



The Liar's Key (The Red Queen's War Book 2)

By Mark Lawrence

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From the international bestselling author of the Broken Empire trilogy comes the second book of the Red Queen's War...

After harrowing adventure and near death, Prince Jalan Kendeth and the Viking Snorri ver Snagason find themselves in possession of Loki's key, an artefact capable of opening any door and sought by the most dangerous beings in the Broken Empire—including the Dead King.

Jal wants only to return home to his wine, women, and song, but Snorri has his own purpose for the key: to find the very door into death, throw it wide, and bring his family back into the land of the living.

And as Snorri prepares for his quest to find death's door, Jal's grandmother, the Red Queen, continues to manipulate kings and pawns toward an endgame of her own design...

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The Liar's Key (The Red Queen's War Book 2) By Mark Lawrence Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #19300 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-06-02
- Released on: 2015-06-02
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Mark Lawrence and *The Red Queen's War*

“Mark Lawrence is the best thing to happen to fantasy in recent years.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Peter V. Brett

“Lawrence’s epic fantasy is a great summer read, full of humor, revenge, and perils that this warrior-and-coward duo must evade in order [to] save their kingdoms and themselves.”—*The Washington Post*

“Exciting action and quick-witted dialog make it a fantastic summer page-turner.”—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Jalan Kendeth is a fine addition to this Loki-like roster of tricksters, knaves, and cowards: heroes and antiheroes we love to hate and hate to love...Mark Lawrence’s growing army of fans will relish this rollicking new adventure and look forward to the next one.”—*The Daily Mail*

“As richly told as the earlier trilogy: The author makes this place, a post-cataclysm earth of the far future, feel as real as any place you’ve ever visited. For fans of the Broken Empire series and readers who enjoy a good, epic-sized fantasy story (readers of, say, George R. R. Martin), this is a must-read.”—*Booklist*

“Shrewd Jalan and honorable Snorri make a marvelous team, lightening a very dark story with wry humor. The brisk adventure and black magic will leave readers eager for the next chapter in the series.”—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Mark Lawrence is a research scientist working on artificial intelligence. He is a dual national with both British and American citizenship, and has held secret-level clearance with both governments. At one point, he was qualified to say, “This isn’t rocket science—oh wait, it actually is.” He is the author of the Broken Empire trilogy (*Prince of Thorns*, *King of Thorns*, and *Emperor of Thorns*), the Red Queen’s War trilogy (*Prince of Fools*, *The Liar’s Key*, and *The Wheel of Osheim*) and the Book of the Ancestor series (*Red Sister*).

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PROLOGUE

Two men in a room of many doors. One tall in his robes, stern, marked with cruelty and intelligence, the other shorter, very lean, his hair a shock of surprise, his garb a changing motley confusing the eye.

The short man laughs, a many-angled sound as likely to kill birds in flight as to bring blossom to the bough.

“I have summoned you!” The tall man, teeth gritted as if still straining to hold the other in place, though his

hands are at his side.

“A fine trick, Kelem.”

“You know me?”

“I know everyone.” A sharp grin. “You’re the door-mage.”

“And you are?”

“Ikol.” His clothes change, tattered yellow checks on blue where before it was scarlet fleur de lis on grey.

“Olik.” He smiles a smile that dazzles and cuts. “Loki, if you likey.”

“Are you a god, Loki?” No humour in Kelem, only command. Command and a great and terrible concentration in stone-grey eyes.

“No.” Loki spins, regarding the doors. “But I’ve been known to lie.”

“I called on the most powerful—”

“You don’t always get what you want.” Almost sing-song. “But sometimes you get what you need. You got me.”

“You are a god?”

“Gods are dull. I’ve stood before the throne. Wodin sits there, old one-eye, with his ravens whispering into each ear.” Loki smiles. “Always the ravens. Funny how that goes.”

“I need—”

“Men don’t know what they need. They barely know what they want. Wodin, father of storms, god of gods, stern and wise. But mostly stern. You’d like him. And watching—always watching—oh the things that he has seen!” Loki spins to take in the room. “Me, I’m just a jester in the hall where the world was made. I caper, I joke, I cut a jig. I’m of little importance. Imagine though . . . if it were *I* that pulled the strings and made the gods dance. What if at the core, if you dug deep enough, uncovered every truth . . . what if at the heart of it all . . . there was a lie, like a worm at the centre of the apple, coiled like Oroborus, just as the secret of men hides coiled at the centre of each piece of you, no matter how fine you slice? Wouldn’t that be a fine joke now?”

Kelem frowns at this nonsense, then with a quick shake of his head returns to his purpose. “I made this place. From my failures.” He gestures at the doors. Thirteen, lined side by side on each wall of an otherwise bare room. “These are doors I can’t open. You can leave here, but no door will open until every door is unlocked. I made it so.” A single candle lights the chamber, dancing as the occupants move, their shadows leaping to its tune.

“Why would I want to leave?” A goblet appears in Loki’s hand, silver and overflowing with wine as dark and red as blood. He takes a sip.

“I command you by the twelve arch-angels of—”

“Yes, yes.” Loki waves away the conjuring. The wine darkens until it’s a black that draws the eye and blinds it. So black that the silver tarnishes and corrupts. So black it is nothing but the absence of light. And

suddenly it's a key. A black glass key.

"Is that . . . ?" There's a hunger in the door-mage's voice. "Will it open them?"

"I should hope so." Loki spins the key around his fingers.

"What key is that? Not Acheron's? Taken from heaven when—"

"It's mine. I made it. Just now."

"How do you know it will open them?" Kelem's gaze sweeps the room.

"It's a good key." Loki meets the mage's eyes. "It's every key. Every key that was and is, every key that will be, every key that could be."

"Give it to—"

"Where's the fun in that?" Loki walks to the nearest door and sets his fingers to it. "This one." Each door is plain and wooden but when he touches it this door becomes a sheet of black glass, unblemished and gleaming. "This is the tricky one." Loki sets his palm to the door and a wheel appears. An eight-spoked wheel of the same black glass, standing proud of the surface, as if by turning it one might unlock and open the door. Loki doesn't touch it. Instead he taps his key to the wall beside it and the whole room changes. Now it is a high vault, clean lines, walls of poured stone, a huge and circular silver-steel door in the ceiling. The light comes from panels set into the walls. A corridor leads off, stretching further than the eye can see. Thirteen silver-steel arches stand around the margins of the vault, each a foot from the wall, each filled with a shimmering light, as if moonbeams dance across water. Save for the one before Loki, which is black, a crystal surface fracturing the light then swallowing it. "Open this door and the world ends."

Loki moves on, touching each door in turn. "Your death lies behind one of these other doors, Kelem."

The mage stiffens then sneers. "God of tricks they—"

"Don't worry." Loki grins. "You'll never manage to open that one."

"Give me the key." Kelem extends his hand but makes no move toward his guest.

"What about that door?" Loki looks up at the circle of silver-steel. "You tried to hide that one from me."

Kelem says nothing.

"How many generations have your people lived down here in these caves, hiding from the world?"

"These are not caves!" Kelem bristles. He pulls back his hand. "The world is poisoned. The Day of a Thousand Suns—"

"—was two hundred years ago." Loki waves his key carelessly at the ceiling. The vast door groans, then swings in on its hinges, showering earth and dust upon them. It is as thick as a man is tall.

"No!" Kelem falls to his knees, arms above his head. The dust settles on him, making an old man of him. The floor is covered with soil, with green things growing, worms crawl, bugs scurry, and high above them, through a long vertical shaft, a circle of blue sky burns.

“There, I’ve opened the most important door for you. Go out, claim what you can before it all goes. There are others repopulating from the east.” Loki looks around as if seeking an exit of his own. “No need to thank me.”

Kelem lifts his head, rubbing the dirt from his eyes, leaving them red and watering. “Give me the key.” His voice a croak.

“You’ll have to look for it.”

“I command you to . . .” But the key is gone, Loki is gone. Only Kelem remains. Kelem and his failures.

ONE

Petals rained down amid cheers of adoration. Astride my glorious charger at the head of Red March’s finest cavalry unit, I led the way along the Street of Victory toward the Red Queen’s palace. Beautiful women strained to escape the crowd and throw themselves at me. Men roared their approval. I waved—

Bang. Bang. Bang.

My dream tried to shape the hammering into something that would fit the story it was telling. I’ve a good imagination and for a moment everything held together. I waved to the highborn ladies adorning each balcony. A manly smirk for my sour-faced brothers sulking at the back of—

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The tall houses of Vermillion began to crumble, the crowd started to thin, faces blurred.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

“Ah hell.” I opened my eyes and rolled from the furs’ warmth into the freezing gloom. “Spring they call this!” I struggled shivering into a pair of treads and hurried down the stairs.

The tavern room lay strewn with empty tankards, full drunks, toppled benches, and upended tables. A typical morning at the Three Axes. Maeres sniffed around a scatter of bones by the hearth, wagging his tail as I staggered in.

BANG! BANG—

“All right! All right! I’m coming.” Someone had split my skull open with a rock during the night. Either that or I had a hell of a hangover. Damned if I knew why a prince of Red March had to answer his own front door, but I’d do anything to stop that pounding tearing through my poor head.

I picked a path through the detritus, stepping over Erik Three-Teeth’s ale-filled belly to reach the door just as it reverberated from yet another blow.

“God damn it! I’m here!” I shouted as quietly as I could, teeth gritted against the pain behind my eyes. Fingers fumbled with the lock bar and I pulled it free. “What?” And I hauled the door back. “What?”

I suppose with a more sober and less sleep-addled mind I might have judged it better to stay in bed. Certainly that thought occurred to me as the fist caught me square in the face. I stumbled back, bleating, tripped over Erik, and found myself on my arse staring up at Astrid, framed in the doorway by a morning considerably brighter than anything I wanted to look at.

“You bastard!” She stood hands on hips now. The brittle light fractured around her, sending splinters into my eyes but making a wonder of her golden hair and declaring in no uncertain terms the hour-glass figure that had set me leering at her on my first day in Trond.

“W-what?” I shifted my legs off Erik’s bulging stomach, and shuffled backward on my behind. My hand came away bloody from my nose. “Angel, sweetheart—”

“You bastard!” She stepped after me, hugging herself now, the cold following her in.

“Well—” I couldn’t argue against “bastard,” except technically. I put my hand in a puddle of something decidedly unpleasant and got up quickly, wiping my palm on Maeres, who’d come over to investigate, tail still wagging despite the violence offered to his master.

“Hedwig ver Sorren?” Astrid had murder in her eyes.

I kept backing away. I might have half a foot over her in height but she was still a tall woman with a powerful right arm. “Oh, you don’t want to believe street talk, my sweets.” I swung a stool between us. “It’s only natural that Jarl Sorren would invite a prince of Red March to his halls once he knew I was in town. Hedwig and I—”

“Hedwig and you what?” She took hold of the stool as well.

“Uh, we— Nothing really.” I tightened my grip on the stool legs. If I let go I’d be handing her a weapon. Even in my jeopardy visions of Hedwig invaded my mind, brunette, very pretty, wicked eyes, and all a man could want packed onto a short but inviting body. “We were barely introduced.”

“It must have been a pretty *bare* introduction if it has Jarl Sorren calling out his housecarls to bring you in for justice!”

“Oh shit.” I let go of the stool. Justice in the north tends to mean having your ribs broken out of your chest.

“What’s all the noise?” A sleepy voice from behind me.

I turned to see Edda, barefoot on the stairs, our bed furs wrapped around her middle, slim legs beneath, and milk pale shoulders above, her white-blond hair flowing across them.

Turning away was my mistake. Never take your eye off a potential foe. Especially after handing them a weapon.

• • •

“Easy!” A hand on my chest pushed me back down onto a floor that felt thick with grime.

“What the—” I opened my eyes to find a “someone” looming over me, a big someone. “Ouch!” A big someone poking clumsy fingers at a very painful spot over my cheekbone.

“Just removing the splinters.” A big fat someone.

“Get off me, Tuttugu!” I struggled to get up again, managing to sit this time. “What happened?”

“You got hit with a stool.”

I groaned a bit. “I don’t remember a stool, I— OUCH! What the hell?” Tuttugu seemed set on pinching and jabbing at the sorest part of my face.

“You might not remember the stool but I’m pulling pieces of it out of your cheek—so keep still. We don’t want to spoil those good looks, now do we?”

I did my best to hold still at that. It was true, good looks and a title were most of what I had going for me and I wasn’t keen to lose either. To take my mind off the pain I tried to remember how I had managed to get beaten with my own furniture. I drew a blank. Some vague recollection of high-pitched screaming and shouting . . . a memory of being kicked whilst on the floor . . . a glimpse through slitted eyes of two women leaving arm in arm, one petite, pale, young, the other tall, golden, maybe thirty. Neither looked back.

“Right! Up you get. That’s the best I can do for now.” Tuttugu hauled on my arm to get me on my feet.

I stood swaying, nauseous, hung over, perhaps still a little drunk, and—though I found it hard to credit—slightly horny.

“Come on. We have to go.” Tuttugu started to drag me toward the brightness of the doorway. I tried digging in my heels but to no avail.

“Where?” Springtime in Trond had turned out to be more bitter than a Red March midwinter and I’d no interest in exposing myself to it.

“The docks!” Tuttugu seemed worried. “We might just make it!”

“Why? Make what?” I didn’t remember much of the morning but I hadn’t forgotten that “worried” was Tuttugu’s natural state. I shook him off. “Bed. That’s where I’m going.”

“Well if that’s where you want Jarl Sorren’s men to find you . . .”

“Why should I give a fig for Jarl Sorr—oh.” I remembered Hedwig. I remembered her on the furs in the jarlshouse when everyone else was still at her sister’s wedding feast. I remembered her on my cloak during an ill-advised outdoors tryst. She kept my front warm but damn my arse froze. I remembered her upstairs at the tavern that one time she slipped her minders . . . I was surprised we didn’t shake all three axes down from above the entrance that afternoon. “Give me a moment . . . two moments!” I held up a hand to stay Tuttugu and charged upstairs.

Once back in my chamber a single moment proved ample. I stamped on the loose floorboard, scooped up my valuables, snatched an armful of clothing, and was heading back down the stairs before Tuttugu had the time to scratch his chins.

“Why the docks?” I panted. The hills would be a quicker escape—and then a boat from Hjørll on Aöefl’s Fjord just up the coast. “The docks are the first place they’ll look after here!” I’d be stood there still trying to negotiate a passage to Maladon or the Thurtans when the jarl’s men found me.

Tuttugu stepped around Floki Wronghelm, sprawled and snoring beside the bar. “Snorri’s down there, preparing to sail.” He bent down behind the bar, grunting.

“Snorri? Sailing?” It seemed that the stool had dislodged more than the morning’s memories. “Why? Where’s he going?”

Tuttugu straightened up holding my sword, dusty and neglected from its time hidden on the bar shelf. I didn’t reach for it. I’m fine with wearing a sword in places where nobody is going to see it as an invitation—Trond was never such a place.

“Take it!” Tuttugu angled the hilt toward me.

I ignored it, wrestling myself into my clothes, the coarse weave of the north, itchy but warm. “Since when did Snorri have a boat?” He’d sold the *Ikea* to finance the expedition to the Black Fort—that much I did remember.

“I should get Astrid back here to see if another beating with a stool might knock some sense into you!” Tuttugu tossed the sword down beside me as I sat to haul my boots on.

“*Astrid?* . . . Astrid!” A moment returned to me with crystal clarity—Edda coming down the stairs half-naked, Astrid watching. It had been a while since a morning went so spectacularly wrong for me. I’d never intended the two of them to collide in such circumstances but Astrid hadn’t struck me as the jealous sort. In fact I hadn’t been entirely sure I was the only younger man keeping her bed warm whilst her husband roamed the seas a-trading. We mostly met at her place up on the Arlls Slope, so stealth with Edda hadn’t been a priority. “How did Astrid even know about Hedwig?” More importantly, how did she reach me before Jarl Sorren’s housecarls, and how much time did I have?

Tuttugu ran a hand down his face, red and sweating despite the spring chill. “Hedwig managed to send a messenger while her father was still raging and gathering his men. The boy galloped from Sorrenfast and started asking where to find the foreign prince. People directed him to Astrid’s house. I got all this from Olaaf Fish-hand after I saw Astrid storming down the Carls Way. So . . .” He drew a deep breath. “Can we go now, because—”

But I was up and past him, out into the unwholesome freshness of the day, splattering through half-frozen mud, aimed down the street for the docks, the mast tops just visible above the houses. Gulls circled on high, watching my progress with mocking cries.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Desiree Thorne:

Have you spare time for a day? What do you do when you have considerably more or little spare time? Yeah, you can choose the suitable activity regarding spend your time. Any person spent all their spare time to take a move, shopping, or went to typically the Mall. How about open as well as read a book called *The Liar's Key* (*The Red Queen's War Book 2*)? Maybe it is for being best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time together with your favorite's book, you can smarter than before. Do you agree with their opinion or you have some other opinion?

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Robin Harvey:

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