

THE CORNERSTONES  
TRILOGY



BOOK II

NEKDUKARR

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and  
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## CHAPTER 2

Lynthalsea and DoHeney watched in amazement as Shay played an intricate game of negotiation with the Fengotherond tax assessor—give a little here, take a little there, let this small item slip past the inventory, and this gold coin is for you. Avari tapped her foot, too hungry to be amused. Right now all she wanted was a hot lunch and a hotter bath, but lunchtime was long passed before the official let the four companions go. When the tax assessor had finally finished, Shay hurried his friends out the door.

"Just a reminder!" The tax assessor's call stopped them in their tracks. "You have a fortnight to gain employment, otherwise you will be required to depart our fair city."

"Depart this, ye—" DoHeney grumbled.

"Thank you, sir," Shay trilled with a smile as he stuffed the dusty hem of his cloak into DoHeney's mouth. "Rest assured we will have finished with our business before then."

"Gaaahhhh!" DoHeney spat out the cloth and glared at Shay. "What did ye do that fer? The fella was jist beggin' fer a good drubbin'. He thought we was thieves. *Common* thieves!" he grumbled, brushing off his grimy tunic. "Why, anyone with *any* kind o' taste would know that this loot is all first class."

"At least he didn't ask to inspect Gaulengil," Avari said, caressing the sheath of the enchanted greatsword. "I'd have had a hard time keeping it off of him. I think it's picked up my hunger pangs."

"I had no *idea* it would be worth so much!" Lynthalsea exclaimed, looking nervously around at the crowds.

"Aye, kin ye believe it?" DoHeny beamed, suddenly forgetting his aggravation. "We're rich! And I don't jist mean rich, but *RICH!*"

"Hush!" Shay admonished. "Fengotherond is the safest city in the northlands, but I do not think we should let the full extent of our wealth become public knowledge."

"Do you suppose," Avari contemplated, "that there's enough for me to restart my horse farm?"

Lynthalsea stared incredulously at her, while DoHeny burst out laughing. But Shay understood Avari's ignorance about money; she had never really dealt much with it before.

"Avari," he explained as they walked, "your share is enough to buy ten horse farms outright, and stock each with a hundred of the finest thoroughbreds."

"Uh..." Avari's jaw dropped and she stared for a moment. "In that case," she said breaking into a grin, "lunch is on me!"

"And I," Shay said, "know just the place."

~

Avari's eyes loop-the-looped after a lively fish that swam in circles around a large glass tank. She was so hungry, she could eat one without bothering to scale, cook or even kill the thing. Her stomach elicited a predatory growl and she leaned closer.

"Avari!" Shay pulled her away and down the street. "We are almost there, and believe me, you will deem it worth the wait. Now look over here." He pointed to an ornate building across the street. "That was the home of the first mayor of Fengotherond back in..."

Although trying desperately to focus on something other than her hunger, Avari was bored by Shay's narrative. A city was a city as far as she was concerned, and she had not been impressed with the few she had seen so far. Besides, they had been on this impromptu guided tour for almost an hour.

To her, the most interesting thing about Fengotherond was the dome. The entire city was covered by a single piece of enchanted and unbreakable crystal, held in place by pillars of magical force that would allegedly last forever. Air circulated

beneath it freely, but snow and rain were caught and diverted into an elaborate system of aqueducts.

DoHeny was astounded to learn that the entire construction had been accomplished by mages, not craftsmen. Sunlight refracted through the dome in a kaleidoscope of colored light, dazzling his sensitive eyes every time he looked up.

Lynthalsea was the only one of the group listening to Shay's narration. Fengotherond appealed to her elvish eye for beauty: white buildings, their facades adorned with silver and gold, glowed in the rainbow light of the dome. Clean streets were paved with smooth cobbles, and even the horses were equipped to avoid inappropriate litter.

Avari snorted in disgust at the sight of a matched team clattering past, each bearing a strapped-on bag to catch manure before it could touch the street. She leaned over the white fence of a stable, and snorted again at the scent of lye rather than the warm, comforting smell of horse and dung.

*City folks!* she thought, shaking her head. *They care more about keeping their pretty streets clean than about the poor animals' hooves or their dignity.*

Avari's irritation multiplied as they turned down a street lined with restaurants. Menus enticed passersby with promises of everything from elvish cuisine to exotic seafood, and the air was thick with the aromas of a thousand different dishes. Her stomach and mind made their decisions simultaneously.

"Enough!" she said as she stepped in front of Shay, interrupting his latest statistic. "It's cruel to drag me by all these restaurants when you know I haven't eaten decently for days! I'm starved! Let's eat anywhere!"

"But Avari," Shay said with a flourish, "we are here!"

Avari looked up. 'The House of Grandeur' was emblazoned in foot-high gold letters upon the marble facade. Polished stairs led to a pillared entrance tended by a footman in red velvet livery. Ordinarily she would have balked at such a place, but her stomach would brook no more delay. She dashed up the steps two at a time.

The gaping doorman went unnoticed as she strode through the portal, but she stopped cold as she was confronted by the maître d'. The impeccably dressed elf glared at her as if she had just tracked something onto his rug. His disdain deepened as the others arrived, his lip curling into a sneer.

"May I... help you in some way?" he asked, looking them up and down.

"Yes, my good elf," Shay said, stepping forward. "We would like your finest meal served in a private chamber, please."

The elf snorted, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, I am... sure you would," he said, oozing condescension. "I *am* sorry, but all of our tables are occupied at the moment. I suggest you try another establishment."

A flick of his skeletal hand dismissed them as he turned and retreated behind a podium of polished hardwood to contemplate a leather-bound appointment book. Shay stepped back as if he had been slapped, unaccustomed to being treated like a common beggar. Beyond a silk-draped archway behind the podium, the opulent dining room stood more empty than full.

Shay's face flushed scarlet. Granted, they were disheveled and worn from their journey, but that was no excuse for such rude treatment. He hardened his resolve and stepped confidently up to the podium.

"I assure you, we are more than able to accommodate your prices." Shay rested his hand lightly on the appointment book, three thick gold coins tucked between his fingers. "We have been traveling for some time and are very hungry." He withdrew his now-empty hand.

The maître d' slapped the book shut, the money inside. He stared at Shay defiantly. "I *said* we were busy. You will leave immediately, or I will be forced to have you removed!" With a quick snap of his fingers two burly men in black cloaks and wide crimson sashes materialized from an alcove. They towered behind the thin elf, thick arms crossed over barrel chests.

Shay stared in disbelief. He opened his mouth to protest, then closed it, the tips of his ears flushing red. He rolled up the

sleeves of his cloak, but was interrupted by a firm hand on his shoulder.

"Let me handle this pompous twerp," Avari whispered in his ear as she nudged him aside.

"Listen, scrawny!" She glared down her nose at the elf as she dropped two jingling saddlebags onto the podium. She then placed Gaulengil, still in its sheath, across the bags. "There's enough in these two bags to buy this sorry excuse for an ale house five times over," she said, her voice hard and loud. "And if I decide to do just that, my first act as the new *owner* will be to kick your skinny arse right out those doors!"

The elf puffed up, waving his defenders forward, then stopped as Avari slipped Gaulengil several inches out of its sheath. He gulped hard when she leaned close.

"Now," she whispered, her tone more dangerous than a scream, "we are hungry and road weary, but if you insist upon making a scene, I'm sure we can accommodate you. I just hope it doesn't hurt business when I hack your pudgy friends into mincemeat and drag your headless corpse through the dining room."

The elf gaped for a moment, eyed the mad glint in Avari's eyes and the sword's razor edge that she was absently caressing with a thumbnail. His lips formed into a tight smile, and he cleared his throat, finding it dry and tight.

"I... ahem... may have been mistaken," he said as he extracted the appointment book from beneath the heavy bags and leafed through the pages. "Ah yes. There is an opening here. An usher will take you directly to your table."

"So long as it's in your best private dining room, I think we have a deal." Avari granted him her sweetest smile as she slapped the sword back into its sheath and hefted her saddlebags.

"Olaf," the maître d' waved one of the men forward, "please take our guests to the Emerald Room. Full accompaniments."

"Sometimes," Avari explained casually to an astounded Shay as they were led up a sweeping staircase, "charm and good looks are no substitute for a sincere threat to life and limb."