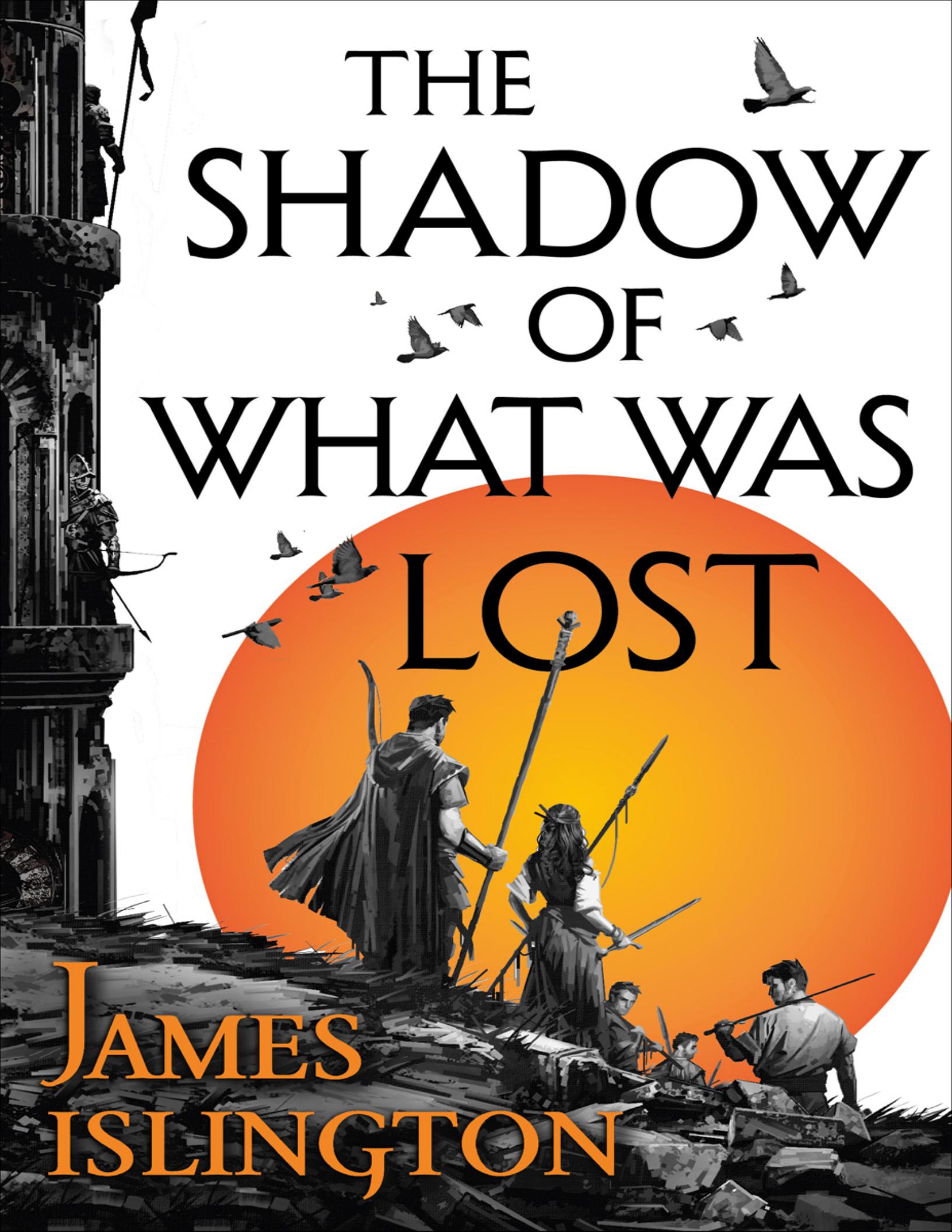


THE SHADOW OF WHAT WAS LOST

JAMES
ISLINGTON



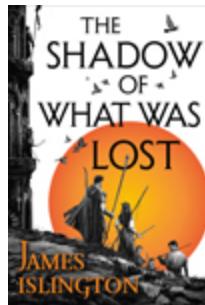
THE SHADOW OF WHAT WAS LOST

The Licanius Trilogy: Book One

James Islington

orbitbooks.net

orbitshortfiction.com



[**Begin Reading**](#)

[**Table of Contents**](#)

[**Orbit Newsletter**](#)

[**Copyright Page**](#)

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

For Sonja.

Without your enthusiasm, love, and support,
this would never have been possible.



Prologue

Lightning.

For a moment the waters of Eryth Mmorg were lit, roiling and churning as though a great knife had plunged deep into the pool's murky heart. A dark wave shattered against a barely discernible outcrop of black rocks, hissing, spitting spray a hundred feet into the air before subsiding. The world flickered back into darkness, but the waves, if anything, increased their intensity. Another roared, hissed, sighed, even louder than the peals of thunder that followed. Another.

Tal watched impassively from his rocky perch, high above even the spray. Only his cloak moved as it flowed out behind him, billowing and snapping in the gusting wind. Old eyes set against youthful features stared unblinking into the night, fixed upon the point where he knew the gaping maw of Eryth Mmorg lay. Another flash illuminated the oval of jagged rocks; the waves licked at them hungrily, waiting to devour any who ventured close.

Behind him lay the flat, barren rock that was Taag's Peak. No life grew there, not even the hard, poisonous foliage that survived elsewhere in the wilderness. The obsidian surface was worn smooth by the constant buffeting wind; twenty paces from Tal it ended in another precipice, almost as sheer as the one he currently overlooked. Few men could gain Taag's Peak, and fewer still desired to.

To the north, on the horizon beyond the pool, the darkness was suddenly broken by a dull red glow. Tal's eyes cleared after a moment, flicked toward the light. The beacon seemed about to fade

before blossoming into a ball of brilliant orange flame, searing light across the wastelands and burning into Tal's head. He gasped, shutting his eyes for a moment, steadyng.

How long had he gazed into the depths? Too long; the alarm had been raised and his flight discovered. A cold, sharp pain clawed at his chest, something he had not felt in some time. Fear.

"Hold," he murmured to himself, fixing his gaze once again upon the angry waters. "Hold." It was very nearly done, despite his lapse in concentration.

"You are running, Tal'kamar. I warned you against running." The sound rumbled around the peak, a presence rather than a voice.

Tal's stomach twisted and he turned, searching for his pursuer.

"I know the truth," he said quietly. He could see it now, at the far end of the peak but crawling toward him. A shadow, darker than the rest. A being not quite there. His master.

The creature chuckled, a sickening sound. "You do not know what truth is any more. He was one man, Tal'kamar. He lied; you said it yourself. You slew him for his falsehood. You took his head and set it on a pike. You placed it at the Door of Iladriel as a reminder, for all to see! Do you not remember?" The shadow stopped, watching Tal. Waiting.

Tal hesitated, staring for a long moment into the gloom.

"Yes," he whispered hoarsely. His master's presence was overpowering; for a moment Tal wanted only to grovel before his lord, beg that all be forgiven.

Then the moment passed, and he sensed a feeling of anticipation from the shadow—and something more, barely discernible. Something he had never felt before from his master.

Nervousness.

He continued, growing more confident with each word. "Yes," he repeated slowly, "but I was mistaken. I followed the path he set me upon. I found proof." He paused, his voice stronger now. "I went to Res Kartha. I asked the Lyth." Stronger again. "I went to the Wells of Mor Aruil and spoke with the Keeper. I found Nethgalla at the Crossroads and tortured her until she told me all she knew." Now he shouted, the rage of so many years finally released, a mighty roar

that seemed to echo across all of Talan Gol and beyond. "I went deep beneath the mountains, beneath Ilin Tora itself. I found the Mirrors. I gazed into them and found one thing!" He stopped, panting, face twisted in grim triumph. "One truth above all others."

The shadow crept closer, menacing now, the silver gone from its voice. "What did you find, Tal'kamar?" it hissed mockingly.

Tal drew a deep breath. "You are false." He said it calmly, staring defiantly at the dark mass. "Completely, utterly false."

He turned, gesturing downward toward the waters. A bright-blue circle began to glow just above the waves, spinning ever faster. When he turned back the shadow was at his face, filling his vision, its breath a foul stench on the air. It laughed, a filthy sound that contained only contempt.

"You cannot escape this place," it snarled. "You cannot escape me."

For the first time in years, Tal smiled.

"You are wrong. This time I go where Aarkein Devaed cannot follow," he said softly.

He stepped backward, over the edge. Fell.

The shadow slithered forward, watching as Tal passed through the Gate and beyond reach. The whirling ring of blue fire flickered white for but a moment; then it was gone, leaving no trace of its ever having existed.

The creature stared at where it had been. The waves below were quieter now, as if appeased.

Suddenly it understood.

"The Waters of Renewal," it hissed.

Its screams filled the world.

Chapter 1

The blade traced a slow line of fire down his face.

He desperately tried to cry out, to jerk away, but the hand over his mouth prevented both. Steel filled his vision, gray and dirty. Warm blood trickled down the left side of his face, onto his neck, under his shirt.

There were only fragments after that.

Laughter. The hot stink of wine on his attacker's breath.

A lessening of the pain, and screams—not his own.

Voices, high-pitched with fear, begging.

Then silence. Darkness.

Davian's eyes snapped open.

The young man sat there for some time, heart pounding, breathing deeply to calm himself. Eventually he stirred from where he'd dozed off at his desk and rubbed at his face, absently tracing the raised scar that ran from the corner of his left eye down to his chin. It was pinkish white now, had healed years earlier. It still ached whenever the old memories threatened to surface, though.

He stood, stretching muscles stiff from disuse and grimacing as he looked outside. His small room high in the North Tower overlooked most of the school, and the windows below had all fallen dark. The courtyard torches flared and sputtered in their sockets, too, only barely clinging to life.

Another evening gone, then. He was running out of those much faster than he would like.

Davian sighed, then adjusted his lamp and began sifting through the myriad books that were scattered haphazardly in front of him. He'd read them all, of course, most several times. None had provided him with any answers—but even so he took a seat, selected a tome at random, and tiredly began to thumb through it.

It was some time later that a sharp knock cut through the heavy silence of the night.

Davian flinched, then brushed a stray strand of curly black hair from his eyes and crossed to the door, opening it a sliver.

"Wirr," he said in vague surprise, swinging the door wide enough to let his blond-haired friend's athletic frame through. "What are you doing here?"

Wirr didn't move to enter, his usually cheerful expression uneasy, and Davian's stomach churned as he suddenly understood why the other boy had come.

Wirr gave a rueful nod when he saw Davian's reaction. "They found him, Dav. He's downstairs. They're waiting for us."

Davian swallowed. "They want to do it now?"

Wirr just nodded again.

Davian hesitated, but he knew that there was no point delaying. He took a deep breath, then extinguished his lamp and trailed after Wirr down the spiral staircase.

He shivered in the cool night air as they exited the tower and began crossing the dimly lit cobblestone courtyard. The school was housed in an enormous Darecian-era castle, though the original grandeur of the structure had been lost somewhat to the various motley additions and repairs of the past two thousand years. Davian had lived here all his life and knew every inch of the grounds—from the servants' quarters near the kitchen, to the squat keep where the Elders kept their rooms, to every well-worn step of the four distinctively hexagonal towers that jutted far into the sky.

Tonight that familiarity brought him little comfort. The high outer walls loomed ominously in the darkness.

"Do you know how they caught him?" he asked.

"He used Essence to light his campfire." Wirr shook his head, the motion barely visible against the dying torches on the wall. "Probably

wasn't much more than a trickle, but there were Administrators on the road nearby. Their Finders went off, and..." He shrugged. "They turned him over to Talean a couple of hours ago, and Talean didn't want this drawn out any longer than it had to be. For everyone's sake."

"Won't make it any easier to watch," muttered Davian.

Wirr slowed his stride for a moment, glancing across at his friend. "There's still time to take Asha up on her offer to replace you," he observed quietly. "I know it's your turn, but... let's be honest, Administration only forces students to do this because it's a reminder that the same thing could happen to us. And it's not as if anyone thinks that's something you need right now. Nobody would blame you."

"No." Davian shook his head firmly. "I can handle it. And anyway, Leehim's the same age as her—she knows him better than we do. She shouldn't have to go through that."

"None of us should," murmured Wirr, but he nodded his acceptance and picked up the pace again.

They made their way through the eastern wing of the castle and finally came to Administrator Talean's office; the door was already open, lamplight spilling out into the hallway. Davian gave a cautious knock on the door frame as he peered in, and he and Wirr were beckoned inside by a somber-looking Elder Olin.

"Shut the door, boys," said the gray-haired man, forcing what he probably thought was a reassuring smile at them. "Everyone's here now."

Davian glanced around as Wirr closed the door behind them, examining the occupants of the small room. Elder Seandra was there, her diminutive form folded into a chair in the corner; the youngest of the school's teachers was normally all smiles but tonight her expression was weary, resigned.

Administrator Talean was present, too, of course, his blue cloak drawn tightly around his shoulders against the cold. He nodded to the boys in silent acknowledgement, looking grim. Davian nodded back, even after three years still vaguely surprised to see that the Administrator was taking no pleasure in these proceedings. It was

sometimes hard to remember that Talean truly didn't hate the Gifted, unlike so many of his counterparts around Andarra.

Last of all, secured to a chair in the center of the room, was Leehim.

The boy was only one year behind Davian at fifteen, but the vulnerability of his position made him look much younger. Leehim's dark-brown hair hung limply over his eyes, and his head was bowed and motionless. At first Davian thought he must be unconscious.

Then he noticed Leehim's hands. Even tied firmly behind his back, they were trembling.

Talean sighed as the door clicked shut. "It seems we're ready, then," he said quietly. He exchanged glances with Elder Olin, then stepped in front of Leehim so that the boy could see him.

Everyone silently turned their attention to Leehim; the boy's gaze was now focused on Talean and though he was doing his best to hide it, Davian could see the abject fear in his eyes.

The Administrator took a deep breath.

"Leehim Perethar. Three nights ago you left the school without a Shackle and unbound by the Fourth Tenet. You violated the Treaty." He said the words formally, but there was compassion in his tone. "As a result, before these witnesses here, you are to be lawfully stripped of your ability to use Essence. After tonight you will not be welcome amongst the Gifted in Andarra—here, or anywhere else—without special dispensation from one of the Tols. Do you understand?"

Leehim nodded, and for a split second Davian thought this might go more easily than it usually did.

Then Leehim spoke, as everyone in his position did eventually.

"Please," he said, his gaze sweeping around the room, eyes pleading. "Please, don't do this. Don't make me a Shadow. I made a mistake. It won't happen again."

Elder Olin looked at him sadly as he stepped forward, a small black disk in his hand. "It's too late, lad."

Leehim stared at him for a moment as if not comprehending, then shook his head. "No. Wait. Just wait." The tears began to trickle down his cheeks, and he bucked helplessly at his restraints. Davian

looked away as he continued imploringly. "Please. Elder Olin. I won't survive as a Shadow. Elder Seandra. Just wait. I—"

From the corner of his eye, Davian saw Elder Olin reach down and press the black disk against the skin on Leehim's neck.

He forced himself to turn back and watch as the boy stopped in midsentence. Only Leehim's eyes moved now; everything else was motionless. Paralyzed.

Elder Olin let go of the disc for a moment; it stuck to Leehim's neck as if affixed with glue. The Elder straightened, then looked over to Talean, who reluctantly nodded his confirmation.

The Elder leaned down again, this time touching a single finger to the disc.

"I'm sorry, Leehim," he murmured, closing his eyes.

A nimbus of light coalesced around Elder Olin's hand; after a moment the glow started inching along his extended finger and draining into the disc.

Leehim's entire body began to shake.

It was just a little at first, barely noticeable, but then suddenly became violent as his muscles started to spasm. Talean gently put his hand on Leehim's shoulder, steadyng the boy so his chair didn't topple.

Elder Olin removed his finger from the disc after a few more seconds, but Leehim continued to convulse. Bile rose in Davian's throat as dark lines began to creep outward from Leehim's eyes, ugly black veins crawling across his face and leaching the color from his skin. A disfigurement that would be with Leehim for the rest of his life.

Then the boy went limp, and it was over.

Talean made sure Leehim was breathing, then helped Elder Olin untie him. "Poor lad probably won't even remember getting caught," he said softly. He hesitated, then glanced over at Elder Seandra, who was still staring hollowly at Leehim's slumped form. "I'm sorry it came to this—I know you liked the lad. When he wakes up I'll give him some food and a few coins before I send him on his way."

Seandra was silent for a moment, then nodded. "Thank you, Administrator," she said quietly. "I appreciate that."

Davian looked up as Elder Olin finished what he was doing and came to stand in front of the boys.

"Are you all right?" he asked, the question clearly aimed at Davian more than Wirr.

Davian swallowed, emotions churning, but nodded. "Yes," he lied.

The Elder gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Thank you for being here tonight. I know it can't have been easy." He nodded to the door. "Now. Both of you should go and get some rest."

Davian and Wirr inclined their heads in assent, giving Leehim's limp form one last glance before exiting the Administrator's office.

Wirr rubbed his forehead tiredly as they walked. "Want some company for a few minutes? There's no chance I'm going straight to sleep after that."

Davian nodded. "You and me both."

They made their way back to the North Tower in thoughtful, troubled silence.

* * *

Once back in Davian's room both boys sat, neither speaking for a time.

Finally Wirr stirred, expression sympathetic as he looked across at his friend. "Are you really all right?"

Davian hesitated for a moment, still trying to sort through the maelstrom of emotions he'd been struggling with for the past several minutes. Eventually he just shrugged.

"At least I know what I have to look forward to," he said wryly, doing his best not to let his voice shake.

Wirr grimaced, then gave him a hard look. "Don't say that, Dav. There's still time."

"Still time?" Normally Davian would have forced a smile and taken the encouragement, but tonight it rang too false for him to let it go. "The Festival of Ravens is in three weeks, Wirr. Three weeks until the Trials, and if I can't use Essence before then, I end up the same way as Leehim. A Shadow." He shook his head, despair thick in his voice.

"It's been three years since I got the El-cursed Mark, and I haven't been able to do so much as touch Essence since then. I'm not sure there's even anything left for me to try."

"That doesn't mean you should just give up," observed Wirr.

Davian hesitated, then looked at his friend in frustration. "Can you honestly tell me that you think I'm going to pass the Trials?"

Wirr stiffened. "Dav, that's hardly fair."

"Then you don't think I will?" pressed Davian.

Wirr scowled. "Fine." He composed himself, leaning forward and looking Davian in the eye. "I think you're going to pass the Trials."

His tone was full of conviction, but it didn't stop Davian from seeing the dark, smoke-like tendrils escaping Wirr's mouth.

"Told you," Davian said quietly.

Wirr glared at him, then sighed. "Fates, I hate that ability of yours sometimes," he said, shaking his head. "Look—I *do* believe there's a chance. And while there's a chance, you'd be foolish not to try everything you can. You know that."

Wirr wasn't lying this time, and Davian felt a stab of guilt at having put his friend in such an awkward position. He rubbed his forehead, exhaling heavily.

"Sorry. You're right. That wasn't fair," he admitted, taking a deep breath and forcing his swirling emotions to settle a little. "I know you're only trying to help. And I'm not giving up... I'm just running out of ideas. I've read every book on the Gift that we have, tried every mental technique. The Elders all say my academic understanding is flawless. I don't know what else I can do."

Wirr inclined his head. "Nothing to be sorry for, Dav. We'll think of something."

There was silence for a few moments, and Davian hesitated. "I know we've talked about this before... but maybe if I just told one of the Elders what I can see when someone's lying, they could help." He swallowed, unable to look Wirr in the eye. "Maybe we're wrong about how they would react. Maybe they know something we don't. It *is* different from being able to Read someone, you know."

Wirr considered the statement for a few seconds, then shook his head. "It's not different enough. Not to the Elders, and certainly not

to Administration if they ever found out." He stared at his friend sympathetically. "Fates know I don't want to see you become a Shadow, Dav, but that's nothing compared to what would happen if anyone heard even a whisper of what you can do. If it even crosses their minds that you can Read someone, they'll call you an Augur—and the Treaty's pretty clear on what happens next. The Elders may love you, but in that scenario, they'd still turn you in to Administration in a heartbeat."

Davian scowled, but eventually nodded. They'd had this conversation many times, and it always ended the same way. Wirr was right, and they both knew it.

"Back to studying, then, I suppose," said Davian, glancing over at the jumble of books on his desk.

Wirr frowned as he followed Davian's gaze. "Did it ever occur to you that you're just pushing yourself too hard, Dav? I know you're worried, but exhaustion isn't going to help."

"I need to make use of what time I have," Davian observed, his tone dry.

"But if you ever want to use Essence, you need to sleep more than an hour or two each night, too. It's no wonder you can't do so much as light a candle; you're probably draining your Reserve just by staying awake for so long."

Davian gestured tiredly. He'd heard this theory from plenty of concerned people over the past few weeks, but it was the first time Wirr had brought it up. The trouble was, he knew it was true—when a Gifted pushed their body past its limits they instinctively drew Essence from their Reserve, using it to fuel their body in place of sleep. And if he was draining his Reserve to stay awake, his efforts to access the Essence contained within were doomed to failure.

Still, three years of keeping sensible hours had done nothing to solve his problem. Whatever prevented him from using the Gift, it ran deeper than a lack of sleep.

Wirr watched him for a few moments, then sighed, getting slowly to his feet. "Anyway—regardless of whether you plan to sleep, *I* certainly do. Elder Caen expects me to be able to identify the major motivations of at least half the Assembly, and I have a session with

her tomorrow." He glanced out the window. "In a few hours, actually."

"You don't sleep *during* those extra lessons on politics? I just assumed that was why you took them." Davian summoned a weary smile to show he was joking. "You're right, though. Thanks for the company, Wirr. I'll see you at lunch."

Davian waited until Wirr had left, then reluctantly considered the title of the next book he had laid aside for study. *Principles of Draw and Regeneration*. He'd read it a few weeks earlier, but maybe he'd missed something. There had to be *some* reason he couldn't access Essence, something he hadn't understood.

The Elders thought it was a block, that he was subconsciously resisting his power because of his first experience with it, the day he'd received his scar. Davian was doubtful, though; that pain had long since faded. And he knew that if he really was an Augur, that fact in itself could well be causing the issue... but information on Andarra's former leaders was so hard to find, nowadays, that there was little point even thinking about the possibility.

Besides—perhaps it was simply technique. Perhaps if he read enough about the nature of the Gift, he could still gain sufficient insight to overcome the problem.

Despite his resolve, now that he was alone again he found the words on the cover blurring in front of him, and his jaws cracking open unbidden for a yawn. Perhaps Wirr was right about one thing. Exhaustion wasn't going to help.

Reluctantly he stood up, leaned over, and extinguished the lamp.

He settled into his bed, staring up into the darkness. His mind still churned. Despite his tiredness, despite the late hour, it was some time before he slept.