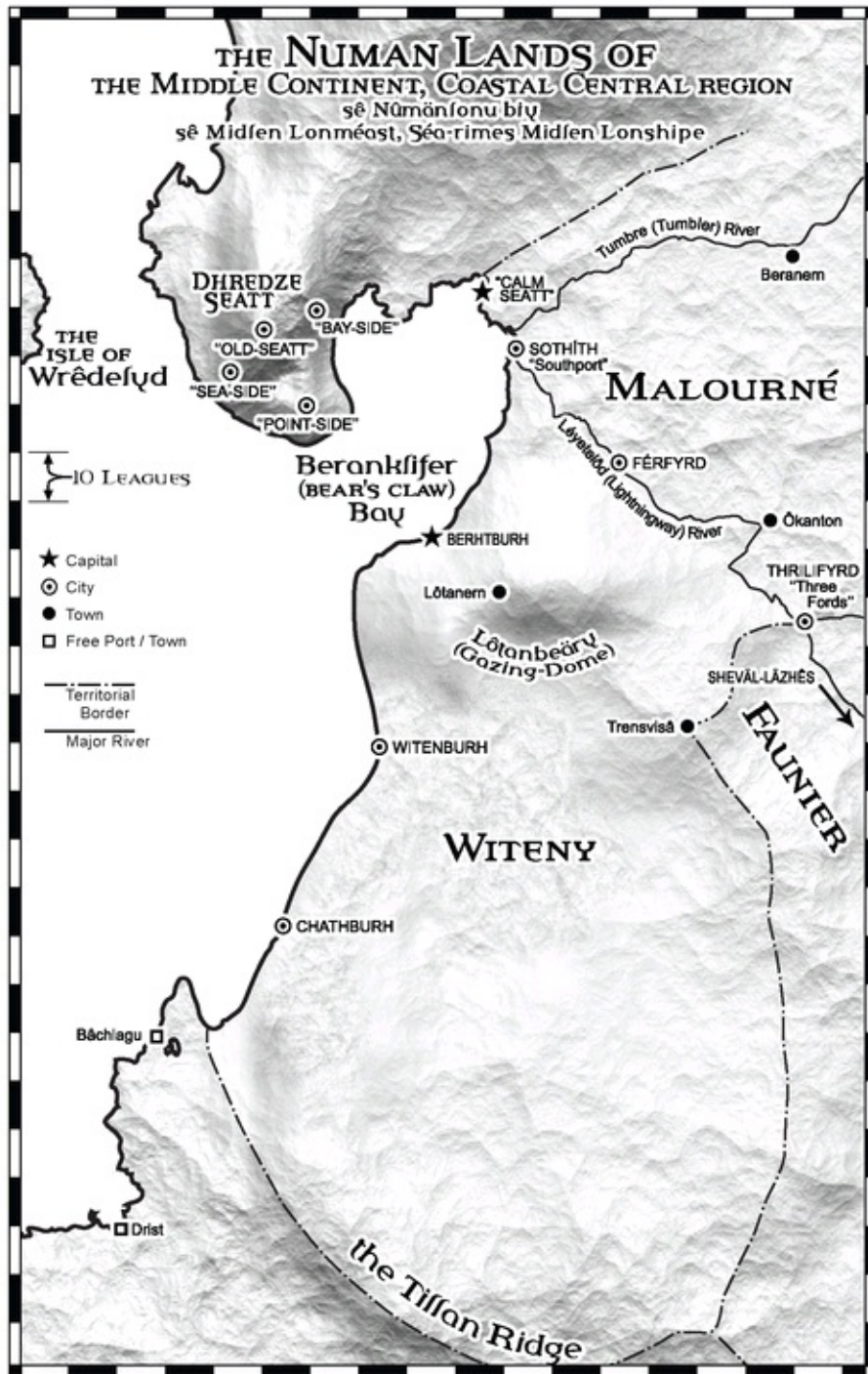
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PROLOGUE

Dusk settled over the harbor below Chemarré—Sea-Side—the western settlement of Dhredze Sea, home of the dwarven people across the bay from Calm Seatt. A two-masted Numanese ship drifted up to its docks. As the crew cast lines to dwarven dockworkers, the vessel settled, with five cloaked figures waiting near its rail.

Three of the quintet wore polished steel helms gleaming pale yellow under the deck's lanterns. A glimpse of glittering chain vestments beneath crimson tabards showed through the splits of the cloaks. Each wore a long sword sheathed upon a wide belt of engraved silver plates. These three were Weardas—the Sentinels—personal guard to the Âreskynna, the royal family of Malourné in Calm Seatt.

Behind them stood one of the other two, easily as tall as they were, but slighter of build. This one in an earthy-colored cloak with full hood hid his face but not the hem of a white robe around his tan feet and boots.

The last of the five, standing before all the others, was much shorter.

Hidden beneath a hooded cloak of deep sea green, small gloved hands and a slight frame marked this one as female. She gripped the rail and peered over the ship's side and up the dock, as if looking for someone.

The crew gave these five a wide berth and hurried to unload a paltry cargo, as if their vessel had left its last port not fully loaded. By the time they finished, night had settled in.

The ship's captain strolled past the quintet and stopped a ways off. The broadest and tallest of the Weardas nodded curtly. That brief movement exposed the tuft of a dark beard on his squared chin. The ship's captain shook his head and turned aftward toward his quarters below.

And still the five waited—until heavy footfalls barely carried from shore.

The woman in sea green rushed down the boarding ramp.

She reached the dock before her panicked guards caught up and encompassed her once more. The tall one in the earthy cloak pushed close behind her as she searched the night for those footfalls. But all she saw were warehouses, other smaller buildings, and a trio of dwarves settled down to pipes and low talk.

Yet those footfalls never broke rhythm.

At first, the dockworkers gave no notice. Perhaps they thought it was one of their own coming off for evening duty. Then something passed through the edge of their lanterns' dim light.

It stomped onward like a broad piece of night on the move, and then vanished from the light beyond reach.

The closest dockworker jerked to his feet, overturning his heavy cask stool. His companions rose but he turned the other way, peering shoreward and all around the port. Only then did he stare after those footfalls, as if the shadow heralded something worse he hadn't spotted.

Slowly, the steady steps breached the edge of the light from the ship's lanterns. Illumination exposed the silhouette of a broad dwarf.

At first, the light only caught on wild, steel-streaked black hair around a grim, wrinkled face. The rest of him remained lost, as if night clung to his massive form. An indignant hiss rose from the tall Weardas with the chin beard.

“You’re late!” he growled. “I don’t like my *charge* being forced to wait in the dark!”

~~“You are early, Captain,” replied the new arrival, his voice like gravel crushed under a boulder.~~

“And I do not care to be seen by my people . . . any more than necessary.”

He drew closer, stepping into full view.

Standing as tall as the small woman, he was easily twice as wide and three times her bulk. Wild locks hung to his shoulders, framing the hard line of his mouth within a beard of short, steely bristles. Over char-gray breeches and a wool shirt, he wore a short-sleeved hauberk of oiled black leather scales. Each scale’s tip was sheathed in ornately engraved steel, and two war daggers in like-adorned black sheaths were tucked slantwise in his thick belt.

This dark juggernaut stopped three paces off and blew a long exhale through his broad nose, full of disdain for his challenger. Then his black pellet eyes settled upon the small woman ringed in by her taller entourage.

“The new moon comes, this time with the year’s highest tide,” he rumbled. “Welcome again . . . Princess.”

The woman raised gloved hands to her hood.

The movement opened her cloak, exposing a forest green skirt. The skirt’s front was split around her dark brown breeches and calf-high leather riding boots. The hilt of a small horseman’s sabre poked out above her left hip. She pulled the hood back, revealing a mass of dark chestnut hair around a dainty face of even features that some would call fetching.

“Duchess . . . Master Cinder-Shard,” she corrected him, but her voice quavered and broke. “Always . . . duchess.”

Reine Faunier Âreskynna, Duchess of Faunier and princess by marriage to the royals of Malourne, nodded respectfully—almost reverently—to the dark dwarf.

“Toying with titles changes nothing,” he returned. “It disrespects heritage. It is a princess of the Âreskynna who comes to the Hassäg’kreigi.”

A soft laugh, like a lark in the woods, rose from the brown-cloaked attendant.

“Oh, spare us, Smarasmôy, you old ghost tender!” that one whispered, using the newcomer’s dwarven name. “Preference of title will not crack the walls of propriety.”

Master Cinder-Shard’s dour expression flattened. He raised those black pellet eyes to the tall and slight figure.

“Chuillyon?” he asked with a forced scowl. “What impish prank did you pull this time . . . to end up on guardian duty?”

His caustic tone didn’t hide an elder’s shake of the head at some suspected mischief by a youngster.

“Not a thing, I swear,” answered Chuillyon innocently. “I chose this duty.”

At that, Cinder-Shard turned serious, almost worried. “Why not assign one of your order instead?”

Duchess Reine remained uncomfortably quiet, and Chuillyon pulled back his earth-toned hood and the white cowl beneath it.

Lantern light spread over a male elf’s triangular face with the large amber eyes of his people, but there was no youngster to be chided. Chuillyon’s golden brown locks, hanging past his oversharpened chin, were faded in streaks. Prominent creases lined the corners of his eyes set around a narrow nose a bit longer even for an elf. More lines framed his small mouth, perhaps as much from mirth as advanced age.

“How fares the Order of Chârmun,” Cinder-Shard asked, “without your mischievous guidance?”

Chuillyon, whose name meant “holly,” lost his soft smile. “As well as the Stonewalkers, I imagine . . . with such unknown times ahead.”

Duchess Reine cringed, clasping her hands tightly together. She tried to breathe slowly, normally.

but her effort was plainly visible. One Weardas, with a face too boyish for his stature, leaned around his captain's shoulder.

"Sir, we draw too much attention."

Reine's gaze slipped to the dockworkers down the way. Three dwarves stared with anxious wonder at Master Cinder-Shard and the gathering on the dock.

"Enough talk," growled the captain. "We go now."

"Tristan!" Reine admonished sharply, and then lowered her voice. "You will show respect for the master of the Stonewalkers!"

At her strained tone, everyone fell silent. Chuillyon laid a hand lightly upon her shoulder.

"Apologies," the captain said. "No offense intended."

Cinder-Shard nodded and glanced briefly at the gawkers far behind him.

"You are correct, Captain," he agreed. "Will you lead with me?"

Cinder-Shard turned a hardened gaze upon Reine as the captain stepped beyond him to wait. A look of sadness or deep regret passed across the dwarf's craggy face. Reine set herself, every muscle rigid, as his gravelly voice declared . . .

"Time again, Princess . . . to return to the underworld."

CHAPTER 1

The racing lift rolled over a shelf lip on the sheer mountainside and lurched to a halt at the w station. Wynn Hygeorht stepped off the lift's platform, arriving at Cheku'ûn——Bay-Side——one of four main settlements for Dhredze Seatt, the nation of the dwarves, overlooking Beranlôm Bay. Even at this dizzying height, the bay below looked wide and vast. Calm Seatt's pinprick lights marked the far shore as the glow of encroaching dawn rose in the east.

Wynn pushed back her hood and brushed away wisps of light brown hair that the breeze pulled across her oval face. Beneath her cloak, she wore the light gray robe of the Order of Cathology in the Guild of Sagecraft.

"We're finally here," she said.

When she turned back, glancing up the stone loading ramp, any matching relief on her companion's faces had nothing to do with reaching their destination.

Shade, taller than a wolf and with a shimmering coat of charcoal black, whined sharply as she wobbled out of the lift's railing gate. The dog swallowed hard, as if her last meal of mutton might come up, and drool ran from her mouth.

Chane Andraso was little better. Tall and lanky but muscular, with solid shoulders, he didn't release the railing until he stepped onto the stone ramp. His raggedly cut red-brown hair ruffled in the wind as he followed Shade down to join Wynn.

He was shivering.

He couldn't have been cold, not as an undead, and she'd never seen him frightened of anything. The barest relief spread through Chane's narrow features. Then he glared back at the lift's massive wheel resting level at the station.

Wynn sighed. "Oh, for goodness' sake—it wasn't that bad."

Chane looked down at her, dumbstruck and aghast. Shade tried to growl, but only gagged, and shook herself all over as if trying to shed the entire experience.

Wynn headed off, shaking her head.

"After all we've been through," she muttered, "such fuss over a simple ride up a mountain!"

A chain of extraordinary events had brought the three of them here.

Two years before, she'd found an ancient castle atop the highest mountains of the eastern continent. An immense decaying library within it held texts written by ancient Noble Dead, perhaps the oldest vampires. One vampire was still there after a thousand or more years. Wynn had taken away a pittance of that treasure, only what she and her companions could carry. She'd hoped her selections, written in lost dialects and dead languages, might illuminate theories on the Forgotten History . . . and the great war that some believed had never happened.

When she returned to the small beginning of a new guild branch on the eastern continent, she'd been given the task of carrying those priceless tomes home to Calm Seatt, Malourné, and the founding origin for the Guild of Sagecraft. She'd boarded a ship and crossed the eastern ocean and the central continent, eager to finish a long, arduous journey and begin translation with her fellow sages.

But nothing in Wynn's recent years had ever turned out as she'd hoped.

Upon her arrival, the texts and her own travel journals had been confiscated and locked away. Only a chosen few of her superiors ever saw them. At least until sages began to be murdered in the night.

over bits of translation work sent out to local scribe shops for transcription. She came to realize she had to regain those texts and solve whatever mysteries they held.

At first, she'd believed they were stored somewhere on guild grounds. Later she suspected they were hidden elsewhere. She'd spotted dark-clad dwarves at the guild, but they vanished without trace of how they came or went. She learned what they called themselves only by chance.

Hassäg'kreigi—the Stonewalkers.

And now, here she was with Chane and Shade in Dhredze Seatt, a place close to home and yet she hadn't seen it in years.

A pair of humans bundled in winter attire, perhaps merchants from Calm Seatt, waited with crates of goods at the larger cargo lift. But no one was waiting to take the smaller passenger lift that had brought Wynn up. More people bustled about the main street here than in any of the lower way-station settlements.

Wynn gazed about the small stone city built into the mountain's sheer side.

She'd been so young the last time she'd come here. Just shy of apprenticeship, she'd been overjoyed that Domin Tilswith had chosen her to assist him. Well, that and trying to keep up with her old master and not get lost amid a foreign place and its people.

She stepped around the way-station's crank house into the narrow stone street, and everything before her seemed to stretch *upward*.

The main road snaked back and forth up the mountain between buildings of stone and scant timber. Only short and steep side streets aimed directly upward, and most were built of wide stone steps and multiple landings. All of it was behemothlike—rather like the dwarves themselves. Dying moonlight barely revealed roofs of slate tiles, stone blocks, and shakes and planks of oak on smaller structures. Everything else was carved from granite so precisely that little mortar was ever used.

Something bumped Wynn's leg. Shade whined and pressed closer. Young and wild, Shade didn't like crowds. Her blue eyes—flecked with yellow—grew wide as she looked around. Wynn reached down to stroke her ears.

"Daunting," Chane rasped from behind.

Wynn was accustomed to his maimed voice, but it still startled her in the dark predawn.

"It can be a little disorienting at first," she replied.

And it was. Dwellings and inns, smithies, tanneries, and shops all spread out, around, and above them in a melded maze.

She shifted her pack to relieve pressure on her shoulder. Chane seemed oblivious to the weight of his own two packs. Gripping her tall staff, a leather sheath covering its top end, Wynn led the way farther up the main street. When she glanced back, she paused, spotting a great open archway in the mountain's side behind the crank house.

The entire lift station could have fit through it with room to spare. The orange light of the dwarves' heated crystals spilled from its interior over people coming and going. But she had no time for a closer peek and instead looked eastward.

The star-speckled night had lightened farther along the distant horizon, and urgency took hold.

"We must find the temple," she said.

Any visitor in a foreign place had to find lodging, but in Chane's case, it was foremost. She needed to get him inside before the sun rose.

"Find?" he echoed. "You do not know where it is?"

"Of course I know. It's just . . . been . . . a long time."

Wynn hurried up the street's gradual slant, deeper into Bay-Side, and quickened her pace. In spite

of her assurance to Chane, she wasn't certain of the temple's location. It was still the best place to take shelter, away from other travelers at an inn. It was also a place where a visiting sage would be welcomed.

Dwarves practiced a unique form of ancestor worship. They revered those of their own who attained notable status in life, akin to the human concept of a hero or saint, or rather both. Any who became known for virtuous accomplishments, by feat and/or service to the people, might one day become thänæ—one of the honored. Though similar to human knighthood or noble entitlement, it wasn't a position of rulership or authority. After death, any thänæ who'd achieved renown among the people over decades and centuries, through the continued retelling of their exploits, might one day be elevated to Bäynæ—one of the dwarven Eternals. These were the dwarves' spiritual immortals, held in the honored ancestors of their people as a whole.

Wynn sought lodgings at the temple of just such a one.

Bedzâ'kenge—Feather-Tongue—was the patron of wisdom and heritage through story, song, and poetry, their paragon of orators and historians. For as long as any history remembered, the dwarves kept to oral tradition rather than the literary ways of humankind.

As Wynn hurried along, she noticed faint shadows upon the granite street stones. Another glance eastward, between stout buildings on the settlement's outer edge, showed the horizon growing ever lighter.

"Are we near yet?" Chane asked.

He didn't sound concerned, but Wynn knew better. If they didn't find the temple soon, they'd have to knock on some random door and beg admittance to get him out of the coming dawn.

"We're in the right area," she half lied. "I'll recognize the street when I see it."

But she wished she'd paid better attention as a girl while visiting with Domin Tilswith.

Wynn stopped between wide steps on both sides. Another thick four-sided stone pillar stood in the intersection. Atop it, steam leaked around a huge raw crystal casting orange light and warmth above the street. Oral or not, dwarves had an ancient writing system, and columns often served the same purpose as street signs in human cities.

She circled it, scanning for engravings upon its smooth faces—not for names of streets but for places found in the direction the column's sides faced. She could read the common dialect reasonably well, but the temple of Bedzâ'kenge wasn't mentioned. Either it didn't lie along any of these routes or it was more than one level up.

Along the higher staircase, she spotted a mapmaker's shop on the first landing, its tan banner flying above a wide front door.

"There," she breathed in relief. "I remember that from the last time I was here."

She hurried up the steps past the mapmaker's shop and others, all the way to the main street's next switchback.

"I know where we are," Wynn exclaimed.

Chane raised one eyebrow. "I was not aware you were in doubt."

"Oh, just come on!"

She broke into a jog, heading the other way. At the next intersecting stairway, she turned upward again. She stopped halfway, catching her breath on a landing with sculpted miniature fir trees planted in large black marble pots. She knew she had the right path, but Chane's brow wrinkled as he glanced east.

"Almost there," she said in a gasp, and hiked her robe as she climbed again.

Shade bounded ahead, reaching the street's next switchback first. Wynn hoped at least one shirvê

—a temple attendant—was up and about this early.

A deep tone echoed between the buildings.

Wynn pulled up short on the steps and held her breath.

“What?” Chane whispered.

She raised a hand for silence and waited, listening and hoping for more tones to come, but none did.

“Night-Winter is over!” she whispered in panic. “Day-Spring begins!”

“What does that mean?” Chane demanded.

This was no time to explain dwarven measures of night’s and day’s phases. She grabbed his sleeve, jerking him onward.

“Dawn is coming!”

“I do not need bells to know that,” he answered.

Wynn reached Shade at the main street’s next crossing. Across the way, before the next intersection, a pillar and its steaming crystal, was a massive structure emerging from the mountainside. Its double doors of white marble were set back beneath a high overhang supported by columns carved like living trees. But quick relief vanished.

Faint shadows from the columns began to appear upon the doors.

Wynn had to get Chane inside right now.

A dark column, like smoke thickening in shadow, grew in a small street-side terrace. It coalesced before an old fir tree nurtured in that place. And a heavy black cowl sagged across a cloak layered over a long black robe.

Sau’ilahk watched his trio of quarry scurry up the steps to the columned and roofed landing.

The sky grew light, and he could not remain for long nor risk going closer. The wolf might sense him. But he now knew these three better, having followed their nightly journey all the way from Calm Seatt.

Wynn Hygeorht, journeyor sage, kept company with a savage, tall wolf she had named Shade. But the pale one called Chane was more suspicious. He gave off no sense of *presence* at all. In Calm Seatt both of Wynn’s companions had been difficult to deal with face-to-face, as neither succumbed to Sau’ilahk’s life-consuming touch. But Wynn frustrated and angered him most.

If not for her meddling, he might have acquired more translation folios—and perhaps a hint to the remedy of his long misery.

She did not know his name, never would, and instead referred to him as something out of her people’s quaint old folklore—a wraith. She even thought him destroyed by the staff’s crystal. Oh, she had injured him worse than he could remember and driven him into dark dormancy. The crystal’s flame had torn him up like sunlight. But she had no notion *what* he truly was, *whom* she had interfered with. In centuries of searching, he had never come close to what he sought until the ancient texts had appeared at the guild. And now . . .

Sau’ilahk slid back through the massive fir and into its deeper shadows, feeling the life in its branches pass through him as if he were *nothing*! That worthless tingle of life was too removed from his once living nature. It did not feed him and only made him ache for one precious thing lost an age ago.

Flesh.

By dear, deceitful Beloved, the one true deity, how he ached to have flesh once more. That singular

desire might have been all that had kept him from fading into nothingness over more than a thousand years. And there was Beloved's more recent promise, given one dusk upon the edge of Sau'ilahk's dormancy.

Follow the sage . . . urge her, drive her. . . . She will lead you to your desire.

That temptation of hope ground against doubt-fueled rage. Could he ever trust his god again?

Sau'ilahk sighed, though his "voice" was nothing more than conjury-twisted air, allowing him to speak if needed. It was smothered like a weakened hiss in the mountain breeze.

Word of his supposed death—or second so—had spread through the sages' guild and beyond. Yet their leaders still chose not to send folios out to scribe shops. And it had become too risky to search farther on guild's grounds. Beloved's whispered words and this sage were all he had left.

It would be so much more pleasing to just kill her.

She thought she knew so much. It was twice as galling that in part she was correct. She knew more than her confederates, though so little of the actual truth.

Sau'ilahk would make her efforts come to nothing, once she led him to what he wanted. He needed her to find the writings of Li'kän, Häs'saun, Volyno, and others of Beloved's "Children." Wynn Hygeorht was his one and only tool for finding a way to regain flesh. But why had she come here, to this temple?

And the first bell of day sounded.

Sau'ilahk could not face the dawn any more than other undead. He let go of awareness and began slipping into dormancy. He faded from the physical aspect of all Existence to the far edge of its spiritual side—to that thin place between life and death. As he sank into dormancy, into dream, he whispered only in thought . . .

My Beloved . . . bless me again . . . this time in truth.

He would hunt Wynn Hygeorht once more when the sun set. Time was the one thing Sau'ilahk possessed in endless quantity.

Chane jerked up his cloak's hood, not daring to glance eastward. Perhaps his clothing would shield him if the sun came too quickly, but he had never tested this outright. He peered up the steps rising to the temple.

The building's frontage emerged from the mountainside and twin granite columns carved like large tree trunks framed the landing's end. Even so, the structure hardly seemed large or deep enough to house these shirvêsh, as Wynn called them, be they monks, priests, or whatever tending some long-dead ancestor.

Wynn hurried upward with Shade, but Chane followed more slowly.

"Don't worry," Wynn assured him. "I'll have you inside in a moment."

The panicked edge in her voice was less than reassuring.

A heavy oblong arc of polished brass hung between the columns like a gateway. Suspended from the roof's front by intricate harnesses of leather, its open ends dangled a shin's length above the landing floor. It was so tall he could have walked through and not touched its top with an upstretched hand.

Chane climbed closer and noticed its metal was formed from a hollowed tube and not a solid bar. Wynn grabbed a short brass rod from a bracket on one column as Chane looked through the strange gateway to the shadowed front doors.

The emblem of a tablet was carved into the white marble and would split down the middle when the

doors opened. Harsh-stroked characters were chiseled inside the tablet's shape as if it held some ancient epitaph or edict. Or was it a warning?

Chane took the last step onto the landing's edge with sudden reluctance.

Was this a true holy place?

He had heard the tales—undead could not enter a sanctified space. There were many such superstitions concerning his kind. Some were true, such as sunlight, the essence of garlic, and fire. Others turned out to be false. He had uncovered a few of those in frightening, accidental ways.

“What’s wrong?” Wynn asked.

She was watching him, as if aware he feared more than just the sun. How could he explain if she did not already know? He shook his head at her. With nowhere to hide, and no way to distinguish the truth, Chane stood trapped between sacred ground and the coming dawn.

“You are certain this is the place?” he rasped.

She didn’t answer and instead struck the rod hard against the great brass arc.

Chane’s whole body clenched as a baritone clang assaulted his ears. Wynn struck twice more, and the sound vibrated inside him, sharpening the prickling sting growing upon his skin. The tones rolled along the street like an orator booming for attention.

“Someone should be up,” she said, but too much nervousness leaked into her voice.

The brass arc’s tones died, and Chane was uncertain what to hope.

What would happen when—if—he stepped across the threshold? Would he burn as in fire; would that be what the sun did to him if he did not cross over? Or would he merely drop dead beyond the threshold like a corpse finally lifeless?

One door began to open without even the grating of metal hinges.

Wynn sighed audibly, and a solid, white-haired dwarf leaned out of the opening.

He studied the trio upon the landing, his face rather flat and wrinkled, like a half-dried grape. Wavy hair flowed down and broke over his wide shoulders, becoming one with his thick beard, though a mustache sprouted below his broad nose. He was dressed in brown breeches and typical heavy dwarven boots, his muslin shirt overlaid with a hip-long felt vestment of fiery burnt orange.

Not typical attire for any clergy that Chane had ever seen.

At the sight of Wynn’s robe, the dwarf’s eyes widened a little. Before he spoke, Wynn grabbed Chane’s sleeve.

“May we enter?” she asked quickly.

At her anxious tone, the old dwarf stepped aside, raising an ushering hand toward the interior. Shade trotted ahead as Wynn pulled on Chane, but Chane jerked free at the last instant.

He would not have her touching him when . . . if something happened.

Wynn looked up, startled and frightened, cocking her head toward the door as she sidled through it. When he crept to the threshold, he forced his eyes to remain open but quickly lowered them, watching only his dragging feet until . . .

His left boot toe slid from the landing’s granite onto a tiled mosaic floor.

Chane faltered. He stepped onward, waiting for . . . something, until a dull thump echoed all around him. He stopped and looked up when the door closed. The first thing he saw was Shade sitting before him on the tile floor. She was watching him, her unnatural blue eyes slightly narrowed.

Shade could sense any undead but him. While he wore the arcane “ring of nothing,” it blocked his nature and presence from all unnatural awareness beyond normal senses. Shade had no idea of his true nature, though she made her dislike plain enough.

She finally huffed and began padding about the entry room.

“What is the matter with you?” Wynn whispered, and Chane flinched.

He stood inside a temple, and nothing had happened to him.

“Thank you, Shirvêsh Mallet,” Wynn said to the old dwarf. “We just arrived, and winter mornings are far too cold up here. It’s so good to see you again.”

The old dwarf—this shirvêsh—squinted. He had recognized her robe but not her. Eye-to-eye with short Wynn, he fixed upon her face. One bushy eyebrow crept upward until his eyes widened again.

“Little Apprentice Hygeorht?” he said in perfect Numanese.

“Of course! You remember me?”

“Remember?” The old one snorted.

Shirvêsh Mallet grabbed Wynn’s shoulders in his bear-paw hands.

Chane was so shaken by entering unharmed that he was taken by surprise. The dwarf could have tossed her about like an empty robe. But she never even teetered as the shirvêsh leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“My hair may be white, but my mind has not turned to ash,” he said. “And I warrant it is sharper than yours . . . with your obsessive need to write everything down!”

Chane frowned, uncertain what the last comment meant.

Wynn cleared her throat, or perhaps choked down a giggle, as if the old one’s words were common welcome. She pulled a folded tan paper from her pocket and held it out.

“I’m a journeyor now, here on assignment. Domin High-Tower sent this for you.”

The shirvêsh took the paper, unfolding it as Wynn gestured to Chane. “This young scholar is Chane Andraso.”

“A bit of a tall, pale one,” the dwarf muttered, not looking up from the letter. “Perhaps not from around here?”

“From the Farlands, on the eastern continent,” Wynn quickly explained. “He’ll be assisting my research. And that’s Shade.”

Shade’s ears pricked at her name.

“Can you spare two rooms?” Wynn asked. “I don’t know how long we’re staying.”

All this familiarity left Chane further out of place. One did not walk into a temple and request rooms for an indefinite period. Yet here he stood in a sacred place, not quite believing he did so. And Wynn carried on as if she and the old one had stumbled upon each other at some public house. It was too casual . . . too presumptive.

The shirvêsh finished the letter and folded it up.

“Yes, yes, you need not ask,” he returned. “Any from the guild are welcome, and it is good to hear from Chlâyard . . . I mean High-Tower, as you would say . . . though that pup could have written more than once in a decade!”

Chane had seen High-Tower, and the elder domin was certainly no puppy. How old was the shirvêsh?

“Have you eaten?” Mallet asked. “We are preparing breakfast. By the Eternals, what drove you to our doors before dawn?”

The two prattled on as if sudden visitors requesting what amounted to charity were commonplace. Chane had been born into a minor noble family in a world where no one made unannounced visits. Since rising as a Noble Dead, he had paid or fought for the smallest comfort or refuge.

“I think we’re too tired to eat,” Wynn said, hefting her pack again. “Could we just join you for dinner? We’ve been traveling all night.”

“By night?” The old dwarf blinked hard. “Now I am curious about such a rush along the bay road.”

And with a foreigner from . . . where did you say?"

"Belaski," Chane rasped.

Shirvêsh Mallet nodded, giving Chane's maimed voice no notice, and ushered Wynn onward.

"Let us be off, child, and find you rooms."

The two led the way toward the open arch across from the doors, and Chane's attention wandered around the surroundings.

From the outside, the building had looked as if it would barely accommodate the entryway. Beyond the next arch was so much more. The opening was likely positioned where the building frontage met the mountainside. It revealed a wide corridor heading deeper into the mountain, into the . . . *temple*. Even thinking that word left Chane unsettled with every step across the entryway's mosaic floor.

Colored thumbnail tiles created the image of a stout, dark-haired, and bearded dwarf bearing a tall, char-gray staff. He wore a burnt orange vestment, somewhat like the elder shirvêsh. In the image, the figure appeared to step straight toward Chane out of the floor along an open road leading away from a hazy violet mountain range in the background.

Chane raised his eyes and quickened his pace to catch Wynn and their host, already a good way down the corridor.

Other dwarves in burnt orange vestments, male and female, appeared now and then. All nodded, waved, or spoke in their own tongue, some yawning as if just roused. They went varied ways through side arches and heavy wide doors along the broad main corridor.

Chane had encountered few dwarves in Calm Seatt, a city so named to honor these stout people who had helped build its castles and major structures. He had not yet grown accustomed to the sight of them. His homeland's folklore spoke of such beings as diminutive creatures of the earth found only in wild and remote hidden places. In truth . . . well, the lore was so far off the truth.

Though shorter than humans, most dwarves looked Wynn straight in the eyes. What they lacked in height, they made up for in breadth. Chane had once seen a dwarf turn sideways to get through a shadowed door in Calm Seatt. It had been a tight fit.

He trailed Wynn and Mallet until the corridor met with a wide archway opening into a cavernous round chamber. Wynn stopped there, looking back for him, but Shade trotted straight in, sniffing about a bright floor of octagonal marble tiles.

"This is the temple proper of Bedzâ'kenge . . . 'Feather-Tongue,' " Wynn explained. "One of the Bâynæ."

Chane immediately halted, not nearing the opening. There was a reason he had made it across the outer threshold.

He could just make out the chamber's far wide and curved wall beyond the arch. Strange characters of harsh strokes, as in the door's tablet emblem, were carved in what he assumed was Dwarvish. The engravings were sparse and austere, arranged in spaced vertical columns.

On the road to the seatt, Wynn had told him of the dwarves' oral tradition. What little they wrote was "carved in stone," or sometimes metal, and only when the meaning innately deserved the implied permanence. Interaction with human culture had led to some use of paper, parchment, and other portable records, but old tradition remained dominant.

Chane noticed six engraved symbols over the chamber's entrance.

Each pattern was octagonal in shape, its tangled carved lines too complex for single letters. They looked similar to a few finely lined ones among the chamber's engravings.

"*Chuoyaksâg Vîôneg Skíal . . . Skíalâg Vîôneg Chuoyaks,*" Wynn uttered.

Chane's gaze dropped to her slightly smiling face.

“~~‘Remember What’s Worthy of the Telling; Tell What Is Worthy of the Remembering,’~~” she added, and then glanced at Mallet. “Yes?”

The old dwarf pursed his lips, trying not to laugh, but chuckled out, “Close enough . . . though it’s better in my tongue.”

Wynn rolled her eyes and waved Chane forward. Reluctantly, he drew closer, gazing past her to where Shade padded around the chamber’s most prominent feature. On a round platform at the center stood a gargantuan stone statue, perhaps two or more stories tall.

A dwarf, with a full beard and flowing hair framing serene features, had his eyes open in fiery joy. He appeared to look into the distance, but his lips were slightly parted, as if he were about to make some proclamation of import. In one hand he gripped a long staff, taller than himself, which appeared made of solid iron. His other hand was outstretched, palm upward, as if offering something—but the hand was empty.

It was the same figure as in the entryway’s mosaic floor.

Once again, every muscle in Chane’s body tightened. Perhaps he had not yet entered a sacred space.

Wynn and the shirvêsh raised their hands in unison, with palms pressed together. They touched their fingertips briefly to their foreheads, then their lips, and finally opened their hands, palms up like the statue. When they spoke, Shirvêsh Mallet uttered Dwarvish, though Wynn echoed him in Numanesh. Their voices resounded, far less like a prayer, and more like orators beginning a tale, loud and clear for all to hear.

“Thanks be to Bedzâ’kenge, poet eternal among the Bâynæ. . . . Thanks be to Bedzâ’kenge, preserver and teacher of heritage, virtue, and wisdom.”

Chane did not follow their example—neither of them noticed; then his vision flickered.

His arms felt heavy and his legs weighted. Weariness surged over him like a sudden illness. Normally he would be in dormancy by now—and was the wide chamber growing brighter around the towering statue?

Only two oil lanterns hung from iron hooks on the chamber’s walls, yet there was far too much illumination for those. The statue appeared to brighten amid a widening fuzzy pool of light.

A tingling sting grew on Chane’s skin. He inched carefully closer, peering into the chamber’s heights.

Shield-size polished metal disks hung in the chamber’s upper reaches amid complicated clusters of interlaced iron half hoops. Attached cables ran from these through rings in the ceiling and the side walls. They came down to be tied off at waist height upon ornate iron fixtures.

Chane lurched back, much to the puzzled glance of Shirvêsh Mallet.

The temple chamber was filling with *sunlight*. Those cables adjusted the angle of the high polished panels. Somewhere above, light entered from the outside to be reflected into the temple’s interior.

“Wynn . . . ?” he rasped anxiously.

She glanced into the chamber’s growing glow, and her happy expression melted in alarm.

“Are the rooms far?” she asked Mallet. “I’m sorry to be poor guests, but we’re ready to drop.”

“Of course,” answered the old dwarf, puzzlement on his wrinkled face softening with sympathy. “This way.”

He led them into a side passage that curved around the temple chamber. Twice they passed openings into that sunlit space.

Chane kept to the way’s outer wall, as far as he could from that light. They finally veered away down an intersecting wider corridor illuminated only by sparsely placed oil lanterns. Chane’s step

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