



Orb Sceptre Throne: A Novel of the Malazan Empire (Novels of the Malazan Empire)

By Ian C. Esslemont



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The epic new chapter in the history of Malaz?the new epic fantasy from Steven Erikson's friend and co-creator of this extraordinary and exciting imagined world.

Darujhistan, city of dreams, city of blue flames, is peaceful at last; its citizens free to return to politicking, bickering, trading and, above all, enjoying the good things in life. Yet there are those who will not allow the past to remain buried. A scholar digging in the plains stumbles across an ancient sealed vault. The merchant Humble Measure schemes to drive out the remaining Malazan invaders. And the surviving agents of a long-lost power are stirring, for they sense change and so, opportunity. While, as ever at the centre of everything, a thief in a red waistcoat and of rotund proportions walks the streets, juggling in one hand custard pastries, and in the other the fate of the city itself.

Far to the south, fragments of the titanic Moon's Spawn have crashed into the Rivan Sea creating a series of isles...and a fortune hunter's dream. A Malazan veteran calling himself 'Red' ventures out to try his luck?and perhaps say goodbye to old friends. But there he finds far more than he'd bargained for as the rush to claim the Spawn's treasures descends into a mad scramble of chaos and bloodshed. For powers from across the world have gathered here, searching for the legendary Throne of Night. The impact of these events are far reaching, it seems. On an unremarkable island off the coast of Genabackis, a people who had turned their backs upon all such strivings now lift their masked faces towards the mainland and recall the ancient prophecy of a return.

And what about the ex-Claw of the Malazan Empire who now walks the uttermost edge of creation? His mission?the success or failure of which the Queen of Dreams saw long ago?is destined to shape far more than anyone could have ever imagined.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Esslemont ... spins a tale of adventure and history that is both weighty and electrifying, both breakneck and intricate.... A worthy and satisfying installment." *Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

IAN CAMERON ESSLEMONT grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has studied archaeology and creative writing, has traveled extensively in South East Asia, and lived in Thailand and Japan for several years. He now lives in Alaska with his wife and children and is currently working on another novel set in the world of Malaz, a world he co-created with Steven Erikson.

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Orb Sceptre Throne

BOOK I

Orb

CHAPTER I

The problem with paths is that once you have chosen one, You cannot choose the others.

Attributed to *Gothos' Folly*

ON THE SOUTH COAST OF GENABACKIS THE FORMER FISHING village of Hurly was a mess.

Nearly two years before, its original inhabitants had drowned without warning in tidal waves that inundated it when the last fragments of the titanic floating mountain named Moon's Spawn crashed into the Rivan Sea. Then, when the flood waters receded, a motley army of treasure-hunters, scavengers and looters had descended upon its corpse like a swarm of flies, and soon after that came an even worse plague: the thieves, conmen and other swindlers who preyed upon them.

Representatives of the Southern Confederation of Free Cities were the first to arrive at the scene of devastation. Wreckers and pirates from way back, they salvaged everything they could, namely the surviving boats of the region, and established a concession out to the newly born isles. A few months later transport fees and tariffs were settled upon and four separate armed challenges to their monopoly had been successfully put down.

Now, after more than a year of trade, the Southern Confederation had firmly established itself as the sole representative of the islands, which they named, with characteristic directness, the Spawns.

Jallin, nicknamed the Jumper for his habit of ambushing from the rear, had to admit that the good times in Hurly were officially over. He and all the other hustlers and scavengers could feel the pinch of lean times. The one-time flood of fortune-hunters had thinned to a trickle of ragged men and women no better off than those who'd already clawed out a spot in the festering town.

Jallin the Jumper knew this well. He'd seen the cycle play itself out in town after town up north, where the Malazan wars had fuelled the rabid, cannibalistic economies of scarcity and demand. He sensed that here the frenzy of fortunes won overnight and even more quickly lost would never reach the pitch it had seasons ago. And it was ending before he'd made his big strike. Just as it had at Pale, Kurl and Callows. Only this time he wouldn't let that happen. Couldn't. Because Hurly was the end of the road. As far south as all these losers and dregs could slide. Everyone's last chance.

So he paid close attention when yet another new arrival came tramping down the town's muddy main track. The newcomer was a wiry ragged veteran, a foreigner by his ruddy hair and ginger moustache - a Malazan. He wore army-standard sandals and cloak, and carried battered leather panniers over one shoulder. That the man was a veteran didn't worry Jallin; almost all the loser fortune-hunters who came down that road had once marched in any number of armies up north - and usually deserted from every damned one. To him they were pathetic in their willingness to get maimed or killed for the promise of a handful of coin or a scratch of land.

This one appeared to have fared even worse than most. A single shortsword hung at his side, but other than that all he carried was the panniers slung over a shoulder and kept tightly gripped in one scarred and sun-browned hand. Those wide bags interested Jallin. What, he wondered, would an old soldier, cashiered or deserted, think vital enough to drag with him all the way down here to the Spawns?

The veteran stopped where so many of the other hopeful Spawn-looters had halted: where the cart-track ended at the strand of slate-black gravel that sloped down to the Rivan Sea. Here, the observant among them usually noticed two important things: that the Spawn Isles were those distant faint dots far out to sea, and that there wasn't a single boat in sight.

These discoveries often left even the hardest and most resilient feeling lost, and so here was where Jallin preferred to approach his targets. As he came alongside, the fellow was still squinting out to sea, and so he murmured: 'There they are, hey? Pay-dirt.'

The old guy grunted something, eyed the wreckage-strewn gravel beach. 'I'm lookin' for a boat.'

Jallin smiled. 'Isn't everyone here, friend? And it just so happens I know a man who might have room for one more on his.'

That got a look. He could tell from the man's blunt gaze that he'd seen a lot. Most veterans had an odd hard stare that Jallin couldn't quite understand - himself not having ever been stupid enough to set foot on a battlefield. It could make a man think twice about giving them trouble. But despite this he'd gone ahead and robbed, cheated, rolled, and even murdered some. All from behind, or from a position of trust, of course. Which was why he considered their toughness and fighting skills irrelevant. After all, peacetime was a very different sort of war.

'How much?' the fellow asked. He relaxed his grip to shade his eyes against the western sun. Whatever was in those bags, it looked heavy. Jallin wet his lips then gave his friendliest chuckle.

'How much? Oh, it'll cost. I won't insult you by pretending I can get you some kinda special deal or some such shit. It'll cost. *That* we got to negotiate, right?'

Another neutral grunt. Jallin pointed back up the track to where it cut between slapped-up inns, stores and taprooms. 'The Island Inn maybe, hey? What d'you say? You look like you could use a drink.'

The fellow turned, squinted up the track, even chewed at an edge of his moustache. After one last lingering stare out to sea, his tensed shoulders fell and he sighed. 'Yeah. Could use a drink.'

Jallin showed the way. He kept up a constant distracting chatter about all the adventurers he knew who'd struck it rich out at the Spawns - which in truth was no one. None who had ever returned, that is. All the while he was thinking: we'll settle a price for tonight, not too low, not too high. Nothing to arouse suspicion. Then down at the beach he'd introduce him to his 'friend'. All the razor-sharp pointed length of it. His misericorde - the weapon he used to put old soldiers where they belonged: out of their misery.

The Island Inn was unique among Hurly's new buildings in that it possessed stone walls. It occupied all that remained of a temple to Poliel, goddess of disease, pestilence and plague. It seemed the old population of Hurly had been particularly anxious to appease her. Perhaps it had to do with all the neighbouring marshes. The new owner of the structure, Akien Threw, liked to joke that they would've been far better off appeasing the cult of Elder Dark, of which the Moon's Spawn had been a holy artefact.

As Jallin entered, guiding the old soldier to a table in the rear, he caught Akien's eye. All the town's touts and hustlers had an understanding with the man: a meal and a floor to flop on in exchange for heading clients his way. Plus a percentage of any take, of course.

Two tall tankards of beer arrived almost the instant they rested their arms on the tabletop of silvery-grey driftwood slats. The veteran's eyes narrowed and his mouth turned down. 'What's this?'

In the relative darkness of the inn Jallin was struck by the scars that lined the fellow's face and how his mangy ginger hair, grey in places, grew patchily one side as if over burns. But he'd seen old soldiers before and almost all carried scars. They all parted with what little coin they'd gathered over the years as easily as anyone, and more swiftly than most. 'So what's your name then, friend?'

After a time the man growled, 'Red. Red Dog.'

Jallin raised a brow at that but said nothing: he didn't give a damn what the fellow's name was. 'Well, Red, this is Elingarth ale. The good stuff.' He touched a finger to the side of his nose. 'The owner's a friend of mine.'

'I'll bet he is,' the soldier muttered darkly. But he lifted the tankard and took a long pull. Jallin noted the nest of white scar ridges up and down the man's forearm. He decided he'd be a touch worried if the fellow wasn't obviously so far past his prime. He also noted how the fellow kept a tight grip on the panniers on his lap. The veteran wiped his mouth and grimaced his distaste. 'I doubt that's from Elingarth.'

Jallin gave an easy shrug. 'I wouldn't know. Another?'

'Abyss, no.'

'Sure. It's early yet.'

In keeping with the diminishing flow of treasure-hunters, the inn's common room was deserted. A pair of guards, no more than old-hand hustlers like Jallin, sat by the door. Two men sat hunched almost head to head at a table nearby, both staring sullenly out into the day's last slanting yellow rays. One elegantly dressed young man, a scion of some aristocratic family or other, commanded another table. He was with three others, all of whom Jallin knew as local thugs and would-be guides, like himself.

The young man leaned back suddenly and announced: 'Then there's no sense heading out. It's too late by far. The place has been picked clean by now.'

The old soldier, Red, turned to watch him.

One of the local guides said something to which the nobleman answered, dismissively, 'Well, who's come back recently? Has anyone?'

Another of the companions offered, 'If I found anything out there I sure as death wouldn't come back *here*.'

They all had a good laugh at that, except the noble youth.

Jallin leaned forward, murmured, 'That's all just sour talk. He's afraid to head out.'

'So,' the veteran drawled, 'where are all the ships?'

Two more tankards arrived care of a shuffling serving boy. 'Anchored off shore. Launches put in at dawn and you buy your berth. But,' he added, lowering his voice, 'it's possible to slip out past them at night. For a fee.'

The soldier nodded his understanding. 'At dawn, when the boats put in. Why doesn't everyone just rush 'em?'

'Southern Free Citi...

Users Review

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