

THE CORNERSTONES  
TRILOGY



BOOK II

NEKDUKARR

by  
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and  
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## CHAPTER 4

Shay did not bother with a carriage for the trip back to the inn. His venting rage would have had him bouncing off the walls in such a confined space. Slowly, his rage subsiding with the physical exertion, he composed himself.

*I cannot believe I behaved so!* he thought, shaking his head. This encounter had weighed heavily on his mind for so long. Now it was over, for good or ill.

Shay glanced back at the temple spires stretching toward the dome overhead and considered the lost prospect of a lifetime spent within those walls. He staggered to a stop as he realized that he felt no remorse for being denied that.

With the busy morning crowds bustling around him, the oblivious priest stood and stared at the spires. As his slim fingers brushed the cool silver icon at his breast—the Balance of Tem, the center of his faith—revelation struck: his allegiance was to holy Tem, not to the rigid framework of the church. He knew his faith was not compromised by his interest in magic, and he prayed that his deity concurred. Should he be wrong, one day his prayers might go unanswered. Until that day, he would continue on his chosen path.

Smiling with resolve, he turned from the spires without a second glance. His stride bounced with energy as he considered his new-found freedom.

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Shay breezed into the Kindly Ki-rin, past the main room and up the stairs two at a time. At the door to their suite he paused, hand on the latch, considering his plans. The door opened under

his hand, jerking him headlong through the portal into the ample bosom of a middle-aged servant woman. The buckets of warm soapy water she carried sloshed all over him.

"Oh! Excuse me, sir!" the maid apologized. With a twist of her impressive torso she bounced him upright then stepped back. "Here, I soiled yer clothes! Let me have 'em cleaned for ya." Setting aside her buckets, she brushed at the mess.

"No, no. It's quite all right," he lied, brushing more at her hands than his wet clothes. "It is just water. No harm done."

"Oh, but a fine gentleman such as yerself can't be walkin' about in soiled clothes!" She effortlessly picked up her two five-gallon buckets. "I'll have my daughter, Cantie, come up and collect them straight away!" The pretty girl waiting behind her mother smiled and curtsied.

"Oh, very well," Shay conceded, not wanting to seem ungrateful. As the women exited, Cantie, out of sight of her mother, turned and granted Shay a not-so-shy smile and wink. Shay gaped, then smiled back, not wanting to be rude.

As the door closed, laughter brought Shay's attention back to the present. DoHeney and Lynthalsea lounged in the main room, giggling at his discomfort. They wore thick robes and looked freshly scrubbed. DoHeney, his beard neatly trimmed and braided, sprawled on a thick, fur rug. Lynthalsea reclined on a low divan, her jet-black hair draped over the back of the couch to dry.

"Nice to see you both out of bed," Shay said, using sarcasm to divert them from his discomfort. He nodded to the low table laden with food. "And I see you've regained your appetites."

"I never had any doubt about mine," Avari said as she padded out of the adjoining bath, toweling her wet hair. "Mmmm, looks delicious!" She sat next to the table, discarded the towel and speared an oat cake. She piled two more onto her plate and drizzled honey on top before leaning back to eat.

"Did you have a nice walk?" she asked around a mouthful.

"Yes. Yes, I did," he said as he seated himself and poured a cup of steaming blackbrew. He lightened it with cream and took

a sip. Its essence caught up with his energy and redoubled it.

"I have done a lot of thinking this morning and have reached a conclusion: we had best concern ourselves with the matters at hand and be on our way before we grow too accustomed to the fine things the city can offer us." He emphasized his point by raising a warm apple pastry in a toast.

"Well, you're the only one who knows the city," Lynthalsea said, reaching out to retrieve a bunch of plump purple grapes. "Unless we want to get lost, you'll have to be our guide."

"That... uh... should not be a problem," Shay stuttered as he tried unsuccessfully not to watch the beautiful elf pluck the plump fruit with her teeth. "The... uh... carriage drivers know the city. Merely summon one and tell him where you want to go. Besides, we will accomplish more if we work independently."

"I would think it a mite safer if we went in pairs," DoHeny contended. "Carryin' around a bulgin' pouch o' gold is a mighty temptation fer thieves."

Shay smiled and shook his head. He popped the last bite of pastry into his mouth and washed it down with blackbrew.

"You are safe," he explained once again. "There is no easy access to the city for common thieves, although there may be an occasional pick-pocket. A display of a well-worn sword hilt will ensure safety, even at night."

"Oh! That reminds me!" Avari rolled to her feet and dashed into her room. She returned carrying the shortsword she had recovered in Zellohar Keep before they had met DoHeny, before Jundag had fallen. She looked at it a minute, then offered it to Lynthalsea. "Here."

Lynthalsea looked confused, but sat up and accepted the weapon. She held it before her, her slim fingers wrapped awkwardly around the hilt. "Thank you, Avari, but why?"

"You need a weapon for close-in work," Avari said as she sat, her tone professional. "Your archery is the best I've ever seen, but it won't do you any good if an ogre is breathing right in your face. It's a fine blade. I'll show you the basics before we leave. We'll have time for more lessons on the trail."

"Thank you, Avari," Lynthalsea said, touched by the woman's concern. Avari shrugged and mumbled noncommittally.

"Hey! What about me?" DoHeny piped, poking Avari in the shoulder. "What if I get an ogre breathin' in *my* face?"

Avari fixed the dwarf with a blithe stare and said, "Breathe back." She took a bite to stifle her grin. The others laughed openly and DoHeny humphed in feigned disgust.

"Seriously, though," Shay cut in as the mirth subsided. "We have a great deal to do, but should be able to finish and be off by first light day after tomorrow."

"So soon?" Raised eyebrows from all echoed the dwarf's words. They had expected a *little* more rest than that.

"I see no reason to delay, and one very good cause for haste; our only advantage against the Nekdukarr is that he does not know where we are or where we are going. We cannot allow him time to learn these facts." Shay stood and began to pace.

"Information and supplies are crucial to our success. Lynthalsea, you will be in charge of procuring food and sundries. We have no idea when we may be able to provision again, and you know more about living in the wilderness than the rest of us.

"DoHeny will place orders for repairs to armor and weapons for us all. Since most of the best armorers here are dwarvish, I think you are the best suited for this job."

"Ye mean *all* o' the best armorers *everywhere*, don't ye, lad?"

"I thought you might see it that way," Shay smiled, knowing he had chosen well. "And last, but far from least, Avari, you will buy us quality mounts, several pack-horses, and any tack and harness we may need."

The tall woman smiled. "My pleasure."

"You will also," Shay continued, "contact the captain of the city guard for information on hiring someone to guide us through the north country, which is where the gems seem to be pointing."

"Why the captain of the guard?" Avari asked absently.

"Because," Shay explained, "the guardsmen can sometimes be hired out, and the captain will know which of his men would

be best suited to our needs."

"Sure." Avari nodded and shrugged.

"As for myself," the half-elf smiled, "since I am more at home in a library than an armory or stable, I shall search for information concerning the gems and our friend Darkmist." Shay stopped and smiled, obviously pleased with his planning.

"We shall start right after breakfast." He sat down, refilled his cup, and piled a plate with ham and eggs. "Remember, we have plenty of money, so buy the best, regardless of price. Our lives could hinge on something as trivial as a broken boot strap." Shay dug into his meal after raising his cup in a toast.

A timid knock sounded at the door, and the servant girl Cantie stepped into the room. She carried freshly-cleaned garments over one arm and sported a mischievous smile.

"I've come for yer clothes, Master Shay," she said, blushing.

"I think it's time we got dressed," DoHeny said, bounding to his feet and scampering for his room.

"Yes," Lynthalsea agreed as she rose. "Avari, we had best ready ourselves for the day, don't you think?"

Avari caught the elf's wink, piled her plate high, and took it with her to her room. "We'll be just a moment, Shay."

As the last of the three doors closed, Shay looked to the servant girl for an explanation, but her smile had turned from shy to sly. She smoothed her bodice to her trim waist, treating him to another wink; her new demeanor explained everything. He swallowed, nearly choking on the ham he had forgotten to chew.

"Now, wait a moment," he said, standing and putting out a hand to forestall the girl. "I really don't need... That is, I really don't want to..."

Cantie moved toward him, her innocent gait dissolving into an inviting swagger. The usually charming half-elf was speechless. Just before she reached him, the girl dropped the clean clothes onto the divan, grabbed Shay's outstretched hand in her own and pressed it to the yielding laces of her bodice.



Iveron Darkmist knelt on the hard stone floor, his face inches from the unyielding surface. He was not praying; Mortas demanded much more than prayer from his Nekdukarr, and he was not prostrating himself before a higher noble, for, although he might bow, he knelt to no one. In fact, he knelt to inspect the characters etched in the mirror-smooth floor. The workmanship was excellent; only with a magnifying glass could he detect a minute roughness at the edges. But for this task, excellent was not good enough. The runes had to be flawless.

Darkmist pushed himself to his feet and fixed his apprentice with a look of restrained approval. The nervous squire smiled and bowed under his master's gaze, the twisted features of its half-orc/half-dwarvish face contorting with discomfort.

"The inscriptions are very good, Grixel," Iveron said, making subtle calming motions with his hands. "They just need some touching up. Polish them with a diamond-dust slurry before you start the inlaying." He glanced around the floor at the hundreds of runes. "It should take no more than a day for the polishing—"

"Message, message for Darkmouse message..."

A messenger beast scampered into the chamber and started to cross the rune-inscribed floor. Grixel gasped in horror as its grimy feet scuffed the intricately-wrought designs.

"STOP!" Iveron roared. The demon-enhanced power behind his command froze the creature in its tracks. The dark paladin stepped over to the stricken creature, his soft slippers avoiding the runes. With a few words and a simple gesture from Darkmist, the messenger floated into the air, letting out a startled yelp. Iveron grabbed it by the ankle and pulled it to the edge of the room, where he dropped the poor beast to the floor.

"Now, what is the message?" he barked.

"Message from Captain Kurekk," it said, its voice deepening in an attempt to mimic the rock troll. "Tell Lord Darkmist dat da two women dat he talked to before has come to visit him again. I put dem in his private rooms so dey could be more comfff..."

## *Nekdukarr*

commferd... So's dey could take it easy 'til he comes."

Iveron glared at the beast and clenched his fists in anger. Kurrekk was a valuable commander and a good strategist, but hadn't the faintest notion of secrecy or stealth. The last thing he needed was his sisters poring over his plans.

He pictured his study in his mind, and muttered the words of power that would take him there.

~

"Sisters."

Lysethra and Calmarel jumped and whirled to the corner of the room where Iveron had materialized. They had been perusing the parchments and scrolls that littered his broad desk.

"So very good of you to pay me a visit. I regret that I was unable to greet you personally." That, at least, was the truth. "I trust my attendants have made you comfortable in my absence."

"Oh, quite, Ivy," Calmarel said, letting the scrolls she had been studying slip from her fingers as if they were of only passing interest. They had timed their visit carefully, using the spider golem she had instructed to stay with him to make sure their brother was occupied elsewhere. That he would simply blink in had caught them by surprise. His wizard's tricks, so different from their god-granted powers, irritated her no end.

"Although you really should have sequestered larger quarters for yourself," she continued as she lowered herself into the chair beside the table. "These tiny rooms are so stuffy."

"Alas, they serve my simple needs. Military commanders rarely enjoy the opulence that many nobles believe their birthright." Calmarel seethed at his inference to her usual insistence on the luxury that she felt was due the aristocracy.

"But you did not travel so far to learn of the hardships of command." He strode forward, draping his cloak over the high back of the chair in which Calmarel reclined. "Tell me you bring news of the council's support of my plans."

"We do bring news from the council." Lysethra said. "But you may be less than elated at the outcome."

"What?" Iveron glared at them in turn, his fists clenching.

"It's not that bad," Lysethra lied. "You stand a good chance of eventually gaining approval. They are dead-locked, five votes to five, leaving the final decision to the mediator."

"And what *was* her decision?" Iveron asked.

"She requires more information." Lysethra smiled, as if the answer were simple. "The council is concerned about committing resources. The logistics of moving troops and supplies are horrendous, and the fact that the battleground will be on the surface has them worried. If you deliver a detailed outline of how you plan to solve these problems, I'm sure the mediator will come around."

"Troops? I need no more troops!" Iveron's patience was at its end. "All I *need* is council approval, a few competent mages and a priest or two of reasonable skill. I have plenty of troops for the initial assaults, with more arriving daily. Supplies will be reaped from the spoils; the farms and cities are stocked with food and clothing to see them through the cold season."

The sisters exchanged secret, surprised glances. They had no idea Iveron's operation was so self-sufficient. Now, if they only knew the extent of his newly acquired magical power.

"In fact," Iveron continued, "the resources of Clan Darkmist alone would be sufficient to ensure success, and our profits would increase by a factor of ten. Of course, we would make the appropriate donation to the mediator to ensure her approval of our—" He stopped, noticing his sisters' incredulous stares.

"You propose that we support your plan without council approval?" Lysethra was genuinely astonished at her brother's audacity. "That is preposterous! Failure would mean the loss of our council seats at the *least*!"

"There will be no failure!" Iveron snapped. "With the power I now possess—" He clamped his jaw in mid-divulgence. "Rest assured, sisters; there will be no failure."

"Success or failure is not the issue," Calmarel said, thinking, *May Xakra take him and his secrets and suck the life out of them both!* "Clan-led acts of aggression on the scale you propose are specifically against the council charter. Expulsion would be the

least of her punishments."

"We must wait for the council to see the value of your plan and commit support to it," Lysethra lied; they had no intention of taking anything to the council. "And they will only see its value if we present a detailed plan, and know the profits to be reaped."

"Very well." Iveron rankled at her tone, crossing his arms. "I will personally deliver the specifics of my battle plans to the council!" He whirled and bellowed for a messenger. Calmarel and Lysethra exchanged worried glances; they certainly could *not* allow him to address the council.

"Iveron!" Calmarel interrupted. "A lesser noble in the council chambers will only infuriate those opposing you. Lysethra and I have been dealing with those treacherous schemers for more than a century. Let us do what we are best at, so that you may stay here and do what you are best at."

Iveron considered Calmarel's uncharacteristically calm persuasion. Her logic was faultless; belligerence would get him nowhere when dealing with higher nobles.

"You are correct, my sisters." Iveron bowed politely, smiling genuinely. "I will prepare a package for you to present to the mediator. Will you accept my hospitality for the day?"

"Of course, brother," Lysethra answered, covering her surprise. Suspicion flashed from an ember to a flame.

"Our efforts in council will be tireless," Calmarel agreed, thinking, *Until we discover your source of power and use it to bury you even deeper than the dwarves of Zellohar did.*

~

With his sisters dismissed to more elegant chambers, Iveron sat at his desk. His quill flew over a fresh piece of parchment, scratching out a detailed synopsis of his strategy, carefully omitting any mention of the gems. Should the council learn of the gems' power, they would stop at nothing to possess them. *They will know nothing until it is too late, when all the power is under my command.*

Finished, he slipped the rolled parchments inside an intricately inscribed scroll case, sealed it, placed it on the table

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before him and began to weave complex incantations.

Hours later, Iveron leaned back with a satisfied smile and rubbed his cramped neck. He had never considered delivering his plans to the council without protection against prying eyes. Trust was a concept that rarely entered his thought process.