

**LESSEK'S KEY**

**Book Two of the Eldarn Sequence**

**By Robert Scott & Jay Gordon**

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Aftermath*

#### Orindale Harbour

The creature huddles in the recessed doorway of a waterfront tavern. Closed now, and empty, the windows look in on an abyss, a room so shrouded in midnighnt that the glass might mark the entrance to the Fold itself. Light from sporadic sentinel torches left burning along the Orindale waterfront reflect off the windows, but, ignoring the laws of physics, their glow doesn't bring any illumination to the darkened tavern; the diffuse glow merely bounces back.

The creature knows well that places exist where nothing matters, where light cannot penetrate, where the absence of perception provides for the absence of reality. The Fold. Isn't that how the old man described it? It's worse than death, because death, like life or love, is held so close. Death has meaning; it's a profound event, feared above most horrors, but meaningful nevertheless. This place is worse, more tragic: the Fold embodied. This is a place so devoid of colour and touch, scent and sound, that nothing can survive. This is the place mothers go after the broken bodies of their children are found washed up on a beach or lying in pieces across a field. It's the end of all things, the event horizon.

Nothing can remain here long – except for the creature. Stooped and broken, hunched at the waist and dragging much of its torso like a disintegrating appendage, the thing in the doorway resembles a tree that has lived too long, the victim of too many woodsmen hacking deep, disfiguring scars. It can stand upright, but that's painful, that requires effort, and hope, and the creature refuses to have hope. Instead, it waits. Fortified by its ability to see and understand its own condition, as if seeing itself from above, the creature becomes the darkness, dragging it along as it drags its own body. It sees the mossy nubs that work their way through the rotting planks of the waterfront walkways. It steps in the puddles of piss and vomit that surround the taverns. It watches rats battling over half-stripped chicken bones tossed from windows two and three floors up, and insects devouring half-digested bits of venison regurgitated by drunks reeling towards home, their ships, maybe, or the downy beds of the local whores.

One night it finds a finger, lost in a bar fight and on another, a portion of someone's ear, which it turns over and over in its fingers, trying to imagine the whole

from which this bit was severed. Finally, it stashes the lobe in its robes, tucked beside the finger, the chicken bones and the bits of venison, before starting out again.

This wretched thing would be willing to die if it were willing to allow itself an experience so meaningful. Its pallid flesh is hidden beneath the folds of a stolen cloak as it stares out at the Orindale night, listening, waiting and planning. It does have a mission: it is driven by its desire to hunt and kill the black and gold soldiers. There are so many; thousands have come here, and it kills one, two, sometimes five in a night. Men or women, it doesn't care. It doesn't dismember them, or eat them – not much of them anyway, there is plenty of food along the waterfront – and nor does it perform deviant acts with their corpses. Instead, the creature slices them open: through the neck is quiet, but the gullet works well, too. It finds some strange satisfaction watching the young Malakasians struggling to replace handfuls of innards, as if packing lengths of moist summer sausage into a torn canvas sack. From some come moist clouds of exsanguinous fog, particularly when they are gutted in the early morning.

The creature's pain comes and goes, but when it strikes it is searing, nearly unbearable. Beginning in its neck and shoulders, the fire bolts across its back, paralysing its legs and forcing it ever deeper into its crouch. Though it cannot remember the past very well, it knows that it has brought this upon itself. There are hazy recollections of a frigid river, a flat rock, and an aborted attempt to straighten itself, to regain its previous form, but it did great damage that day, hurling itself repeatedly against the unforgiving stone. Then the pain was glorious, making it see things, hallucinations, nearly translucent lights like wraiths scurrying over hillsides and flitting between sap-stained pine trunks. Now it salves its wounds with the black and gold soldiers.

They'll never capture it. They've tried. It outsmarts them easily; it avoids their snares, because it lives among the things that crawl and slither on the ground, safely beneath the gaze of the Malakasian occupation army.

A stray dog happens by, a filthy, disagreeable mutt with mangy fur, a pronounced limp and a broken canine uselessly askew in its lower jaw. The dog gives the creature a low growl, a warning, more out of fear than any real threat. But it's too late. Brandishing a long knife, the creature pounces. Cat-quick and deadly, it buries its knife in the dog's throat and twists with such force the stray can do little more than yelp before dying on the cobblestones.

The hood of its cloak falls across its shoulders, revealing an ashen face, a man's face, sickly-white like the colour of spoiled milk. His eyes focus on nothing. Though bent, he is a big man, and powerful. He doesn't feel remorse: the animal will make a tasty breakfast and, if he rations the meat, lunch too.

The creature – the man – is distracted by something. Licking at the bloody knife, he peers into the darkness hovering over the harbour. He can make out flames, watch-fires, he assumes, that burn on bowsprits, jib-booms, and stern rails though they appear to float above the water. He closes his eyes and listens: something has happened. One of the ships is coming apart; even from this distance, he can hear beams splintering, masts collapsing and planks pulling free and snapping like hickory knots in a bonfire. He judges the distance at well over a thousand paces and decides it can be only one ship. Hazy recollections taunt from just beyond the periphery of his consciousness, and a feeling: this is good, this vessel snapping in two and sinking to the bottom of Orindale Harbour – but he can't recall why.

Without warning, and surprising himself, he speaks. ‘They must have made it.’ Then he looks around in terror. ‘What does that mean? Who said that?’

‘They must have made it,’ he repeats and this time realises *he* has spoken. He is hearing his own voice. It’s as if he hid part of himself, enough to preserve the integrity of who he was . . . hid it far enough away to allow himself . . . the creature, that is . . . to eat things like discarded fish innards, severed ears or vomited venison bits. But he is close enough to hear when his *döppelganger* speaks.

‘Say that again.’ He is looking anxiously about the abandoned waterfront, still aware of the cataclysm taking place in the harbour, but ignoring it for the moment. ‘Say that again.’

‘The ship, the *Prince Marek*, they must have reached it.’

Bending slowly, an indistinct blur in the darkness, the hunched creature sheathes his long knife. He peers side to side, aware there are things he doesn’t understand, and mumbles, ‘Good then . . . back to the hunt.’

Sallax Farro of Estrad tucks the dog’s limp form beneath his cloak, pulls his hood up and hurries south along the wharf.

A tangible silence like a spectre creeps across the countryside. Trees ignore the wind and stand upright; leaves quiet their rustle as onshore breezes fade to a whisper. Waves lapping against the shoreline flatten to nearly indiscernible ripples; seabirds land and nest, their heads tucked protectively beneath wings. Even the northern Twinmoon appears to dim, as if unwilling to illuminate Nerak’s disappearance.

All of southern Falkan draws its shades, closes its doors and waits. Nerak is gone, and Eldarn has not yet decided how it will respond. Like a battered child finally witnessing her father’s arrest, the very fabric holding this strange and beautiful land together rumbles with a growing desire to scream out *We are free!*, but those screams emerge as a nearly inaudible whimper. Many feel the dark prince’s exit, shuddering for a moment, and then returning to the business of their lives. There is a status quo to be maintained. There are expectations and accountability because, of course, the dark prince may return.

South of the city is a meadow, just above the inter-tidal zone: more of an upland bog, rife with sedge, rushes and coarse coastal grass. The meadow, flanked on three sides by the scrub-oak and heavy needle pines that mark the sandy edge of the Ravenian Sea, is an anomaly. The expanse of thick foliage and dense fertile soil, thanks to a narrow stream rushing by just out of sight behind a stand of pines, form an unexpected oasis trapped between the intimidating Blackstone peaks to the east and the cold salt waters to the west.

On this night, the meadow grasses are brushed back and forth by Twinmoon breezes charging unchecked north and south along the narrow channel. Painted pale Twinmoon white, the grasses glow with the muted brilliance of a snowfield at midday.

Gabriel O’Reilly appears, interrupting the ghostly surface, a blurry cloud of spectral smoke. His battle with the almor has taken him across the Fold, through the great emptiness and within a breath of the evil force lying restlessly inside. He has seen the centre of the world, has passed through the dead of the Northern Forest and through the great cataclysm that pushes the edges of the universe ever outwards. It is all he can do to maintain his sanity as he looks into the face of a god – it *must* be a god, for nothing else

could generate such beauty, such destruction and such pure, uncomplicated power. But this isn't his God; he's not home yet.

Gabriel O'Reilly has felt the fires of the demon lands, smelled their putrid stench and sensed their inhabitants: legions of creatures marshalling their resources in an effort to weaken his resolve and purloin his very essence. At times, he has seen home, Virginia, and though he doubts any of it is real, he imagines he can smell it, touch it, feel those lush rolling hills beneath his bare feet. Slamming through forests and burrowing through mountains, O'Reilly and the almor careen, a tangle of demon limbs in a ghostly fog across time and worlds. As they pass through the pristine wilderness of his home, he checks beyond the rise of each hill, hoping for just one glimpse of a Confederate brigade marching to face the Army of Northeastern Virginia.

And all the while he holds on to the demon almor, the one sent to take Versen and Brexan, the only friends he's made in five lifetimes, forcing himself to remember why he grips the creature so hard, hanging on despite the drain on his sanity.

Now the almor is gone. O'Reilly has no idea how long they have battled, but suddenly the demon vanishes, falling away into the burned over wastelands of a distant world. It is as if its will to engage him has run dry.

Has it been days? Years? O'Reilly doesn't care. Instead, he casts his senses about the meadow, detecting no sign of Brexan, Versen or the scarred Seron they fought together. As much as he can remember of disappointment, the spirit feels it now. He had hoped that beating the almor would have given him a way home: the path to heaven, the right to look upon the face of his own God.

But it hasn't happened, and he is still here in Eldarn. O'Reilly floats above the meadow another moment, his indistinct face a mask of loneliness; then without a sound he slips between the trees and disappears into the forest.

He is not gone a moment when others appear along the edge of the meadow, following O'Reilly through the trees, hunting him. One, the leader, pauses to stare across the Ravenian Sea. It has been many years since William Higgins has seen the sea, long before his daughter was born, before he left his family in St Louis to seek his fortune in the mountains above Oro City, Colorado. He turns after the others; they are close behind O'Reilly now. As the cavalry soldier-turned-miner fades from view, his ghostly white boots pass through a fallen cottonwood tree. The sound of a spur, chiming through the ages, rings once above the din of the onshore breeze.

Although the sounds of the *Prince Marek* shattering in the harbour do not reach her, Brexan Carderic is unable to sleep. Moving north, she is less than a day outside Orindale, expecting to reach the outskirts of the Falkan capital before dawn. She doesn't hear the *Prince Marek* coming apart, but the stillness that follows in the wake of the ship's death reaches her. She makes her barefoot way slowly along the shore, recalling the loss of her boots, discarded in the Ravenian Sea after she cut Versen loose from the stern rail of the fat merchant's ship. With every step towards the city, the Malakasian imagines first how she will find this man and second how she will torture him when she does. Burning Versen's body was the most difficult thing she'd ever done, yet she did it meticulously, thinking she will have one chance to get something right, but she will live with its memory for ever. She chose every branch carefully, avoiding green wood so her fire

would blaze quickly into a fury. Even as the flames claimed Versen's body, Brexan sat, imagining the horror of failing to get that first spark to kindle.

She cries as she remembers that day, sitting by his side, rising only to find a piece of scrub-oak, a pine bough or a thatch of cedar brambles. She didn't speak to him, or kiss him goodbye, nor did she take any of his scant belongings as keepsakes. Instead, she sat with him, watching as his pyre burned down and eventually out.

Mark Jenkins stands on the forward bench of a small skiff borrowed from an elderly fisherman he believes now to be the Larion Senator, Gilmour Stow of Estrad. He has a half-moon gash above one eye, and blood clouds his vision. Mark thinks he must have been hit by a splinter of glass when what was left of the aft end of the *Prince Marek* began breaking apart; he ignores the bleeding and, screaming out her name, searches the wreckage for any sign of Brynne. He scans the castaway spars, rails, barrels, beams and sections of sailcloth that have begun floating away. He has given up hope that the Pragan woman will appear alongside the skiff, offer him an alluring grin and ask if she might come aboard. He tries to spot a pale upper arm, a bare cheek, temple or even a supple leg in the light cast across Orindale Harbour by the northern Twinmoon.

Before him, the great sailing vessel sinks away. Apart from avoiding the undertow as the tons of metal, wood and tar careen towards the bottom, Mark doesn't give the remains of the *Prince Marek* more than a glance. He is shouting Brynne's name, but it fails to occur to him that Steven and Gilmour might be lost as well.

Then a thought nudges him. There's something . . . he has seen something, something he can't remember at the moment, but even that is enough to give him pause, to turn him around stiffly, a mannequin on a rotating pedestal. The last few minutes have been too traumatic; his search for Brynne has distracted him. There are other problems, other threats.

Where's Garec?

They left him sleeping in the catboat. That isn't it. There's something more.

Versen? No.

Mark's voice fades until he can barely hear himself whisper the Ronan woman's name.

*The clouds. Those clouds of mist. Where are they?*

He saw one; it had been coming out over the harbour, right before the ship shattered in two. He searches the night, rubbing a sleeve across his face to wipe the blood from his eyes. *There it is.* It's as if a black fogbank has blown west to hover over the harbour. Despite Mark's certainty that he witnessed the cloud moving away from shore, towards the *Prince Marek*, not ten minutes earlier, now it looks to have stopped – not retreated; rather, it remains stolidly in place, about two hundred yards off the waterfront. But it's frozen there, impervious to the efforts of the onshore breeze to carry it back into town, thicker than any normal cloud and heavier than fog ought to be. Like a column of ethereal soldiers poised to charge, the mist looks as though it is awaiting its next set of orders: *fall on the partisans and kill them all*, or perhaps, *return to the city and await further instructions.*

If the cloud advances, he'll swamp the skiff, turn it over and hide in the air pocket below, praying the thin boards of the fisherman's boat will be enough to stave off the deadly fumes. Mark clears his throat and begins shouting again for Brynne.

Gilmour Stow allows himself to be pulled beneath the surface as the colossal ship sinks by the bow, then, opening his eyes, mumbles a quick spell in a cloud of bubbles, and his underwater vision improves. Brighter, nearly in focus now, the *Prince Marek* floats effortlessly towards the bottom, picking up speed and casting off loose cargo, rigging and more than a few bodies. It's a beautiful sight; ironic and tragic that such a ship would look most glorious when wrapped jib to spanker in the very water that buoyed her for so many Twinmoons. He watches until it disappears from view.

In one hand, Gilmour clasps Steven Taylor's hickory staff and in the other, the only existing copy of Lessek's spells, notes and reflections on the nature of magic and the Larion spell table. He had been so certain the book had been lost a thousand Twinmoons earlier; he curses himself for not realising Nerak had it all along. He is a powerful foe. Thinking back to their battle just moments earlier, Gilmour wonders if the fallen Larion magician had given his best: granted, it had been a titanic blow, and it had required all of Gilmour's concentration to keep from being pulverised. But had it been Nerak's *best*? Had he really felt the sum force of the dark prince's power? Kicking towards the surface, he wonders if Nerak was telling the truth: *That was naught but the tiniest of tastes, Fantus, a miniscule sample drawn from the very furthest reaches of my power.*

The only blow Nerak had an opportunity to land: had it been a feint, a flick of the wrist? Would a focused spell, carefully woven over time, tear Gilmour to ribbons or reduce him to dust? He hopes he will be in possession of Lessek's key and in control of the spell table before he has to discover the full extent of Nerak's power.

Clutching the staff close, Gilmour emerges from the depths and immediately forgets the dark prince. Fear and regret seize him as he hears Mark Jenkins, nearby but invisible in the darkness, screaming Brynne's name.

'Rutters!' the older man murmurs, realising Brynne is lost.

It's not the crashing and snapping of beams in the *Prince Marek* that finally wakes Garec Haile of Estrad, but the faint sound of shouting. His gaze slowly focuses on the heavy weave of a blanket he borrowed from his sister's room the previous Twinmoon. The archer wriggles to a sitting position, shrugging off layers of wool, draws a few stabilising breaths and feels the gentle undulating rhythm of the harbour tide. 'I'm on the boat,' he says out loud.

In a rush, the events of the past avens return; he jerks himself upright. 'Steven! I've been shot. Oh, gods, I've been shot!' He reaches for the arrow, the black Malakasian arrow he knows he will find jutting crookedly from his ribs – but despite the recollection of an intense burning pain as the polished shale pierced his skin, the young freedom fighter can find no sign of injury. 'Gone,' he says, feeling nothing but a tear in his tunic and the sticky remnants of blood drying on his clothing. 'How can this be?'

Wishing for more light to conduct a thorough examination, Garec takes a deep breath. There is no rattle, no telltale vibration of fluid pooling in his lungs. He places a hand over his heart; it, too, seems strong, thrumming beneath his fingers.

Standing, Garec's legs falter for a moment and he nearly topples headfirst into Orindale Harbour. Balancing, he stretches and cautiously considers his apparent good health. 'I'm all right,' he whispers and only then realises he is alone on the catboat. 'Where is everybody?'

Garec's question is answered with another cry, faint but urgent. He feels his stomach roil as it comes again: '*Brynne!*', a sob recognisable in the distant voice. Instinctively, Garec reaches for his bow.

It's not there.

For a moment, he feels a nearly overwhelming sense of relief. He hoists the vessel's small sail and almost immediately it is captured by the onshore breeze; the keel turns lazily in a loping circle towards the wharf. 'Rutting boats,' he grumbles, picking his way aft to the tiller. 'I'll be out here for the next Twinmoon.'

'*Brynne!*' The hopeless cry resonates through his bones; Garec guesses that his friend is dead. What happened? How long had he slept? Had they tried to take the *Prince Marek* without him? Awkwardly, he pulls the sail taut and gropes for a wooden stanchion along the starboard gunwale; failing to find one, he hangs on to the line in one hand while wresting the tiller with the other to bring the boat about. Navigating as best he can in the moonlit darkness, he sets a course for the sound of the distraught voice.

Carpello Jax shifts three candles closer to the polished looking-glass propped above his fireplace mantel. His beard is coming on nicely: step one in his transformation.

Sweat dampens his face and neck despite the evening breeze. He drags a ruffled linen sleeve across his forehead, a frequent move over the past several days. Not that it has been warm in Orindale; rather, Carpello sweats because he is grossly overweight, and because he anticipates his audience with Prince Malagon. He is sure the dark one knows Carpello's schooner is moored in the harbour; it won't be much longer before he's summoned to the royal residence to present his report. Carpello has prepared a convoluted tangle of lies and remains confident he can sell his story to Prince Malagon: he is a businessman, and he lies for a living.

Through the open windows, Carpello hears the sounds of a cataclysm unfolding in the harbour, but for the moment he doesn't move to investigate. He is nervous, and that has awakened a handful of sublimated memories. The most tenacious this evening is Versen, the woodsman. Carpello runs a hand across the ample hillock of his abdomen, touching the wound dealt him by the woman just before she went overboard in an effort to free the troublesome Ronan. Carpello had meant to interrogate the girl and then to give her to his crew as a diversion, but things had gone terribly wrong. By the end of that day, he had lost both prisoners and his Seron escort.

Carpello grimaces. It will be a difficult tale to weave for the prince; he reviews his own version once again, to ensure all the details are committed to memory, as if they had actually occurred. The sweaty businessman knows the secret to successful lying is believing one's own fabrications; Prince Malagon will be Carpello's most challenging audience yet.

Outside, there is another explosion, but Carpello's thoughts are still with the woodsman. Even facing torture and death, the young man had surprised him: 'A very good friend of mine looks forward to meeting you,' he had said. 'If I were you, I would take my own life rather than ever run into her again.'

'A woman? I shall be enchanted, I'm sure,' Carpello had responded.

'You'll be dead,' the Ronan had answered flatly, 'and she'll make it last for Twinmoons . . . a grisly death is on its way to Orindale right now.'

Had Versen been bluffing? Carpello wipes the sweat from around his eyes once more. He doesn't believe so. Versen had sounded convincing: a specific woman wanted to find and kill him. But why? Carpello feigns ignorance for a moment, trying out his 'innocent' face in the candlelit looking-glass. He watches it fall away. He knows why.

Reaching into his belt, he withdraws a thin fillet knife with a tapered point and a polished edge. Wiping it on a chamois, he leans in close to the mirror and, with a steady hand, slices the bulbous mole from the side of his disfigured nose: step two.

Blood blooms from the wound, dripping from Carpello's sagging jowls to stain the frilly ruffles of his linen shirt. He sways unsteadily, feeling faint. His vision tunnelling, he staggers backwards to sit with a groan in a nearby chair. Carpello Jax begins to cry as Versen's voice echoes grimly in his head: *You'll be dead . . . and she will make it last for Twinmoons.*

## Middle Fork, Praga

Alen Jasper wakes, groans, rolls to one side and vomits repeatedly into a ceramic pot beside his bed. *Too much wine tonight. Too much wine every night.* Spitting between dry heaves, the former Larion Senator runs a wrist over his mouth and then his forehead: cold sweats; he might be sick.

‘Nonsense,’ the old man tells his darkened room. ‘You haven’t been sick in eighteen hundred Twinmoons. You drink too rutting much. That’s all, no need to lie about it now.’ He’s interrupted by the need to wretch, but this time Alen vomits on the floor; the contents of the ceramic pot are too foul for a second round. Collapsing onto his back, he stares at the ceiling and feels the tremors begin. ‘Pissing demons, you can’t need a drink already.’ With a frustrated curse, he promises to deny himself another drop until after sunset the following day. ‘Suffer, you drunk fool. Go ahead and shake.’ The sweat rolls from his forehead, tickling the sensitive skin behind his ears and staining his already damp pillow grey.

Alen breathes shallowly in an effort to ease the pain in his head and calm the angry waste churning in his stomach. He reaches for a cloth draped across a bedside chair. It’s a gesture he has perfected over hundreds of evenings similar to this, but tonight something is different. The cloth feels odd in his hands, as if his fingers, deadened from Twinmoons of drinking and malnutrition, have suddenly rejuvenated themselves. The cloth is softer; he can feel wrinkles, tiny imperfections in the weave that he has not noticed before. He catches the fleeting aroma of beeswax from a taper burning on his mantel.

He stops wiping his face and inhales deeply. Behind the grim flavour of his vomit and beyond the sharp tang of the candle, he finds it: roast gansel. Churn prepared the meal two nights ago, and the smell is still hanging about his house. He hasn’t been able to detect aromas like this in fifty Twinmoons.

Alen swings his feet over the edge of the bed, outside the splatter of this evening’s meal – he can’t recall what it was – and onto the floor. He runs a hand through sweaty hair and whispers, ‘What’s happened to me?’

Moving to an armoire near the window, Alen splashes generous handfuls of cold water on his face and feels the familiar sensation as it trickles beneath his tunic to dribble down his back. The cold slaps him awake and he shivers, a genuine shiver rather than the all-too-common drink-shakes that generally visit him in the pre-dawn aven. He pulls off his rank clothes and considers himself in the glass.

‘Fat, you rutter.’ Alen purses his lips disgustedly. ‘How did you get here?’

He is unaware that a Twinmoon’s travel to the east, Prince Malagon’s flagship is sinking, nor does he realise that a Larion far portal has been opened and that Steven Taylor and the dark prince have both crossed the Fold in search of Lessek’s key. Alen is powerful enough to have detected the brief but powerful battle between Fantus and Nerak only a half aven earlier, but Alen’s senses were dulled, from apathy, alcohol and grief. He stands naked, reflecting on the Twinmoons that have turned him into this reprehensible, out-of-shape creature that stares back at him from the looking-glass.

Not many people can stand to look at themselves naked for too long: most are too critical, pining for something – more muscle, less paunch, more hair, bigger breasts . . . Alen’s assessment of himself goes beyond superficial disgust as he delves more deeply into his own cowardice, his grief and his fear.

Hiding in his specially-designed house where no one in Eldarn can find him, he pines for everything he wanted to do, the leader he wanted to become, and for the things he wanted for his children. Though they had become interesting and engaging adults, and Alen remains proud of them all, there could have been more, if only he had done something: stood his ground, defended the Larion Senate, killed Nerak, and travelled to Durham to find his daughter, Reia. He should have brought her home to assume her place in the Senate; she would have been a powerful sorcerer. His daughter – *Pikan*’s daughter would have stood toe-to-toe with the world’s most powerful magicians, scholars and leaders, even with Nerak.

But Alen had not done any of those things. Instead, he had come to Middle Fork to wait, to lose hope and to drink. He had certainly come to do that.

But this evening something has changed. The pallid whiteness of his flesh has faded to a healthier pink. He can smell again, and feel. His fingers caress the fabric of his bedside cloth: Alen feels himself rejuvenating from within. The cold fear and stolid grief slip away, as if someone has pulled a stopper and allowed his essence to drain out. He is no happier with himself – he isn’t pleased with the bandy arms, the bony legs or the bulging pot-belly hanging over the shrivelled penis he has not used for more than pissing – too often red – for more than five hundred Twinmoons. But this evening, with the stench of his vomit still heavy on the air, Alen senses a change; it skips across his skin and for a moment, the old Larion researcher feels the atrophied member stir between his legs.

Alen watches his stomach tighten, slimming his figure, as he stands up straight. Dropping the cloth, he brings his hands together, fingertip-to-fingertip, and feels the magic pass. His head clears as he turns away from the glass, intrigued by his regained strength.

‘Why tonight?’ he asks. The room is empty, but he knows to whom he has really addressed the question. ‘Why now, you whoring bastard? Why now, when I’m this old, this tired, and a rutting dog-faced drunk?’

Lessek doesn’t answer, and Alen shifts uneasily towards the armoire, wanting clean clothes. He tries to avoid looking back at the glass, but as he reaches for the cabinet door it’s unavoidable and he is forced to look himself squarely in the face.

He realises what has happened.

The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes are not as deep as usual, and the grim creases in his forehead not as pronounced. He quickly dons a clean tunic and hose, mumbling as he does, ‘Can’t be . . . where would he go? . . . They haven’t let up in so long . . .’ Hastily knotting a leather thong at his neck, he picks up the basin and tosses the remaining water across the puddle of vomit. With a thought, he casts a simple spell and watches as the water carries the spoiled vestiges of his dinner away, leaving a spotlessly clean floor in its wake.

Magic surges through him, and Alen is tempted to let go with a thunderclap, something that will shatter the windows and scare the dog-piss out of his neighbors. But he decides first to experiment, to be absolutely certain the changes that woke him from

his stupor are lasting. Grabbing a cloak and a pair of worn leather boots, the former Larion Senator kicks open his chamber door and bellows, 'Wake up, my friends! It's time to get going!'

The old man turns to make eye contact with himself in the glass, flicks his wrist in a simple gesture and barks a hearty chuckle when the mirror shatters; several jagged pieces of polished glass tinkle to the floor.

'They've stopped looking for me . . . Welstar Palace is undefended.' Slamming the door behind him, Alen shouts, 'Hoyt! Churn! Hannah! Wake up!'

## Silverthorn, Colorado

'I think I'll go tomorrow,' Jennifer Sorenson says, unaware that, a world away, Malakasia's flagship is shattering into black shards and sinking into Orindale Harbour.

'No, stay the weekend,' Bryan encourages. 'They're predicting fresh snow Thursday night. We'll ski the powder for a couple of days, and you can drive back to the city on Saturday, or even Sunday if you don't mind traffic going down the mountain.'

'Please stay,' Meg adds, 'and if you don't want to ski, we'll go shopping. The antiques shops in town are terrific.'

Jennifer forces a smile, appreciating everything they have done to help her cope with Hannah's disappearance, but shopping for antiques and skiing in the Rocky Mountains remain low on her list of priorities. 'Thank you both. I really mean it, but with all the antiques I've sold in the past few months, I don't think I even want to look at another one for a very long time. And Bryan, I just don't know that I can go up there without—' Jennifer coughs, covering a sob.

She has been at her brother's for the past eight days: reading, writing letters and sharing walks with Bryan and Meg, but she has not been skiing, not one run. She hasn't even looked up at the mountain; raw emotion is just too near the surface. There has been no news of Hannah since the Idaho Springs police told her the search and rescue efforts underway on Decatur Peak would be suspended until spring. 'The snow is too deep for an effective search, Mrs Sorenson. I'm sorry,' the detective had said, coolly, *professionally* sympathetic. She had not moved as the numb realisation washed over her: Hannah was lost, presumed dead.

Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, her brother says, 'I'm sorry, Jenny, I didn't— But stay anyway. We'll, I don't know, cook gourmet food and drink too much expensive wine.'

'No.' It's a genuine chuckle this time as she reflects on her brother's sometimes curious endeavours in the kitchen. She wipes her eyes. 'Look at me. I'm a mess. You don't need me hanging around here.'

'Don't be silly,' Meg says. 'It'll be better here than at home. The store's finally empty, so you're spending too much time at the house. Just take a few more days to regroup.'

They don't understand.

'There's no place,' Jennifer begins falling apart again. 'There's no place to hide. There's no safe place. I can't get away from her. She's everywhere. Don't you see? I can't stand it. One minute she was there on her bike. I made her put her helmet on as if she was a ten-year-old, and then she was gone. I can't just sit around waiting until spring for some hiker to—' Jennifer collapses to the floor; Bryan kneels to take her in his arms.

'Just a few more days,' he whispers. 'I'll go back with you on Sunday, and we can take care of a few things there.'

'No!' Jennifer shouts. 'We won't. I won't clean out her room. I won't do it. She is not . . . she's not gone, Bryan.'

'Jenny, please.'

'No,' she shakes her head too hard, causing her vision to tunnel. 'You tell me how they got to the trailhead, Bryan. How did they get there? All three cars were at the house.'

Hannah's climbing gear was at our house. She wore running shoes up there that night. She knew it had snowed.'

Standing, Jennifer breathes deeply in an effort to calm down; it doesn't help. 'I'm sorry, but you climbed with her, Bryan, she wouldn't go up there in running shoes. She isn't on that mountain. I won't believe it, and I won't clean out her room. I won't cancel her insurance. I won't take her fucking messages off the answering machine. I'm sorry, but there is nothing like this. This would have been easier if they had just told me she was—' Jennifer wails, a cry that breaks her brother's heart.

'Please don't apologise,' says Meg. Uncertain what to do with her hands, she alternates between clutching at the crew neck of her sweater and rubbing her palms along the outer seams of her jeans. Feeling useless, she moves into the kitchen for some water.

Bryan takes his sister by the shoulders as the *Prince Marek* hoists her broken transom to the Falkan night and begins sinking into the harbour. He takes a breath, bracing himself just enough to say, 'A few more days, okay?'

Defeated, Jennifer finally nods. 'Okay.'

'Great.' He makes an attempt at levity. 'What shall we cook? Grilled elephant balls?'

'Sounds lovely,' Jenny can't stifle a giggle. 'I'll rent *Casablanca*, and we'll make an evening of it.' She sees the relief in his face; her heart lightens. Bryan will always be her little brother.

'Make it *Victor Victoria*; I'm in the mood for a cross-dressing soprano,' he grins at her.

'I'm afraid Meg will have to help you there, Bryan.'

'Nah, she's an alto,' he whispers, and together the siblings laugh, holding one another, waiting for the comforting predictability of everyday life, absent since Hannah's disappearance, to return.