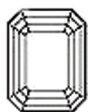


THE CORNERSTONES TRILOGY



BOOK III

JUNDAG

by
Chris A. Jackson
and
Anne L. McMillen-Jackson

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thank you for being my heroes.

This book is dedicated to my mother, Shirley, who read to me, and taught me that the pictures in my mind were better than television.

CAJ

This book is also dedicated to my parents, Fran and Margie, who always encouraged me to follow my dreams, even when they led me far from home.

ALMcM-J

The Pantheon

deity~domain~area of influence~symbol

The Gods of Light

The Seven Heavens

~The plane of Paradise above all~

Eos All Father (The Maker)~Nimbus~maker of all~circle of gold

Demia (Keeper of the Slain)~Eroe~usher of souls~feather

Oris (The Overseer)~Librum~knowledge~crossed scrolls

Tem (The Balancer)~Ordin~justice~silver scales

Eloss (The Defender)~Refuge~warriors~a silver shield

Koss Godslayer~Korr~champions, knights~sword-point up

The Heavens are separated from all by Purgatory

The Gods Of Earth and Sky

Earth Mother (Lady of the Forest)~life, earth~tree or gem

Thotris~beauty, fertility, vanity~a hand mirror

Puc (The Trickster)~luck, trickery~any coin

Bofuli~wine, meriment~a goblet

Odea~the sea, storms~the scimitar moon

Dorin (The Delver)~greed, wealth, gold, gems~crossed picks

The Hells are separated by Limbo, and the river Oblivion

The Gods of Darkness

The Nine Hells

Pergamon (The Punisher)~Agonia~pain, torture~thorned chain

Seth (The Defiler)~Malorea~decay, poison, serpents~Ouroboros

Xakra (The Tangler)~Discord~plotting, deceit, chaos~spider

Mortas (The Deathless One)~Necrol~death~interlocking

crescents

Phekkar (The Flaming One)~Hades~fire~a burning sun

The Lower Hells

Grund~Lair~orcs, ogres and trolls~clenched fist

~The Void~

Draco~Pytt~dragons~reptilian eye

~The Abyss~



CHAPTER 4

THUD—THUD.

What in the name of Tem the Balancer is DoHeny doing in there? Shay thought as he approached his friend's door.

THUD—THUD.

Shay started to knock, then thought better of it. Perhaps if he waited a bit, the noise would stop. Perhaps it was not DoHeny at all...

THUD—THUD.

The sounds were even louder, and Shay grasped the door latch, lines of worry etching his brow. *It sounds as if he is beating his head against the door. Perhaps I can help...*

THUD—THUD.

The latch vibrated in Shay's hand, expressing the violence with which the door had been struck. Clearly, something was wrong. Disregarding the twinge that told him to give DoHeny his privacy, he thrust open the door.

THUD—

Shay caught the glint of flying steel, and managed to turn his head just enough to let a razor-edged dagger pass a hair's breadth from his cheek. It clattered against the far wall of the corridor, undoubtedly damaging the blade's hone, but nothing like the damage it would have done to Shay's eye had he not reacted.

"Holy Mother o' Earth and Rock, Shay! Are ye all right, lad?" DoHeny exclaimed from across the room. He sheathed his remaining weapons and approached hastily.

"Nothing damaged but my nerves, DoHeny," the half-elf confessed, brushing his hand across his cheek. Several daggers

pinned a square of parchment to the stout oak door. "And what vile deed did this harmless piece of parchment do you, that you feel it needs the attention of your daggers?"

"Eh? Oh, that." DoHeny flushed red and sheepishly removed his weapons from the door, making them disappear in the folds of his vest. "'Twas nothin' at all, Shay, me friend. I jist felt the need fer a bit o' target practice."

"I saw you pith a striking snake-man through the eye with one of those daggers during our trip through the Black Swamp," Shay reminded, snatching the parchment as DoHeny reached for his last blade. "I would not think a stationary foot-square sheet of parchment would be a challenge from only five paces.

"Er, well, I was jist writin' down somethin' and my mind drifted and I—Here, gimme that there paper, ye blasted elf!"

"Half-elf, remember?" Shay teased, holding the sheet out of DoHeny's reach while trying to decipher the scribblings. The dwarf's penmanship was atrocious, and Shay had only been studying dwarven script for a few months, but the layout was in stanza form. "By Tem's hand, DoHeny! This is *poetry*!" he exclaimed just as the dwarf's fist plunged into his stomach.

The air left Shay with a whoosh, and he bent double with surprise more than pain. DoHeny's nimble fingers snatched the parchment from his grasp before he could draw his next breath. Shay straightened himself slowly, staring at his friend in astonishment. In all the time he had known DoHeny, he had never seen the dwarf offended by anything. And, unlike Avari, who had tried to kill Shay on occasion, this was the first time DoHeny had ever laid a hand on him in anger. Evidently this was something about which the dwarf felt strongly.

"So what if it *is* poetry?" DoHeny scowled defensively, rolling the parchment and tucking it away. "Jist because yer own kin are such artsy-fartsy masters o' song and verse don't mean a dwarf can't necessar'ly put rhyme ta words on occasion!"

"I, uh, am sorry, DoHeny," Shay managed as he straightened his cloaks and massaged his tender middle. "I did not know you were poetically inclined. I did not intend to make

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light of your efforts at prose, and would be honored if you would let me read a bit of it."

"Well, I..." DoHeny stammered. "It's not rightly done yet, ye see. I was jist havin' a spot o' trouble, and was workin' it out in me own way, ye understand, when ye barged right in and near got an eye patch fer yer nosiness."

"I am sorry about that," Shay apologized, "but it sounded as if you might be hurt, and I thought I had best intervene." He paused, favoring DoHeny with his most ingenuous mien. "I really would like a look at your work, DoHeny. Perhaps I could help you overcome whatever is blocking your flow."

"Oh, I ain't got no problem wi' *that*, lad. One o' UrMae's raisin muffins ever mornin' and you're right as rain!"

"I meant the flow of *words*, DoHeny," Shay said as he rolled his eyes.

"Oh, that!" he brightened. "Well, mayhap ye can be o' help at that." DoHeny retrieved the perforated scroll and handed it, a bit reluctantly, over to Shay. "Now mind, it's still unfinished."

"All right," Shay said, eagerly unrolling the scrolled page. "Things are rarely perfect on the first draft, to be sure. Now what is this title, 'Beware The Dark Sausage'?"

"No, no, lad!" DoHeny sputtered. "That's 'Scourge' not sausage, ye blasted fool half-elf! Can ye imagine anyone writin' a rhyme about a sausage?"

The two looked at one another in stunted silence for half a breath, then broke into hysterical laughter. Shay's arms folded over his still-tender stomach and he sank into a cushioned armchair as DoHeny's face turned as red as a beat. They gasped for breath and their laughter subsided a bit, Shay handing the scroll over to his friend while he wiped away tears of mirth.

"I have to admit," he sighed, slumping in the chair, "my command of your language is still far from adequate for the interpretation of poetry." He sat up more, straightening his clothes once again and trying to appear sincere. "Please recite it for me. That way you can provide the proper emphases."

"Aye, that may help a bit," DoHeny agreed, "but mind ye,

it's bound ta lose somethin' in the translation. All the rhyme and meter are gonna be shot straight to Hades."

"I know," Shay assured him carefully, "but content is more important than either, and that will remain unchanged."

"Very well then, here ye are... And no snickerin'..."

Beware The Dark Scourge

Twilight's shadow falls from the heavens.

A gentle blanket

for those of the night.

Or is it merely the dark of earth overhead?

A comforting ceiling

for those of the depths.

But dark of deep, or starless night,

may bring no comfort,

or refuge from The Dark Scourge.

For the dark of The Scourge

is the hunger of nothingness,

and darkness for all.

Well, what de ye think?"

Shay tugged his goatee, mulling over the curious poem. That such thoughts would originate from any dwarf, even DoHeny, struck him as strange. As a race, the dwarves were most at home in the darkness of the deep caverns. Even dwarven children are unafraid of the dark. So why would DoHeny write a poem so obviously concerned with terrors of the dark?

"Ye don't like it," DoHeny said flatly, "I can tell." He rolled the parchment violently as Shay stammered a rebuttal.

"No, no, DoHeny. It is not that I do not like the poem. In fact, it is very good. It shows much effort on your part and a good attention to suspense and compulsion. It is simply that..."

"What?" DoHeny barked in uncharacteristically short temper. "Ye think it's stupid to be writin' about things lurkin' in the dark, don't ye?"

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"Not stupid, DoHeny," Shay assured him, "just unusual. If this poem had come from my hand, or one of any other surface-dwelling race, I would have thought it a perfectly fine concept. After all, who is not afraid of the dark?" Shay paused before answering his own question. "Dwarves." He tugged his goatee furiously. "What brought you to write this, anyway?"

"Beats the stuffin' outta me!" DoHeny shrugged. "I been feelin' kinda jumpy lately, like there's an unstable rock hangin' over me head. I guess I'm jist bored outta me skull 'round here, an' thought I'd try me hand at somethin' new. There *have* been a few decent verses turned out by me kinfolk, ye know."

"Oh, I have no doubt," Shay agreed seriously. "But is there any more to it? It seems...unfinished."

"Aye, an' that's the very thing that had me so dern frustrated!" the dwarf spat, his hand grasping in the air as if reaching for something intangible. "Anyone with half a wit in their head can see it's unfinished. It's jist that, ever time I try ta put on a second verse, it seems not ta fit. Kinda like not bein' able to see around the next corner, if ye understand me thinkin'."

"Well, you have a good bit of talent, if that is your first work," Shay complimented. "I encourage you to continue your pursuit, perhaps with less blade work."

"An' I'm beggin' yer pardon fer that bit o' carelessness, Shay," the dwarf apologized. "Why, I near took yer eye—"

"Now there's a fine pair o' heroes!"

UrMae burst into the room like a thunderclap, balancing a tray heavily laden with food in one hand, and a cask on her opposite hip. Shay rose to help, but was only hustled out of the way by her blitzkrieg advance. She placed the platter on a wide table atop a mess of parchments and quills, and dropped the cask into DoHeny's lap, all the while scolding nonstop.

"There ye sit by a dyin' fire, an' not doin' a thing about it. Shay, stoke that up a bit afore it's totally cold. An' look at this mess in here! Why, I *know* it was cleaned this very mornin'! DoHeny, I raised ye better than this. It's time ye stopped all this mopin' around an' did somethin' constructive. Now the

both o' ye, git yer skinny kiesters o'er here an start puttin' some o' this food away while I tap the cask fer ye. I'd let ye do it, but ye'd likely hurt yerself."

DoHeny shrugged helplessly as she whisked the cask from his lap, and noisily dragged his chair to the table. He was already mounding roasted meat, sautéed onions, mushrooms, and fragrant cheese onto dark crusts of hearty bread before Shay had obediently brought his own chair to the table. It was blissfully quite for the moment it took UrMae to tap the cask and draw two foaming tankards. She placed the drinks in front of them, tsking at their table manners, then whirled away.

"I know ye've got lots o' hero matters ta talk about, so I'll jist be on. 'Tis enough fer me ta know the two o' ye at least won't starve from self-neglect."

UrMae slammed the door with the same force with which she had kicked it open. She was gone. It took Shay a moment to catch his breath after her whirlwind of activity, but soon the quiet was supplanted by contented munching and slurping.

~

Finally sated after two sandwiches and as many ales, DoHeny poured himself a third drink and leaned back in his chair. Sticking his legs out toward the hearth, he allowed the freshly stoked fire to warm his feet as the yeasty brew warmed his belly. It felt good to have his friend here, and it felt good to laugh. For the first time in several weeks, he was able to push aside the vague apprehensions that perturbed his hours, both awake and asleep. He, who had spent innumerable hours skulking in the shadows, now felt as if something else skulked...and watched. It was unsettling, and made him feel exposed. Writing the poem had been his way of trying to understand the feelings, and it bothered him that he couldn't see it through to the end. But for now, he would tend to his visitor.

"So," he said after belching prodigiously, "what brings ye up the mountain, anyways?" He stared up at Shay from beneath his bushy eyebrows. "Ye didn't come all this way to read me nonsensical scribblin's."

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"UrMae's delicious lunch, of course," Shay joked, but immediately sobered and ran his hand through his hair. "Actually, I think I just needed to talk. I can hardly believe it, but Refuge has been getting on my nerves of late. The administrative tasks and petty squabbles are vexing, although my mother has assumed those responsibilities. And Lynthalsea refuses to take her studies seriously. She is always either out chasing through the woods or consorting with the guests. I guess I am feeling a bit restless."

"Restless!" DoHeny scoffed. "Why, with all them books and such that you carted out o' that slimy Nekdukarr's study, I thought ye'd be up to yer eyebrows in magical stuff fer years. Now, I'm the one that's got a true case ta be restless. Here they plunk me in this bright shiny keep, fix me up with these tidy cozy rooms... Hell, I even got me own *maid* ta do me cleanin' and cookin' fer me!"

"I know what you mean..." Shay agreed.

"Aye, then they tell me ta sit an' be a good boyo, an' don't touch none o' the statuary! I tell ye, it's like bein' in prison er somethin'!"

"I would be satisfied if I could simply concentrate on my work," Shay complained. "Do you know, I took twenty-four volumes of arcane lore from that damned Darkmist's study, and I have only managed to delve into four of them. Why, there are books for which I cannot yet even read the titles!"

"Got ye stymied, have they?" DoHeny asked cautiously as he watched his friend take a deep draught of ale.

Uh oh, he thought. *I shoulda known he weren't here jist ta see me pretty face.*

"It is very frustrating, I can tell you," Shay continued, oblivious to the dwarf's concerned mien. "It is like dangling a haunch of meat in front of a starving man. There's one incantation in particular that is driving me to distraction!"

"Sounds like ye got a problem there, all right," DoHeny agreed, anticipating Shay's next words.

"What I need, or rather what I would like to ask, is if I could

borrow the emerald for a short while. If I have another power source, I can concentrate on mastering the form of the spell without having to muster all the power on my own. The diamond alone does not seem to be potent enough. It is just for this one spell, and I am sure I will not need it for long."

"Oh, I don't think that'd be a problem," DoHoney smiled, trying to do so genuinely, but disappointed that this meeting, like so many of their meetings over the past few months, concluded with this request. The eagerness in Shay's face when he talked about the gems reminded the dwarf too much of a drunkard pleading for just *one* more drink.

Ach! He scolded himself. *But what do I know o' magic! Shay's been excited about his studyin' since I first met him.* Still, the concern persisted.

"I'll have ta tell DoHurley, o' course. Though the emerald is mine ta do with as I like, as the diamond is yers, I never know when the king might want it fer some bit o' work about the keep," DoHoney lied as he bounced to his feet. He drained his tankard and headed for the door, motioning for Shay to remain. "Why don't ye jist relax here a bit and have another ale. I shouldn't be long, though he might be on one o' the lower levels. I'll send a message if I'm gonna be mor'n a while at it."

Outside the room, DoHoney bent to the keyhole and watched Shay rise to refill his tankard, then set the ale down untasted and start to pace, glancing frequently at the door. With each turn on his repetitive path, the half-elf absently tucked his hand into the pocket of his robe where DoHoney knew he kept the diamond cornerstone, bound securely in a velvet bag. Troubled, DoHoney walked slowly down the hall.



"Now, mind ye, I ain't disregardin' his part in the liberation o' this fine keep," former-elder MurFindle spouted in his most politically agreeable tone, "but havin' one such as he, bein' the very same vile ilk that was the downfall o' Zellohar in the first

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place, a foul delver inta arcane and evil magics, walkin' these hallowed halls... Why, it jist gives me the shiverin' shakes!"

"And he's gone and assaulted one o' us!" blubbered BoRindall, also a former elder, now in charge of food storage, as evidenced by his girth. "Usin' one o' his stinkin' spells ta hurl my esteemed colleague inta the air, then dash him against the flagstones! Why, it's a wonder good MurFindle wasn't killed!"

"Aye!" the other three former elders agreed amidst their murmurs of "Filthy sorcerer!" and "The cowardly point-ear!"

"That's ENOUGH!" DoHurley thundered, shaking the very bones of his dragon-throne with his voice. His own weary bones creaked audibly as he surged to his feet, his one eye wide as his temper flared.

"I'll not argue that Master Szcze-kon is a wizard," DoHurley began, trying to rein in his temper, "though the matter's never exactly been a secret. And though wizard he may be, he bears no kinship ta that slimy lot that was our downfall near a century ago. And mentionin' his name in the same breath is more an insult than I'll sit fer."

He tugged his beard in frustration and turned his full attentions to MurFindle, the instigator of this entire farce.

"But jist because he picked ye up and dropped ye from a dizzyin' height o' near five feet—No, don't deny that's all it was! The entire squad o' guards saw it.—and not in defense o' yer insult ta him, mind ye, but rather yer insult ta a fellow dwarf and one o' the Liberators o' Zellohar, ain't no reason ta get yer nose outta joint, MurFindle. Ye look hale enough ta me, which proves his restraint and good judgment in not killin' ye. Why, if'n 'twas me what cast the spell, ye'd likely still be fallin'!"

"But, Yer Majesty! Ye canna' give one o' his ilk the run o' the keep! Why there's no tellin'—"

"One o' his ilk?" DoHurley sputtered, cheeks and nose flushing red with anger. "You keep in mind, MurFindle, that while yer moldy dwarf arse was sittin' safe behind tons o' rock in Boontredk Warrens, it was his ilk, an' the stout hearts o' elf, human, an' one o' our own, that had bluster and balls enough ta

grab that slimy Nekdukarr by his horny helm and kick his deathless carcass back to Necrol!"

DoHurley snatched up his broad axe and stomped down the steps of the dais. The four elders shrunk from his path, their hands straying stupidly toward their own weapons, as if they could raise a hand against their own king in his own hall without being cut down by a dozen guards. But DoHurley had other than mayhem on his mind.

"From this point on, I'll hear no word o' malice from *any* dwarf o' this keep directed toward *any* o' the Liberators o' Zellohar." He held the axe out flat in front of the elders. "And I will take yer oaths on this blade that none o' ye will, by word or deed, interfere with the comin's or goin's o', or in any way molest or malign, those four who have so selflessly honored us by deliverin' our ancestral home from bondage!"

Silence reigned for several breaths as the four elders stared aghast at DoHurley. To extract such a vow from them would make it no less than treason to even make a rude noise in the presence of one of those four liberators. And since their goal had been to have at least the elven members of the four banned from the keep, not only had their plan failed, it had backfired.

"The alternative ta taking this oath is simple," DoHurley finished stonily, "but 'tis a long walk back to Boontredk."

The four dwarves paled. Though their positions here were far less prestigious than those they had held in the warrens, none wanted to be master of an empty maze of musty tunnels.

"I so pledge," Murfindle stated solemnly, albeit reluctantly, placing his hand on the blade as he spoke. "And let it also be known that I never wished ill ta the most honored Liberators o' Zellohar, but was merely counselin' caution at lettin' an elf wizard roam about unattended."

The others voiced similar pledges and assurances. The King of Zellohar watched in grim amusement as each glanced sidelong at the others to see if anyone would lead a protest, but none did. Dwarves such as these never had the guts to stand up on their own, only daring to speak out when they were in a pack.

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He gave them leave to go, fuming quietly as they slunk from the hall. He then turned back to his throne, propped his axe against the dragon-claw armrest and sank into its increasingly uncomfortable seat. He brooded there for a time, then, noticing the impatient guards shifting from foot to foot, he waved them all out. He needed to think about this, and who could think with half a dozen attendants waiting to hold a hanky if you sneezed?

"I don't know if I agree with Shay's judgment in handlin' that old fart MurFindle, but done's done," DoHeney said as he stepped from behind an ornate tapestry, blithely trimming his fingernails with a dagger. "It could be ye jist solved the entire matter." He paused, returning the dagger to its hidden sheath. "Then again, ye coulda jist stirred up a whole passel o' snakes."

"How de ye figger?" DoHurley growled, not really surprised that DoHeney had been hiding in the hall during the exchange.

"Them four've been makin' trouble ever since they lost all their highfalutin' mightiness as ruling elders, especially since they lost it ta ye," DoHeney reminded the king. "And if ye don't watch yer backside, ye jist might find a dagger pokin' out o' it."

"They ain't got the guts ta be so brash," DoHurley scoffed. "I know MurFindle's style better than ye. It'd be more his way ta discredit me, makin' hissself look good in the process. That way he'd have a crack at the throne if I was tossed out."

"Whatever his method, ye can be sure he wishes ye no boon, me uncle," DoHeney scowled, plopping down on the dais steps, then catching his indiscretion, "er, Yer Majesty, I mean."

"Baahh!" the king spat, snatching up his axe and spinning the haft in his gnarled and mutilated grip. "Majesty, smagesty! I sometimes curse yer hide fer dumpin' all this mess on top o' me, DoHeney. Why, I'd give two more fingers fer a decent night o' sleep these days! All the gripin' and groanin'; so-an-so's cheatin' me, so-an-so's a dirty liar. Sometimes I'd like to jist kick their squeakin' butts off the parapets!"

"Like Shay near done with MurFindle?" DoHeney snickered. "I woulda loved ta seen his face."

"Aye, lad," the king agreed, retaking his seat with a sigh.

"Though yer bringin' up his name—Shay's, that is—does bring another problem ta mind."

"With Shay?" DoHeny stammered. "Suren yer not thinkin' o' takin' MurFindle's word at any value?"

"Nay, lad," DoHurley waved, dismissing the problems with the former elders. "I'm talkin' o' our friend's behavior the last few months. And don't ye look at me like I jist said yer nose had turned blue! I know ye've noticed it as well, likely before I did."

"Aye, I've noticed it," the worried dwarf admitted, tugging at his beard in frustration. "But figgerin' on what ta do about it has gotta be the biggest rock ever ta meet a hard spot. He's been spendin' far too much time cooped up with them gems, if'n ye ask me."

"That's what I think is the very root o' the problem, lad," DoHurley said, lifting the uncomfortable circlet of platinum from his brow and hanging it on his axe handle. "An' I think," he concluded, pushing himself from his seat to join DoHeny on the steps, "that we'd better figger a way ta curb our pointy-eared friend's thirst fer magic. Them gems have been told ta have odd effects even on the minds o' dwarves. How the two o' them together've been bendin' his thoughts, even I canna guess."

"Aye, an' he's here ta borrow the emerald again," DoHeny admitted. "But tellin' him he can't, or tryin' ta take the diamond from him, would be a bit like tellin' a dragon his treasure was too big fer his greed. But," he added hopefully, "Shay's more prudent than most magical types, bein' one o' Tem's priests as well, don'cha know. He's probably able ta handle it."

"Fer a time, perhaps. But eventually we gotta do somethin' about it," the old warrior resolved. "Fer, if ye gotta fight a dragon, 'tis best ta do it before he grows too big. And growin' is exactly what Shay's wizardin's doin' every second he's tucked away in a dark corner with them blasted magic rocks!"

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