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BY JAMES ISLINGTON

*The Licanius Trilogy*

The Shadow of What Was Lost

An Echo of Things to Come

The Light of All That Falls

# THE LIGHT OF ALL THAT FALLS

The Licanius Trilogy: Book Three

**JAMES ISLINGTON**



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## Prologue

The blizzard howled around Caeden, shading the world a merciless, freezing white.

He scraped icy flakes from his vision and bowed his head, trudging onward and downward against the ferocious gale that raged up the mountainside, each lungful sharp and every step sodden. He had been walking for what felt like hours; it couldn't be far now. Impossible as it was to make a portal directly into Alkathronen—and though the Builders' last city was hidden even to kan—he felt confident that he had opened his Gate close by.

Fairly confident, anyway.

He focused, filtering out the knifing cold and briefly extending a shield of Essence around himself, creating a bubble that sluiced through the snow ahead in a brief, hissing cloud of steam. Using even that much of his power was a risk. He needed as much time in Alkathronen as possible before anyone knew he was here, and the Venerate had taken a fresh Trace from him during his torture in Ilshan Gathdel Teth a year ago.

Caeden shook the grim memory from his mind, shrugging the heavy coil of rope more securely onto his shoulder and leaning hard into the cutting wind as he let his Essence shield drop again. A few more steps and a hazy glow began to reveal itself in the white; a minute later he was stumbling into the abrupt calm of the canyon, the sound of distantly crashing water finally reaching his ears as the flakes in the air became distinct, their movement easing from diagonal slash to gentle downward drift.

Two enormous, parallel waterfalls resolved themselves, one on

either side of the path ahead, bolts of blue energy streaking along their perfectly sheer, shimmering facades. The road itself was mercifully dry, snow dissipating in tiny puffs of steam wherever it touched the stone surface. Caeden felt his body relax slightly as the reprieve of warmth began to press against his frozen cheeks.

He reached up and pushed back his tightly drawn hood, allowing the gentle heat in the air access to the rest of his face as he looked around warily. This was the central hub for the Builders' works, the point from which they had built portals to each of their wonders. Alaris had needed to remind him of that, the last time he was here, but it was clear in his mind now as he studied the symbols inscribed on the edges of the road. Recognized them. Understood their purpose.

Knowledge like that didn't surprise him anymore. He had recovered much during this past year of isolated observation and planning—almost all his memories, he thought—even if his mind still shied away from reliving the specifics of his history as clearly as it once had.

The latter, he had to admit, pleased him almost as much as the former.

He pressed forward, quick now that the deep drifts no longer hampered his progress, sensation returning to his limbs with a sharp prickling as he walked. The glow of Alkathronen up ahead formed a shielding dome against the blizzard, even as it exposed the city's utter emptiness.

Caeden slowed as he passed the symbol marking the portal to Ilin Illan, pushing down another shudder of doubt over his decision to come here. It was a risk to expose himself like this, rash, even, and yet... it was time. Davian had been a prisoner for a year now. That meant he was about to be sent to Zvaelar.

Which, by all estimates, gave Caeden less than a month to prepare.

He pressed on. The remaining Venerate had not been idle since his escape: Davian had warned him of Gassandrid's idle boast, so as soon as he'd remembered, Caeden had chanced sneaking into the Andarran capital to see if it was true. Sure enough, a disturbing number of the people he had observed there were showing the subtle mental markers. Hundreds had been Read, now. Maybe thousands.

Gassandrid, Alaris, and Diara were leaving no stone unturned in their scouring the country for him—or, more to the point, for Ashalia's whereabouts.

He'd anticipated that, of course, and had done what he could to make sure that there were no clues to find, removing even the memories of his presence whenever he did have to venture away from the Wells. Unfortunately, it had also meant not risking any contact with his friends in Andarra. The Venerate almost certainly knew of them now, would be watching them closely.

He cast another longing glance back at the Builders' symbol for Ilin Illan. That enforced isolation, in the face of what he knew was coming, had been hard... but it also meant that Karaliene, Wirr, and the others were relatively safe. The Venerate might have come within a breath of breaching the ilshara, but they were nothing if not patient—and would be even more so now that Caeden's brief capture a year ago had handed them Licanius. They would not attack their own bait.

Not so long as it was bait that they believed served a purpose, anyway.

The uneasiness of that thought clung to him as he came to a halt in front of the massive white archway that marked access to Alkathronen itself. He closed his eyes and focused on it. Sure enough, the subtle, crisscrossing lines of kan were there, blocking the only path inside.

He stood for a moment longer, hesitating.

Then he stepped beneath the towering stone, disrupting the near-invisible strands, the air shivering around him in response. Alaris would know that he was here, now.

The only real question was whether he would tell the others.

He stared in absent worry at the burbling fountains that adorned Alkathronen's entrance, then shook his head and started toward the east-facing cliff.

Either way, he had little time remaining and much still to do.



Caeden fed more Essence into the heatstone, clenching his teeth to keep them from chattering.

He held his hands out toward the waist-high cylindrical Vessel

and seated himself atop a low white wall, finally allowing himself to rest. Several of these heatstones dotted the city, perfectly integrated into the aesthetics and yet somehow always easy to spot. Stoked with a little Essence, they emitted warmth well beyond that which Alkathronen already provided—an especially welcome function right now, given Caeden's groaning muscles, rope-burned hands, and snow-sodden clothes.

He could have fixed all of that quite easily, of course, but he also knew that he would need every bit of Essence in his Reserve soon enough.

He stared absently over at the eastward edge of the city, where the soft glow of Essence held back the thrashing white that raged just beyond. The storm had worsened since he'd arrived. That hadn't made his work over the past five hours any easier, but it would be to his advantage if it kept up now.

He shifted to warm the other side of his body, switching his gaze to the arrow-straight road leading into Alkathronen's center. He could see where the snow failed to melt, the flickering and waning Essence in the distance revealing a steadily deepening white.

He shivered as he watched that unsteady illumination, not wanting to think about the last time he'd been here. It was rarely far from his mind, though—still impossible to ignore both what he had learned then, and what he had done since.

Isiliar had been his friend, and he had knowingly left her to be driven insane.

And then—after she had finally been set free—he had killed her.

"You look unhappy, Tal'kamar."

Caeden started at the voice. Then he steeled himself and stood, turning and nodding a greeting to the tall, chiseled man who was standing across the street from him.

"You're not wrong," he conceded to Alaris, the quiet words carrying easily in the dead hush. He didn't smile, but he made certain not to appear hostile, either. "I am glad you came, though."

Alaris's blue eyes were locked on him. The other man at first glance looked relaxed, but there was discomfort to his stance. Wariness.

"A promise to a friend is a promise that cannot be broken," said Alaris. He studied Caeden. "And I want very much to believe that we are still friends, Tal. Despite."

"As do I." Caeden meant the words. Still, he couldn't help but let his gaze flick to the silent streets behind Alaris, processing just how quickly the other man had come. "I wasn't expecting you for a while yet."

Gassandrid was the only one of the remaining Venerate who could make a Gate, and there was a strict code of accountability for all trips outside the ilshara. For Alaris to have kept his word to Caeden and not told the others about this meeting, he would have needed an excuse to leave—a very convenient one, to have employed it at such short notice. Caeden had planned for having mere hours before Alaris's arrival, but in truth had expected days.

"I am alone," Alaris assured him, noting the glance. "Gass was already expecting to send me out for... something else. The timing simply matched up."

Caeden frowned at that—what business did Alaris have that would bring him so close to an Alkathronen portal?—but he knew the other man well enough to believe him. He slowly, carefully unbuckled the blade at his side, then tossed it onto the ground between them. "Good. Because I am here to talk."

Alaris nodded as he eyed the steel thoughtfully, but did not discard his own weapon.

Caeden gestured to the bench on the opposite side of the heatstone; when Alaris was seated, the two watched each other mutely before Caeden finally blew out his cheeks, trying to find the right way to start this conversation.

"The last time we were here," he began, "you said to come back when the Lyth had been dealt with. You said that if I wanted to understand both sides of this fight, you would be willing to have that discussion." Alaris leaned forward with something like hope in his eyes, but Caeden quickly shook his head. "I wish to be up front, my friend. I have remembered enough now to make that discussion unnecessary. I am not on your master's side of this, and I never will be again."

Alaris's expression twisted. "I am... saddened to hear that. Unsurprised, but... still." His shoulders slumped, a bitter note

entering his tone. "If you are no longer interested in my perspective, Tal, then what is this about?"

The disappointment in his friend's voice hurt, but Caeden pressed on. "An offer. An exchange."

Alaris snorted. "If you are talking about Licanus—"

"Of course I'm not." Caeden spoke the words softly. He already knew exactly where Licanus was, anyway. "I want you to free Davian. In exchange, I will tell you where Cyr's Tributary is, and I will not stop you retrieving him from it."

Silence greeted the statement, Alaris's brow furrowing as he considered what Caeden had said.

"Why?" He shook his head bemusedly. "I know you need both Cyr and Davian dead to close the rift, and Cyr is by far the harder of the two to kill. Even more so if you set him free."

Caeden kept his expression smooth. Cyr had gone to his Tributary willingly—had been convinced of the truth about Shamaeloth and had volunteered—but the other Venerate didn't know that. They assumed that he was a prisoner, as Meldier and Isiliar had been.

"Because I made a promise to Davian," Caeden replied firmly. "And I cannot rescue him—not from Ilshan Gathdel Teth, not with you standing against me. I am not as strong as you. I never was." He said the words simply, without self-pity or false modesty.

Alaris gazed at him. "A smart man might take this to mean that Davian is more important than Cyr, in some way that we are not currently aware."

"A smart man would realize that I would never have proposed such a trade if that were the case. This is about me trying to keep my word, Alaris—that is all. I'm trying to be the man I aspire to be, rather than the man you knew." Caeden leaned forward. "We both know that I kill Davian—that is not something that can be undone, regardless of how long you hold him." The thought still turned his stomach, even a year after his learning the fact, but he made sure not to show it. "On the other hand, neither of us knows Cyr's fate. So it is a good offer, Alaris. One that I will not make again."

Alaris stared at the heatstone for a while, obviously considering.

"Can you hear yourself, Tal?" he asked suddenly. He looked up, and there was a haunted aspect to his gaze as he stared at Caeden. "You say you did not come here to talk about this, but... the man you aspire to be? You want to exchange one friend—whom you imprisoned for two thousand years—with another, and your argument for my accepting the trade is that I already know you will kill one of them anyway." He gave a tired, bitter laugh. "Yet you are so certain that you are the one on the right path, and that the rest of us have been misled."

Caeden scowled. "I suppose you think that you and the others are less stained, somehow?"

"Yes." Alaris said the word matter-of-factly. "We act knowing that all that is done will be undone, Tal—that our actions against others do not matter, *unless you succeed*. We are not the ones bent on protecting a broken, imprisoned world and killing the people we love."

Caeden opened his mouth to retort, then stopped himself with a weary shake of his head.

"No," he said quietly. "No more, Alaris. No more trying to sow doubt. No more dredging up arguments that we have already had, or distracting me with questions to which I gave you my answers centuries ago. Shame on you for that. Shame on you for trying to take advantage of my ignorance." He stared at the other man steadily, letting him see how heartfelt was his own disappointment. "The fact is, I know what I believe now. I remember why all of this is necessary. I remember that you refuse to consider that the creature we know as El has been deceiving us. *I remember*. So let us just... skip this part, this time."

Alaris's expression twitched, and Caeden saw that his rebuke had struck home. Good.

There was silence.

"It really is you this time, isn't it, Tal," Alaris said ruefully. He rubbed his face tiredly. "Davian for Cyr, then. Let me... think a few moments on it."

Silence fell again; Caeden studied Alaris, loath to ask but too concerned not to. "How is he?"

Alaris hesitated.

"Well enough," he said. "He has created some... unique politics,

though, as I am sure you can imagine. Gassandrid wishes to educate, while Diara... Diara wishes to punish. Knowing who he is and what will happen to him—what he will do—has made some of their arguments quite compelling.” He held Caeden’s gaze. “But he is still under my jurisdiction. And for now, as far as I am concerned, he is simply one more person who needs protecting from you.”

Caeden felt his jaw tighten at that, but said nothing.

Alaris watched him thoughtfully. “While we are being civil...”

“If you have things to say, then I am happy to listen.”

Alaris just nodded to himself, evidently having expected no less. He reached into a pocket and drew out something small and thickly wrapped; the cloth was white but as Alaris began to remove the covering, Caeden saw the inner layers were sodden with some kind of green, viscous liquid. Soon the last piece fell to the ground with a damp slap, but it still took Caeden a few moments to realize what Alaris was holding.

“Where did you get this?” Alaris tossed the ruined remains of the Portal Box to him. “Clearly none of us made it.”

Caeden’s heart skipped a beat as he caught the Vessel, and he barely avoided displaying his relief as he examined it; getting to confirm its destruction was a gift, though Alaris couldn’t have known that. The cube’s once-bronze surface was now a slick black, the inscriptions worn off, a piece of the metal oozing away even as he held it.

Caeden had remembered early on that Talan Gol would corrupt the Vessel, as it did almost all such devices trapped for any length of time within the ilshara. But the Portal Box had been especially powerful. Unique. He hadn’t been certain that it would decay in the same way.

“The Lyth,” said Caeden, seeing no advantage to lying. “I stole it from them.” He shrugged at Alaris’s raised eyebrows.

Alaris gave a chuckle at that, shaking his head. “That is a story I would very much like to hear one day.”

“One day,” agreed Caeden. He let his gaze return to the rotting Vessel in his hand, regret heavy in his chest. Another reminder of just how badly he had used his friend. As Malshash, Caeden had linked Davian to the Portal Box, manipulating him into deliver-

ing it after Caeden’s memories were erased—all because Davian was the only one Caeden had been certain would live to do so.

He’d drawn Davian into all of this, knowing that he would ultimately die at Caeden’s hand. *Because* he would die at Caeden’s hand, and therefore not any sooner.

He pushed both the thought and the decayed box to one side, carefully wiping his hands, tempted to again try to convince Alaris of why it had been corrupted in the first place. The other Venerate believed that the degradation of Vessels in Talan Gol, and in fact the very barrenness of the land itself, was an effect of the Boundary: something built into its machinery to make it a more effective means of imprisonment.

It wasn’t. Caeden himself had allied with Andrael to devise the ilshara, and its purpose had only ever been to delay El’s march to Deilannis, to force the other Venerate to stop and join him in questioning whether their faith had become blind. And yet, even when they’d believed that Caeden was still on their side—that he’d been an unwilling participant in Andrael’s machinations—Alaris and the others had been quick with their excuses. They’d claimed that Andrael must have added to the ilshara’s anchoring Vessels before handing them over to the Darecians, or that possibly the Darecians themselves had modified them.

The Venerate were intelligent men and women, and yet somehow unable to even entertain the possibility that the ongoing, contained presence of their god was the true problem.

Such was Shammaeloth’s nature, though. Those who were most steeped in his corruption somehow had the hardest time seeing it—something for which Caeden could barely blame them. He knew that myopic haze all too well.

Alaris abruptly shook his head.

“My answer is no, Tal.”

Caeden stared blankly, then breathed out heavily as he understood. Alaris had chosen to reject the deal for Davian’s release.

“Why?”

Alaris gestured helplessly. “Because you only came here after you realized that you couldn’t beat me in Ilshan Gathdel Teth. Because I cannot see the upside of this for you, which means that you must be concealing it.” He paused, sounding desolate now.

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“But most of all? Because after Is... I know that you are not the man you once were. You may have the memory of our friendship, Tal’kamar, but I am no longer convinced that you are my friend.”

Caeden felt his heart wrench, and he struggled to find the words to respond.

“You cannot know how sorry I am to hear that,” he said finally, not bothering to conceal the pain in his voice. “But you are making a mistake, Alaris.”

Alaris’s expression didn’t change. “I will exchange Davian for the location of *Ashalia*’s Tributary. Nothing less.”

“No.”

“Then we have nothing further to discuss.” Alaris stood stiffly. “I gave you my word that I would let you leave Alkathronen, Tal, and I meant it. But the moment you are gone from this city, we are enemies. There will be no other parleys like this.”

Caeden stood, too, then walked over to his blade and stooped, picking it up off the stone with a slight metallic scraping.

Then he slowly, deliberately leveled it at Alaris.

“I know,” he said softly.

Alaris stared at him in indignant disbelief, and Caeden hated the guilt that look stirred in him. The two men remained motionless; then Alaris was shifting smoothly, giving himself room as he reluctantly drew his own sword.

“I suppose I should be grateful that you didn’t wait until my back was turned,” said Alaris, holding his blade at the ready. “At least that much of you remains.” He sounded more tired than anything else, though his eyes were hard. “Whatever advantages you think you have here over Ilshan Gathdel Teth, Tal, you’ve miscalculated. I have no doubt that you have been busy laying the groundwork against me, setting your traps, but you said it yourself—you expected to have longer. Mere hours was never going to be enough.”

Caeden didn’t acknowledge the statement, keeping his blade up and cautiously beginning to circle. Alaris matched the motion.

“One last chance, Tal. Walk away. You do not have one of Andrael’s Blades, so even if you have some other Vessel I don’t know about, you cannot hope to win. And I will not let you escape this time.” When Caeden still didn’t respond, Alaris sighed, look-

ing stuck between melancholy and frustration. “Then answer me one last question, before we end this and you are locked away forever.”

Caeden kept pacing. “Ask.”

Alaris’s gaze never left Caeden’s as they continued their slow, cautious dance. “I know that shape-shifting is simple enough for you, after all that practice a century ago—and I know that most of your memories must have come back by now, too. So why return to *this* body? Why not your own?”

Caeden almost hesitated at that. He’d asked himself something similar, in the days after Davian had decapitated him to free him from Ilshan Gathdel Teth. Wondered why he had felt so driven to change back, despite the accompanying pain. Despite his other options.

He had eventually found the answer, though.

“Because it’s who I am now,” he replied.

His blade flashed down toward Alaris’s right arm; there was a blur and then the clash of steel as Alaris slid aside and parried, the sound echoing through the silence of Alkathronen. Caeden swayed smoothly back as the counter came, swift and clinical, slicing the air where his shoulder had been a moment earlier.

Caeden pressed the attack with a flurry of quick, light strikes, nerves taut as he kept his breathing steady, quickly assessing his best course of action. Alaris’s Disruption shield was already in place, just as Caeden’s was, preventing kan attacks almost entirely. Each man had stepped outside of time, too; the snow that had been drifting gently downward was now frozen in place, suspended between them, glittering ethereally as each flake refracted the Essence-light of the city.

He broke off, exhaling hard, his frozen breath drifting outward and then gathering in place as it left his time bubble. This was an even match where kan and Essence were concerned, bringing it once again down to a physical contest.

A contest in which Alaris was invincible.

Alaris didn’t give him long to think; the muscular man was suddenly pressing forward, the wicked edge of his blade flashing in a mesmerizing, fluid dance of motion as it blurred at Caeden again and again and again, each strike whispering past skin or