

THE CORNERSTONES
TRILOGY



BOOK II

NEKDUKARR

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ISBN 978-1-4392-2958-3

Cover art by Noah Stacey
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Distributed through Jaxbooks Publishing
www.jaxbooks.com
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Amazon.com



CHAPTER 3

Well, the morning is off to an excellent start! Shay thought as he jumped into his waiting carriage.

Shay had stolen off before breakfast, leaving his companions still abed at the Kindly Ki-rin, goose-down comforters tucked snugly under their chins. His first appointment had gone well, and he hoped its consequences would bear fruit, but as he considered his next objective his stomach fluttered.

"We are here, sir."

Shay looked up. The carriage had stopped. Beyond the patiently waiting driver loomed the towering spires of the temple of Tem the Balancer. Shay's heart skipped a beat. He straightened his back and flicked imperceptible wrinkles from his worn tunic. *Stop stalling!* his conscience urged and Shay abruptly stood, forgetting the confines of his quarters.

"Gods damn this shrunken—"

The curse escaped his mouth before he could stop it. With a wry grin he stepped from the carriage, massaging the rising lump on his head. The driver's carefully blank look was reassuring; perhaps no one had heard.

Shay paid the driver, jerked his tunic straight, turned on his heel and— The stares of four acolytes posted at the temple gate stabbed him, dashing any hope that his indiscretion had gone unnoticed. He painted on a smile and climbed the steps, fully aware of their scrutiny of his attire, gait and demeanor.

The acolytes moved to intercept him. The gate watch was generally assigned to those in their early years of training. They took their duty seriously, even though it was more formality than

any real defense.

"Hail, traveler." The eldest acolyte stepped forward, hand raised. "This is the private temple and rectory entrance reserved for the priesthood. Public services are across the way."

"Hail, acolyte." Shay smiled, dismissing the youngster's curt tone. "I realize that it is not evident from my attire, but I also am a priest of Tem." Anticipating the skeptical looks, he drew his silver icon from beneath his tunic. "My name is Szcze-kon. I have been traveling for some time and have come to speak with an old friend, Ken-Dolan. He is a high priest, in charge of literary researches, and I am sure he—"

"Of course, brother, of course!" The realization that he was speaking with a superior snapped his challenger to attention. "My name is Merren. I am honored to meet you. There is no need... for a messenger... we can—" Merren struggled to keep his composure while shaking off a younger boy who tugged on his sleeve. The boy whispered something too softly for Shay to hear. Merren's eyes widened and he glanced toward Shay.

"One of us will escort you to High Priest Ken-Dolan's study." Merren's manner was still polite, but suddenly strained.

"That won't be necessary," Shay said with a raised hand. "I can find my way, but thank you. Justice be yours, acolyte"

He bowed politely, continuing on his way before they could even return the blessing. The back of his neck itched as he crossed the courtyard, and a discrete glance confirmed their stares and frantic whispering. The youngest among them then dashed off toward another doorway.

Shay's teeth clenched as he ascended the steps to the literary research wing. His reputation seemed to have preceded him.



Waves crashed over the deck as the *Valkyrie* plunged through the mounting seas, heeling at a dangerous angle. Verdin, the first mate, looked up as dawn's light stained the sails scarlet, as if the cloth bled from a deep wound.

"Red sails in morning bring gales without warning" was a common sailor's axiom. A cold drop fell on his upturned face and he half-expected to wipe away blood, but it was merely a speck of the sea upon which he had spent his life, a sea that was becoming angrier by the moment.

"This is mad," he muttered, shaking his head. Under normal circumstances, the sails would already be reefed, but these were not normal circumstances. With only a third of the cargo that usually stabilized them, and more canvas aloft than he liked, things were getting dangerous.

Verdin caught a glimpse of a towering, white-capped swell only a moment before it smashed into *Valkyrie's* port quarter. Shudders reverberated through the hull. The vibrations traveled up the mate's arms and legs as he held onto the shrouds, ducking to avoid the lashing spray. A sudden crack like lightning dropped him to his knees.

The last wave had been too much for one of the port-side jib sheets: the line had snapped and the luffing sail had been torn in half by the wind. The captain roared commands and sailors scrambled to secure the torn canvas.

"Captain! We must shorten sail!" the mate yelled as he grabbed the wheel to help the helmsman keep the rudder straight. "If we part a shroud, the mainmast could give way!"

Captain Brigden Der Ooden gripped the sterncastle rail, his knuckles white as he surveyed the damage. Twenty-five years of experience told him that his first mate was right. If they did not shorten sail soon, the entire ship would be in peril.

"Aye, Verdin. It's time. Strike the tops'ls and the jib, and take a reef in the main. Replace that torn forstays'l." Der Ooden started down the steps to the deck and called back over his shoulder, "I'll be below, dealin' with our passengers."

"Aye, sir." The first mate smiled with relief and shouted the orders to the boatswain. For perhaps the first time in his career, Verdin had no desire to be the captain. He had a bad feeling about these passengers, but they had paid in advance, and in gold.

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But what good is money, Verdin considered as he ducked another spray of seawater, *if you're not alive to spend it?*

~

Below decks, Captain Der Ooden knocked firmly on the door to the ship's best cabin. Scuffling sounds from within piqued his curiosity. As he leaned closer, the scuffling suddenly stopped. He put his ear to the door, and nearly fell into the room as one of the passengers jerked it open.

"What is it?" the shrouded figure asked, his tone sharp.

"We have shortened sail," he said, biting back his sharp retort. The eyes beneath the hood of the man's cloak gave him chills. "The wind and seas have increased, but we should still make Fengotherond by midnight."

"Haste is critical to us, Captain." A bulging pouch slipped from beneath the dark cloak. "If you require more money..."

Der Ooden licked his lips at the sight of the purse. The gold was enticing, but what good would it do if the *Valkyrie* was dismantled? He glanced into the cabin, only to have the man's dark cloak block his view. The captain's anger flared anew.

"Keep your money," he snapped. "I've the safety of my ship and crew to think of. We'll continue on at our best speed, but I'll take no more risks, no matter the reward."

"Very well, Captain." The pouch vanished. The venom behind the acquiescence made Der Ooden's palm itch for a belying pin. "Your best effort is all that we may ask."

The door closed and the captain breathed a sigh of relief. To hell with the money; he would be glad to see these odd passengers off his ship. He turned back to the deck, scratching the prickly hairs that rose on the back of his neck.



A haze of resurgent memories accompanied Shay through the corridors of the temple. By the time he reached the research library, the memories had overwhelmed him, and his paranoia at the front gate seemed senseless. As he pushed open the door, the

dry scent of ancient parchment and leather brought a smile to his lips; he had spent many happy hours here.

Priests sat hunched over thick tomes and yellowing scrolls, copying and translating the accumulated knowledge of the Northern Realms. Initiates scurried about in traditional suede slippers, their footsteps soft whispers on the smooth stone. Shay waited, knowing better than to interrupt the diligent researchers.

A middle-aged man wearing the crimson robes of a supervisor stepped forward. Reading Shay's hand signals, the man bowed and motioned for him to follow. Only when he had closed the door of the small antechamber did he speak.

"Do you have an appointment to see the high priest?"

Shay sensed the same dubious attitude he had felt when he first confronted the acolytes. He knew that his worn attire was the reason, but it rankled just the same.

"No," he admitted, "but I know he will see me. It has been many years since I last visited, and we were very close."

"Name?" The man waited, stylus poised over a wax tablet.

"Szcze-kon."

The man's mask of business-like efficiency dropped, as did the stylus that slipped from his suddenly clumsy fingers. He stooped to pick up the instrument, taking a half-step backward.

"Is something the matter?" Shay asked, knowing full well the root of the supervisor's discomfort.

"Oh no, nothing at all." The supervisor fumbled the tablet and stylus into a pocket. "I must verify High Priest Ken-Dolan's appointments. Please make yourself comfortable." He turned and disappeared through another door.

Options flashed through Shay's mind: should he wait, leave and avoid the pending confrontation, or... Shay acted on impulse and dashed after the red-robed supervisor. The man was down the hall, knocking on a familiar door.

"I thought we could save some time if I came along!" he said at the supervisor's shoulder, flashing his best smile.

The man jumped as if a mouse had scampered up his robes. "I told you to wait!" he hissed, trying to push Shay back toward

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the anteroom as the door flew open and an elderly man burst out.

"How many times must I tell you—" The old man looked around for the interloper and saw Shay. "By The Balancer! Shay!"

The half-elf wrenched himself free of the supervisor's clinging hands, turned to face his former mentor, and nearly cried at the surprised pleasure in the old man's sparkling gaze. It was as if he had come home. Ken-Dolan's warm embrace told Shay that, no matter what, he would always be welcome here.

"Come in, lad, come in!" the elder insisted as he ushered Shay into his study. Books and scrolls of all sizes and shapes were stacked on shelves and desks and chairs and even the floor, just they had always been in the past.

Shay smiled, thinking, *Some things never change.*

"By the right of all that's holy, I didn't think it could be true!" The high priest thrust Shay to arm's length and scrutinized him from head to toe with penetrating blue eyes. "What in the names of all the gods brings you back? And how are your parents? Your mother is still beautiful as ever, I'll wager! And your father, the old coot? Is he still doing well? Here, sit, sit! You must tell me everything that's transpired since last we met."

A discrete noise at the door distracted them; the supervisor, whose face now matched his robes, stood waiting.

"Eh? Oh, sorry, Gershan." Ken-Dolan dismissed the expectant underling with a shooing motion. "You may go now. Oh, but send one of the pages with some tea, will you?"

The supervisor straightened and opened his mouth to speak, but had to jump back to avoid the slamming door.

~

By his third cup of tea, Shay felt truly at home. He and Ken-Dolan sat on opposite sides of the tea service. They were on the floor, of course; every other horizontal surface in the room was covered with the research material to which Ken-Dolan had devoted his life. They talked of friends and family and all the meaningless trivia that only becomes important at times like these. They sipped tea and laughed, and dug things up from each

other's memories, then laughed some more.

Yes, Shay thought happily, *in a world so chaotic, it is nice to find an occasional constant.*

"So tell me, what *really* brings you here, Shay." The old priest stared into the half-elf's soul with his sparkling eyes. "You didn't travel all this way just to tell me the latest gossip."

"Actually," Shay began, his throat once again tight, "I came to ask if I might be allowed to study here... with you, that is."

"Why, that would be wonderful, my boy!" The elder priest slapped Shay on the shoulder. "We'll have some chambers cleaned for you by nightfall! This will show those roustabouts a thing or two; them and their 'New Historical Perspective'. We'll dig up facts that even the *Gods* have forgotten!"

Shay could scarcely believe it! After all his searching, all the rejections from other temples... this. He should have known; things were so much more open-minded here. Besides, he had always known that Ken-Dolan would never turn him away.

"I cannot start immediately," he explained. "I have a commitment of utmost importance that must be dealt with first. In fact, I would like to discuss it with you. I know you will find it fascinating, and perhaps you could offer some—"

A rap at the door interrupted Shay. Ken-Dolan turned a sour look toward the portal, as if considering not answering.

"Probably just some *clerical* problem," the elder said, chuckling at the ancient pun and heaving himself to his feet. "I'll be just a moment."

Shay nodded and rose as well.

"What is it now?" Ken-Dolan jerked the door open, but was brought up short by the stern group standing outside. In front stood Lord-High Priest Berryl, the chief administrator of the temple, arms crossed defiantly, brows knitted in disapproval. He was flanked by Gershan on one side, and several equally stern priests and acolytes on the other. Shay's heart sank.

"Lord Berryl. Why this *is* a surprise! Please come in!" Ken-Dolan stepped aside and swept his arm wide in welcome. "I believe you know my former student, Szcze-kon."

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High Priest Beryll stood his ground as if his feet were welded to the stone. He raised one eyebrow at the sound of Shay's name, but otherwise ignored the greeting.

"Indeed, yes, I have met Szcze-kon." Beryll's tone was slow and deliberate. Without turning, he spoke to his escorts. "You have done your duty, Gershan. You are dismissed."

"But... this man..." the supervisor sputtered.

"This man is *my* responsibility! You are dismissed, Gershan. *Now.*" The supervisor bowed and slunk away. "You acolytes may leave also; this is no concern of yours." As the low-ranking priests dispersed, High Priest Beryll finally turned back to the room, only to find Ken-Dolan mimicking his stance, looking as unmovable as a centuries-old oak.

"What is the meaning of all this?" Ken-Dolan barked into the lord high priest's face. "And what do you mean 'this man'?"

"It would seem, Ken-Dolan, that you have been caught in the midst of a deception," the lord-priest said. "Or, at least, have been denied the benefit of all the facts."

"Well, then, by all means enlighten me!" Ken-Dolan waved the four remaining priests into his chamber and slammed the door. "And please, confine your accusations to *facts.*"

"Such was my only intent," the lord-high priest replied, looking around for someplace to sit. After a moment he resigned himself to standing. Shay stood alone, outside the circle of priests, a half step behind his friend, eyes cast downward.

"From all accounts, gleaned both by word of mouth and direct communications with Szcze-kon's former high priest, this man has brought a great shame to the church."

"Shame?" Shay gasped, wide eyed at the pronouncement.

"Nonsense!" Ken-Dolan spat. "Shay was a model student!"

"At one time, perhaps," the lord high priest continued, "but he has strayed from the path of purity, Ken-Dolan. He was found practicing sorcery in a temple of Tem. And, furthermore, when told to repent and discard his paganistic books, he refused. Even against the requests of his own father, he chose to continue his heretical studies. Subsequently, he was expelled from the

temple at Kosseldur. Since then, he has been refused by virtually every temple of Tem in the entire eastern continent."

"Impossible!" Ken-Dolan looked to Shay, but the half-elf could not meet his gaze. "Shay... Why didn't you tell me?"

"Honestly, I thought you knew; it seemed everyone else did. I thought it did not matter to you." Shay risked a glance at his former mentor, expecting the same ridicule he had seen everywhere else, but he saw something different. Understanding perhaps? Maybe even pride?

"I never intended to bring shame to anyone," he said, his voice stronger, "least of all to the church."

"Regardless of your *intent*, the fact remains that you were cast out. Therefore, I have no choice but to ask you to relinquish your holy symbol and leave these premises."

Shay's jaw dropped. His breath left him as if he had been kicked in the chest.

"What?" Ken-Dolan's jaw dropped. "You mean to excommunicate him? You can't be serious!"

"I can, and I am, Ken-Dolan!" Berryl said, piercing the elderly researcher with a venomous glare. "He will, of course, be given a small stipend to keep him from digressing further from the path of purity."

The well of grief that had been growing in the center of Shay's soul suddenly burst into a fiery pit of rage. His jaw clenched as his right hand strayed to the haft of the massive war hammer at his belt. The runes upon the weapon flashed crimson, casting a flame of magic onto the half-elf's livid eyes.

"The *LAST* thing I need from you is pity!" The circle of priests shrank back before Shay's anger.

"I came here seeking a place where I might be allowed to study and worship in my *own* way. Here, in the center of culture for the entire Northern Realms, I thought people might be slightly more open-minded. I see now that I was mistaken."

He turned to grasp Ken-Dolan by the shoulder. "So long, my friend. I have commitments and friends who need me. It was good to see you again." Ken-Dolan's smile was everything Shay

could have asked for. He turned and strode toward the door.

"HALT, Szcze-kon!"

Shay felt the power of the Berryl's command, knowing the directive was a holy compulsion. Amazingly, however, his stride merely faltered instead of stopping, and he shook off the remaining effects like clinging cobwebs. Clenching the haft of his hammer, the furious half-elf turned to confront his superior. Berryl stood encircled by his small force of priests, all of them clutching their holy icons. Only Ken-Dolan stood apart.

"When I asked for your medallion, it was not a request." The lord high priest stepped forward.

"*HOLD*, Priest."

Lord-High Priest Berryl froze, not from the effects of any spell, but from what he saw before him. Shay stood poised. In one hand he held the great dwarven war hammer, its runes radiating crimson fire. Upon his chest, the holy symbol of Tem the Balancer shone with the purest of white light. In his other hand, crackling blue lightning twisted and writhed, crawling from fingertip to fingertip as if of its own volition. Not least disturbing, the half-elf's voice had shifted from its usual lilt to a booming basso profundo.

"Before ye start somethin' ye canna finish, know this," Shay said, his voice gradually returning to normal. "The only way you will take this medallion from me is to pry it from my lifeless fingers. And although you *might* have the power to do just that, if you try, you may just find this temple coming down around your ears! If my powers are to be taken from me, let almighty *Tem* do it, not the likes of you!"

Everyone stood utterly still for a span of several breaths, the lord high priest obviously reluctant to accept the challenge Shay had cast before him. As the moment of confrontation passed, the half-elf's features eased from barely bridled rage to a mien of contempt.

"Justice be *yours*, Lord-High Priest Berryl." Szcze-kon turned from the priests and smashed the door open, not bothering to work the latch. As he stalked down the short hall, his temper

flared again.

How dare they threaten to excommunicate me!

He splintered his way through two more doors and strode across the library floor, oblivious to the disruption caused by his still-glowing weapon and medallion, and the sparks of his aborted spell trailing from his clenched fist. Shay took the time to yank open the next portal and slam it shut behind before descending the steps to the courtyard. Acolytes and supervisors alike melted from his path like butter before the hot knife of his anger.