

ASSAIL

A NOVEL OF THE MALAZAN EMPIRE

IAN C. ESSLEMONT



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Tor Books by Ian C. Esslemont

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Copyright

This one is for the old gaming gang at the University of Manitoba: Doug and Doug, Jeff, Oliver, Grant, Ron, Martin, Henry, Craig, Laurence, Neil, Shurjeel and Arne.

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I give my love to my wife, Gerri Brightwell, without whose support and understanding this novel and those preceding it, would never have been possible.

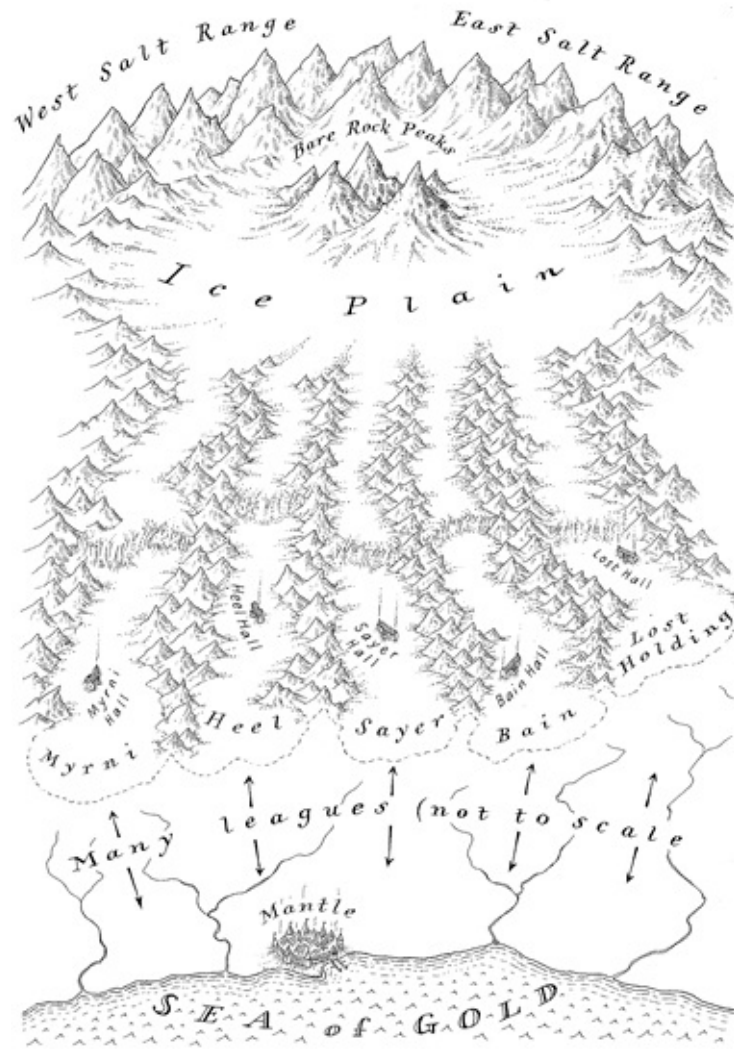
And to you Malaz readers. It has been a privilege to unveil these stories. I hope you have enjoyed them as much as I.

ASSAIL & environs

As compiled from diverse sources
by Reuth, son of Tulan



THE BLOOD RANGE



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The *Lady's Luck*

Kyle	Given name, Kylarral-ten, of Bael lands, south of Assail
Tulan Orbed	Master of the <i>Lady's Luck</i>
Reuth	Ship's navigator, and Tulan's nephew
Storval	First Mate
Gren	Steersman

In the North

Orman	Son of Orman Bregin
Old Bear	A legendary man of the mountains
Keth and Kasson	The Reddin brothers
Gerrun	Also known as Shortshanks
King Ronal	Also known as 'King Ronal the Bastard'
Lotji Bain	Nephew of Jorgan Bain

Of the Iceblood Holdings

The Sayers

Buri	Legendary elder of the clan
Jaochim	Master of the clan
Yrain	Mistress of the clan
Vala	Sister to Yrain
Jass	Son of Vala
Bernal Heavyhand	A clan retainer, or hearthguard

The Heels

Cull Heel	Also known as Cull the Kind
Yullveig	Wife of Cull, also known as Yullveig the Fierce
Erta	Daughter of Cull and Yullveig
Baran	Son of Cull and Yullveig

The Overland Raiders

Marshal Teal	A Letherii aristocrat
Enguf the Broad	A Genabackan pirate
Malle of Gris	A Malazan aristocrat
Holden of Cawn	A mage of Serc
Alca of Cat	A mage of Telas

The Sea Raiders

The *Sea Strike*

Burl Tardin Captain
Whellen First Mate
Gaff Second Mate

The *Silver Dawn*

Jute Hernan Captain
Ieleen Navigator, wife of Jute
Lurjen Steersman
Buen First Mate
Letita Master of weapons
Dulat A sailor

The *Resolute*

Tyvar Gendarian Commander of the Blue Shields and Mortal Sword of Togg
Haagen Vantall Steward of the Blue Shields

The *Ragstopper*

Cartheron Crust Captain
Orothos First Mate

The *Supplicant*

Timmel Orosenn Also known as the Primogenitrix, ruler of the island of Umryg
Velmar Priest and servant to Lady Orosenn

The T'lan Imass

The Kerluhm

Ut'el Anag Bonecaster
Lanas Tog

The Ifayle

Tolb Bell'al Bonecaster

The Kron

Pran Chole Bonecaster

The Crimson Guard

K'azz D'Avore Commander
Shimmer Second-in-command
Blues New captain of the Second Company

Tarkhan	Captain of the Third Company
Bars	Also known as 'Iron Bars', formerly of the Fourth Company
Cowl	High Mage and Master Assassin
Gwynn	A mage
Petal	A mage
Black the Elder	
Black the Lesser	
Sept	
Cole	
Amatt	
Lean	
Keel	
Turgal	

The Crimson Guard Fourth Company

Cal-Brinn	Captain and mage
Jup Alat	Lieutenant
Laurel	
Leena	

Of Mael's Greetings

Ghelath Keer	Master
Havvin	Ship's pilot
Levin	Apprentice pilot

Others

Silverfox	The 'Summoner' created to end the T'lan Imass war
Luthal Canar	Representative of the Canar trading house, of Lether
Lyan	A female warrior from north Genabackis, a Shieldmaiden
Dorrin	King in exile of Anklos, Lyan's ward
Fisher Kel Tath	A well-travelled bard
Jethiss	A Tiste Andii castaway
Kilava	Ancient living Bonecaster of the Imass
Mist	A sorceress
Anger and Wrath	Mist's sons
The Sharrs	A mage family
The Sheers	A mage family
Giana Jalaz	A former lieutenant in the Malazan army

PROLOGUE

North territory of a new land

Of the Jaghut wars:

Seventh century of the 12th Lamatath campaign

33,421 years before Burn's Sleep

The woman ran at a steady unhurried pace. Her breath came as long level inhalations through the mouth and out through her wide nostrils. Sweat darkened the front and back of her buckskin shirt. Her moccasins padded silently over stones and pockets of exposed sandy soil. That she was running up a wide rocky mountain slope, and had been for most of the day, attested to iron strength and endurance. She dodged round slim poles of young pine, white spruce and birch. She jumped rocks and slid and scrambled up steep gravel talus fans. She knew she could outpace her pursuers, but that she would never shake them from her trail. Yet still she ran on.

She knew that once they tired of the chase, they would take her. She judged it ironic that the same desperate urge to continued existence that drove her also lay behind their relentless pursuit – though they had relinquished their claim to it long ago.

Still she scrambled on up the slope, for one hope remained. One slim unlikely chance. Not for her survival; she had given that up the moment she glimpsed the hoary eldritch silhouettes of her pursuers. The one slim chance lay for vengeance.

Knife-edged broken rock cut her fingers as she scabbled for handholds. It flayed her moccasins. The surrounding steep slopes of tumbled stone and talus heaps were just now emerging from winter. Ice clung to shadowed hollows and behind the taller boulders. Snow still lay in curved dirty heaps almost indistinguishable from the surrounding gravel. She took vigour from the chill bite of the high mountain air, knowing it perfectly natural rather than any invoked glacial freeze. Taking cover in a stand of pine, she paused to risk a glance behind: no movement stirred upon the slope below, other than a smallish herd of elk just now clattering their way down-valley. No doubt disturbed by her passage.

Yet she knew she was not alone. She also knew her pursuers needed not to show themselves to run her down. She'd hoped, though, they would at least grant her this one small gesture.

A lone figure did then step out from the cover of tumbled glacial moraine. It was as if she'd willed its appearance. The tattered remains of leathers flapped about its impossibly lean frame. A dark ravaged visage scanned the slope, rising to her. The white bear hide that rode atop the head and shoulders hung as aged and wind-dried as its wearer. She and he locked gazes across the league that separated them – and across a far larger unbridgeable gulf as well.

So far behind? she wondered. Then she understood and in that instant threw herself flat.

Something shattered against the rocks next to her. Flint shards thinner than any blade sliced her buckskins and flensed the skin beneath.

She jumped to her feet and returned to scrambling up the slope. She reached a ridge that was mere shoulder of the far taller slope: a jagged peak that reared far above. Here she paused a second time, exhausted, her lungs working, drawing in the icy air.

Then she screamed as a spear lanced through her thigh, pinning her to the bare stony surface. She fell back against a rock and took hold of the polished dark haft to draw it. A skeletal hand knocked hers aside.

The same fleshless visage that had caught her gaze below now peered down at her. Empty dark sockets regarded her beneath the rotting brow of a white tundra bear. Necklaces of yellowed claws hung about the figure's neck – presumably the claws of the very beast it wore – while the scraped hide of the beast's forelimbs rode its arms down to the paws tied with leather bindings to its own hands. Ribs darkened with age peeked through the mummified flesh of its torso. Rags of leather buckskin lay beneath the hide, all belted and tied off by numerous leather thongs. A long blade of knapped flint, creamy brown, its tang wrapped in leather, stood thrust through a belt. 'Why flee you here, Jaghut?' the Imass demanded.

'I flee destruction,' she answered, her voice tight with suppressed pain.

Others of the Imass warband now walked the ridge. The bones of their feet clattered on the rock like so many stones. 'Caves above, Ut'el,' one of their number announced, pointing a flint blade higher up.

The Imass, Ut'el, returned its attention to her. 'You would seek to lure us to ambush,' it announced.

'If you say so.'

'I am disappointed. You have brought death to your kin as well.' It faced one of the band. 'Take the scouts. They are occupied?'

This Imass dipped its hoary skull where the flesh and hair had fallen away in patches. 'Yes, Bonecaster.'

Bonecaster! the woman marvelled. A mage, shaman, of the breed! If she should bring this one to destruction then all would have been worth the struggle.

The Bonecaster returned its attention to her. She sensed its mood of disappointment. 'I had thought you a more worthy prize,' it murmured, displeased.

'As we had hoped for more worthy successors.'

'Victory is the only measure of that, Jaghut.'

'So the victors would soothe themselves.'

The undying creature raised its bony shoulders in an eloquent shrug. 'It is simply existence. Ours or yours.'

She allowed herself to slump back as if in utter defeat. 'You mean the elimination of all other than you. That is the flaw of your kind. You can only countenance your family or tribe to live.'

‘So it is with all others.’

‘No, it is not. You are merely unable to see this.’

‘Look about, Jaghut. Raw nature teaches us...’ Ut’el’s whisper-faint voice dwindled away as he slowly raised his bone and dried-tendon features to the higher slope.

‘How fare your scouts, Bonecaster?’ she asked, unable to keep a savage grin from her face.

‘They are gone,’ he announced. His gaze fell to her. ‘*Others* are there.’ He now shook his near-fleshless head in admiration, and, it seemed to her, even horror. ‘My apologies, Jaghut. I would never have believed any entity would dare...’ He drew his flint blade. ‘You are a desperate fool. You have doomed us all – and more.’

‘I am merely returning the favour.’

All about, the remaining Imass warriors flinched as if stung, drawing their blades of razor-thin flint. ‘Purchase us what moments you can,’ he told them flatly. His tannin-brown visage remained fixed upon her.

The warriors dipped their heads. ‘Farewell,’ one answered, and they disappeared into snatches of dust.

Above, figures now came pouring from the cave mouths: stone-grey shapes that ran on odd-jointed legs, or all four limbs at a time.

‘I am tempted to leave you to them,’ Ut’el said. ‘But we Imass are not a cruel people.’

‘So you would absolve yourselves over the centuries, yes?’ She took hold of the spear haft. ‘That is fortunate. Because we Jaghut are not a judgemental people.’ And she heaved herself backwards in one motion, yanking the spearhead from the ground to tumble off the ledge, spear in hand.

He swung, but the blade cut just short of her as she slipped from the narrow ridge. Her buckskin snapped in the wind. ‘I leave you to...’ she yelled as she plummeted from sight down the sheer thousand-foot drop.

... *your doom*, Ut’el Anag, Bonecaster to the Kerluhm T’lan Imass, finished for her. He turned to face the high slope. The grey tide of creatures had finished his band and now closed upon him.

In what he considered his last moments, he raised his flint blade to his face. He watched how the knapped facets reflected the clouds overhead, how the reflections rippled like waves on clear lake water.

No. This is not yet done. I so swear.

He stepped into the realm of Tellann as the first of the clawed hands snapped closed upon the space he once occupied.

* * *

Hel’eth Jal Im (Pogrom of the White Stag)

51st Jaghut War

6,031 years before Burn’s Sleep

Here evergreen forest descended mountain slopes to a rocky shore. Shorebirds hunted for crabs and beetles among tide-pools and stretches of black sand beaches. From their perches on tree limbs and among the taller rocks larger birds of prey watched the shorebirds and the glimmer of fingerlings in the shallows.

A morning mist hung over the bay. The air was still enough for sounds to cross from one curve of the shore to the other. The figure that arose from the seaweed-skirted boulders was not out of keeping with the scene. The tattered remains of leathers hung from its withered, mummified shoulders and hips. A nut-brown flint blade hung thrust through a crude twisted-hair belt tied about its fleshless waist. Over its head of patches of stringy hair and exposed browned skull it wore a cap cut from the cured grey hide of a beast more at home on sundrenched savanna than temperate boreal forest.

Similar figures arose, one by one, here and there about the shore. They gathered around the first arrival, and though gender was almost impossible to tell among their fleshless desiccated bodies, skin little more than paper-thin flesh over bone, this one was female and her name was Shalt Li'gar, and she was of the Ifayle T'lan Imass.

'What land is this?' one of the band, J'arl, asked. In answer, she raised her head as if taking the earth's scent through the exposed twin gaps of her nostrils. 'I know it not,' she judged. 'No account of it has been shared with me, nor with those with whom I have shared.'

'Others of us must have found it before, certainly,' another, Guth, commented.

'And what became of them...?' Shalt answered, thoughtfully, peering into the mist to the far shore of the sheltered bay.

The other ravaged faces turned as well and all were silent and still for a time. So quiet and motionless were they that an eagle flew overhead to stoop the waters, its talons slicing the surface. It rose with a fish struggling in its claws, and perched in a nearby half-dead fir to tear at its meal.

The faces of all the Imass had turned silently to follow the course of its flight.

'Favourable, or unfavourable?' J'arl asked into the continued silence.

'Are we the eagle?' answered another. 'Or the fish?'

Shalt extended a withered arm to the bay. 'Others are fishing as well,' she pronounced.

They started picking their way round the curve of the shore.

First to emerge from the mist were the prows of hide boats pulled up on the strand of black gravel that climbed steeply to the forested rocky slope. Smoke trailed through the trees. Shalt glimpsed a stout log structure high on the slope. Figures now came running down a trail. They carried spears armed with stone heads, maces of stones tied to wood handles. They wore stained and beaded leather and animal hide capes.

'Humans,' Guth observed, unimpressed. 'We should search inland.'

'Pity they choose not to talk,' Shalt judged, almost with a sigh. 'We will scout inland.'

J'arl thrust up a withered hand, all sinew and bone. 'I ask for a pause. There is something...'

Shalt regarded him. She tilted her age-gnawed head. 'A presence?'

'Something,' he repeated, wary, as if unwilling to say more.

The local people had formed a line inland. They yelled and shook their weapons. Shalt studied them: much taller than she and her stock. Prominent jaws, large teeth. Similar in features – probably the descendants of a small breeding population. Such was not so unusual among her own kind, long ago.

Her band was disappearing one by one, moving on, when one of the locals shouted something Shalt understood: ‘Be gone, demons from the outside!’

The words used made all her remaining band reflexively draw their blades. For they were in the Jaghut tongue. Shalt stepped forward. ‘Whence came you by this language?’ she asked in the same tongue.

‘It is known to us of old, demon,’ an elder answered, sneering.

Known? she repeated, wonderingly. *How can this be?*

‘And we have been warned of your kind,’ he continued. ‘Be gone! You are not welcome here.’

Shalt raised her chin, the flesh worn away from one side of her mandible, and scented again deeply. What came on the air staggered her, and were she not of the Imass she would perhaps have fainted into unconsciousness from the challenge it presented to her very core.

‘Abomination...’ J’arl breathed in an exhalation of cold air. He raised his blade.

No! Shalt cried to herself. *They are human! We mustn’t slide down this path ... it will lead us to annihilation.*

J’arl started forward and Shalt acted without thought. Her blade sliced through vertebrae at the juncture of neck and shoulder. J’arl slumped, though she knew he was not finished utterly.

Up and down the shore her band exploded into a whirling mêlée of Imass striking Imass. Flaming blades clashed and grated in a burst of clamour that sent all the nearby birds skyward in alarm. A group coalesced round Shalt, who directed them into a line defending the milling locals.

‘Flee the coast!’ she shouted to the people as she blocked a strike from Guth. ‘Flee!’

‘They will be found,’ Guth promised her as he strained. ‘If not us, then others.’

Shalt cut him down as well and wept as she fought, for he had been a companion of uncountable years.

She spared the mêlée a glance and despaired. The aggressors far outnumbered the defenders. Yet she was First of the Band for a reason and she fought even as all her allies fell about her. She was last giving ground, suffering strikes that shaved dried flesh from her limbs and cut rotted hide from her shoulders. Now her skills overcame the constraints of the attackers, who fell one by one before the two-handed blade, so thin as to be translucent, that she flicked and turned as lightly as a green branch.

A blow took her skull. It severed bone down past her right occipital ridge. Yet even as her skull shattered she dropped this last aggressor and wailed at the necessity, for it was Bruj’el, a bull of a warrior, and cousin to her mate gone these many centuries.

She turned to the people. She could sense her animating spirit fleeing its flawed vessel. Her Tellann-provided vision was darkening, withdrawing. She fell to her bony knees. She dropped her blade to brace herself with one hand and breathed out one last fading sigh to the staring, awed figures

CHAPTER I

Kyle sat in his accustomed seat in a sailors' dive in Kevil, Mare, of south Fist, and considered his dwindling stash of coins, and thus options, for escaping these damnably insular Korel lands. It was a region so notoriously hostile to foreigners that should any here find him, an obvious stranger wounded in the street, many would go out of their way to kick and spit upon him.

Especially as he wore the gear of the hated Malazans.

He'd ordered a stein of beer, which finally arrived at his table only because he'd proved himself a paying customer; something which might end soon enough. He supposed he could afford the short jaunt across Black Strait to Stygg on the mainland, and from there it was but a hop and a skip overland south across the Great Ice Wastes to Stratem, wasn't it, my lad? He had the money for that at least. Or he could always join the Mare navy. They at least were recruiting. Not that they'd take a foreigner, and certainly not a blasted ex-Malazan who'd been at the naval engagement where the much vaunted Mare galleys had been razed to the waterline by said invaders and their allies.

He sipped the beer and damned that Katakan captain he'd hired. Once Fist slipped below the horizon the man turned round! He should've put his sword to his throat and forced him to sail on east. 'Course, there was no way he could've kept the whole crew at knife point for two weeks – but at least he'd have gotten off the wretched island.

Patience, he told himself, Kylarral-ten, son of Tulo, of the People of the Wind. There will be other chances.

Abyss, maybe a foreign trader would put in and he'd be able to hire on as crew. He was wondering how long it would be before that happened, and whether he had enough coin, when someone eased himself down into the chair opposite.

'You are looking for a ship,' the fellow said, and crossed his arms. He was wearing a canvas shirt, ragged and much patched, and his trousers were similar. His face and neck were sun- and wind-darkened to the Mare sailor's usual deep polished brown. An antler-handled dirk stood up from the strip of hair rope he wore tied as a belt. His dark eyes held the common disapproval and scarce-hidden hostility Kyle usually found directed at him as the cut of his leathers, his belt, sheath and boots, labelled him as being of those recent invaders.

Kyle allowed a guarded nod. 'Unsuccessfully,' he said.

'I speak for Tulan Orbed, Master of the *Lady's Luck*. He is interested in your talk of lands east here across the Bloodmare Ocean.' The man's face and tone, however, made it plain that he was not.

'Those lands are so close the Bloodmare Ocean should be named a strait.'

The sailor leaned forward to push his stubbled chin out over their tiny round table. 'Listen, Malazan. We Marese are the greatest sailors of the age. If there was any such land so close then it would be our colony by now.'

Not if those lands are the ones I seek, my friend, Kyle silently rejoined. He also thought it polite not to mention that the combined Malazan and Moranth Blue navies, having defeated the Mare navy, might have a word to say about who were the greatest sailors of the age. In any case, he allowed himself a small shrug. 'What does Master Tulan Orbed say?'

The sailor fell back, scowling. Knife scars on his cheeks and chin twisted and paled a ghostly white as they stretched. 'He would meet you to discuss the matter. He would have you come on board.'

'When?'

'Tonight. Tomorrow. Whenever,' and he echoed Kyle's indifferent shrug.

'Then I will come this night.'

'We would require payment before we push out,' he warned, and he thrust his chin forward once again.

Kyle stood, tossed a coin to the table. 'That is for your master and me to discuss, I should think.'

He left the tavern not even glancing back. The fellow had made his disapproval obvious. There was nothing more to discuss. He headed to the wharf, or rather series of wharves. For Kevil, as he had discovered, like all Mare cities, was really nothing more than a land-based depot and servicing center for their extraordinary, apparently unsinkable, galleys.

At least, he reflected, they may not sink but the Moranth certainly proved that they do burn.

He walked the uneven cobbles of the wharf's main way. It bore ruts from centuries of foot and cart traffic. The cortex of many stones had eroded through to the creamy brown flint beneath. Through the evening gloom of clouds, smoke and mist he could just make out the looming shapes of the nearest moored vessels. All thrusting so tall and proud their sculpted galley bow-figures of waves, dolphins and, of course, the obligatory women.

Well ... maybe not quite so proud these days.

The famed galleys of Mare, when not drawn up for repairs, were each housed in their own slips flanked by piers allowing easy access to the long slim vessels. The effect of the league-long line of such berths was of a great set of teeth deployed ready to bite the waters of the bay.

Dragging steps behind announced the resentful sailor following. Kyle searched for and found a lad lounging among the piled cargo of boxes and bales. He approached; the lad made a show of ignoring him. He cleared his throat. 'I'm looking for the *Lady's Luck*.'

A lazy sullen gaze scoured Kyle up and down. The gaze slid away. 'Her mate's a knife through behind you.'

'Where's his ship?'

The lad just smiled his contempt and crossed his arms, leaning farther back.

Calm, Kyle, he reminded himself. Calm. It's worth it to get out from among these ignorant inward-looking people.

He headed on. Movement on his left and the mate appeared. He decided to give the man another chance. 'This direction, I assume.'

The mate said nothing.

So, am I right or wrong? If they reached the end of the wharf, he decided he'd throw the man off.

After a long silent walk, interminably long it seemed to him, the mate edged his head over and muttered a grudging, 'The *Lady's Luck*.'

A tiny orange glow at the raised stern deck marked a lit brazier. Kyle stepped down into the longship, edged along the narrow seating of the oarsmen up on to the central raised walkway, and climbed the seven slim steps that led to the open stern deck. The mate followed all the way.

Here Kyle found two men, one old and one young, each wrapped in furs against the chill of the passing winter, roasting titbits of meat on skewers over the brazier.

The older one, a great boar of a man with a thick black head of curly hair and beard to match, eyed him while he licked his fingers clean, one at a time. His dark face carried the scars of decades of fighting and exposure to sun and wind. The younger's face was smooth and pale; Kyle hazarded a guess that he had been to sea rarely if at all. The lad glanced from his elder, his father perhaps, to the mate, then to Kyle, and back round again.

'You are this foreigner speaking of lands to the east?' the elder rumbled.

'I am.'

'I am Tulan Orbed, Master of the *Lady's Luck*.' He waved a great paw to the lad. 'This here is my nephew, Reuth.'

'Kyle.'

'The black storm cloud behind you is Storval, First Mate.'

'We've met.'

'Ha! I intuit from your tone that you certainly have. So gloomy is he we name him Black Storval. He urged Kyle to him. 'Come, come. Set yourself at ease. We see so few foreigners here. Tell us of the world beyond Fist. You have seen these distant shores to the east?'

Kyle was rather taken aback to meet such a cosmopolitan attitude. He sat easily enough, but to one side, so as not to put his back to the ill-tempered mate. Tulan chuckled at this, and winked. The mate peering up sharply, he said, 'Another horn and more ale, Storval.'

The man scowled even more but ground out a nod. 'Aye, captain.' He thumped down the stairs.

Tulan extended a wood skewer to Kyle, who took it and jabbed a scrap of meat that he then held over the glowing brazier coals. 'I have seen them.'

The captain's gaze flicked to his nephew. 'Indeed. And does this land have a name?'

'It does. The southern lands are known to some as Bael. The northern some name...' and here he paused, wondering whether to mention the damned ill-omened name at all. But he ploughed on, thinking, wind toss it, no one from Korel would know it anyway: '... Assail.' The captain eyed his nephew once more. But the lad was watching Kyle. A faintly amused smile pulled at his mouth. The mate, who knew this already, he realized. They just wanted to see if I'd lie about that name. 'Anything else?'

'Where were you there? A port? Did you land?'

Kyle nodded while he ate his sizzling cut of meat. Storval returned, set down a third drinking horn and a fat skin. Kyle used the skewer to pick his teeth. 'A city on the east coast. Kurzan.'

Again, Tulan eyed his nephew, who nodded.

Kyle turned to the unprepossessing pale blotchy-faced lad and looked him up and down. 'You've been there?'

He blushed furiously, his face almost glowing, and shook his head.

'Reuth's a scholar,' Tulan explained. 'But a particular kind of scholar. I paid a fortune to send him to poke through dusty records in Jasston and Jourilan. Isn't that so, Reuth?'

The lad nodded vigorously.

Tulan picked up the skin and squeezed a stream of ale into the horn. He offered it to Kyle. 'His passion is cartography. Know you this line of knowledge?'

Kyle accepted the horn, nodding. 'Charts and maps.'

'Indeed. He is only happy when bent over dusty sheets.' The captain glanced to his nephew. 'Quit the secret hoard of charts they have in Jourilan, confiscated from every vessel that ever landed wrecked itself upon the coast. Isn't that so, Reuth?'

The lad leaned forward, all eagerness. 'Yes. And you, sir, your accent is not Malazan, sir. Where are you from? Is it Seven Cities?'

The captain raised a paw as if to backhand the lad. 'Not now, dammit to the Lady's grave!' Reuth flinched away. 'Apologies,' Tulan growled. 'The lad has spent too much time among scrolls and records and not enough time crewing among men – some of whom may not look kindly upon questions regarding their past.'

Kyle gave the young man a reassuring smile. 'I welcome curiosity. I find it ... refreshing.'

Tulan grunted a laugh. 'No doubt you do here along these shores!' He wiped his greasy hands on his furs. 'Now to business. How many days to cross – by your estimate?'

'Due east of here? A fortnight at the least, I should think. With favourable winds.'

Again the captain eyed his nephew, who answered with a curt nod of approval. 'Good, good. Such a crossing is as nothing for us of Mare.'

Yet none of you have ventured it, Kyle reflected. On the other hand, perhaps some have ... they've simply never returned. He sipped the ale and found it even worse than he'd anticipated; he grimaced. 'And is your goal – pure exploration?'

Tulan guffawed anew. His toothy grin was conspiratorial and he hunched forward, lowering his voice. 'Come now, friend. That you seek these eastern lands proves you've heard the rumours.'

'Rumours?'

The big man sat back and frowned behind his greasy beard. 'No need to play things so close. We of Mare are traders, sea-scavengers. Aye, I'll even admit it openly here upon the deck of my own good ship ... marauders and raiders. No need to pretend with me.'

Kyle had no idea what the man was getting at. He swirled the dregs of the ale in its horn, considered dumping it over the side. Rumours? There were plenty of rumours surrounding Assail. Yet these were all of a kind that would send you fleeing it. Not seeking passage to it. He slowly shook his head, all the while keeping his gaze steady on the man. 'I'm sorry, Tulan, captain. But I have heard r

recent rumours.'

Tulan once more waved a hairy hand at his nephew. 'Foreign gods, man. Even Reuth here has heard, in Kor! The ports are seething with the news.'

Kyle continued to shake his head.

Reuth cleared his throat. 'A word, Uncle, if I may?'

'What?' Tulan grunted, now all ill-humour.

'Our friend is a foreigner in these lands, yes? No one here would speak to him regarding anything. Let alone pass on choice bits of news, or even gossip to while away the time.'

The captain's dark masses of brows rose as he considered his nephew's words. He slammed his horn to the keg he used as a table. 'Of course! No one would pass such news along to some damned foreigner – ah, no insult intended.' By way of apology, he held out the ale-skin and Kyle could only answer by extending his horn for refilling. 'An offering to our journey!' Tulan laughed as he overtopped the horn, spilling ale to the deck. 'And a propitiation to the new gods to come. Though and he lost his smile, 'after the Lady, we've quite had our fill of gods in this region, I should think.'

'The news then?'

Tulan raised his horn to the toast. Reuth joined, and Kyle also, though inwardly dreading more of the brackish drink. 'To a profitable, ah ... *venture*, friend. For it is all the news that gold has been discovered in the northern mountains of the lands across the Bloodmare Sea. Great wide fields of gold. Enough wealth to make kings of us all.'

So astounded by this claim was Kyle that he mechanically threw back his drink and had to force the vile liquid down. Ye gods! Gold in northern Assail? This news would draw thousands from across the lands. Especially if word of it had reached even isolated and inward Korel. 'When was the strike made?' he asked, clearing his throat and coughing.

Tulan waved the horn airily. 'Well, admittedly, it has taken some time for the news to come to us. Apparently, word first came from a shipwreck on the Jourilan coast. Some people heralding from some backward land named Lether. The crew had heard of it first hand from a stricken vessel they came across and ... ah ... rescued.'

Kyle shook his head, unconvinced. 'Tall tales to save their skins.'

Tulan winked. 'So too would I have thought. But then similar news came by way of a vessel that put in for repairs on the north Fist coast. This ship hailed from Falar, north of Malaz. Know you it?'

'I know it. Excellent mariners, the Falari.'

'Yes. They claimed to have landed on an island within spitting distance of the Assail mainland only to find the place nearly deserted. Entire villages empty. They questioned some oldsters who gave them the news ... gold had been discovered in Assail. Everyone picked up and went after it.'

Kyle raised his hands wide. 'Then we are too late. These strikes are usually cleaned out in months. All the rich ground worth sifting gets claimed.'

The captain winked again – it was an engaging gesture that seemed to say: 'Yes, this may be so but we are both men of the world and we know better...' Kyle found himself warming to the old pirate

– for pirate he had as good as confessed to being. ‘But this is Assail,’ Tulan said, pushing more meat on to his blackened skewer. ‘We know the tales of that land.’ Don’t we now, Kyle silently answered and he shook his head at the dreadfulness of them. ‘Just so. Few will live to reach the fields, yes? And as to claims or ownership ... well.’ The big man gave an eloquent shrug.

Kyle knew this to be true. If the stories were to be believed, no state existed up there to grant any rights of ownership, or to recognize any claims or stakes. It would be utter chaos. Armed bands would provide the only authority, and they answerable only to themselves. And as to those who already lived up there – petty warlords, pocket tyrants continuously at war with their neighbours – they could find themselves utterly overrun. Surely not even they could kill quickly enough to stem the tide soon to be breaking on their shores.

He almost tossed back the last of his drink but stopped himself in time. He eyed the grinning pirate captain. ‘You plan to take a rich claim, empty it, and cut your way back to the *Lady’s Luck*?’

Tulan blew on the cooked meat then pulled it off the skewer with his teeth. ‘Nothing as crude as that,’ he answered, chewing. ‘Godsblood, man, you almost make it sound like hard work.’ He offered his nephew a wink and topped up his horn. ‘Nothing like that. Think it through, man. We don’t do any of that hardscrabble digging! We let other poor unfortunates do all the hard work sifting and washing and transporting and such. We’ll just lie in wait along the coast, won’t we? After all, they’ll want to get it out of such a godsforsaken pesthole.’ He opened his hands wide at the obviousness of it. ‘That’s when we liberate it.’

‘Ah, I see. An elegant plan.’

Tulan grinned his agreement. ‘Thank you, my friend.’

‘So you have a crew.’

‘Oh yes, the prettiest gang of murderers and hireswords. Why, we even have a squad of ten Stormguard who are – how shall I put it – *dissatisfied* with the new regime.’

That alarmed Kyle, and he must have not made a good enough job of disguising his reaction as the captain held up a hand. ‘You are Malazan. I understand your concern. But do not worry. All that is the past, no? We are now brothers together in this venture for gainful capital, yes?’

Kyle allowed a wary smile. ‘Of course.’ Struck by a new thought, he studied Reuth. ‘So you know the coast...’

The lad blushed and lowered his gaze. Tulan stroked his beard and grinned like a proud uncle saying, ‘We have the best maps outside Assail itself, I am sure.’

Reuth dared a glance. ‘The names,’ he whispered, as if frightened. ‘I don’t understand the names. Have you heard those names?’

Kyle nodded his agreement. Yes. Those names haunted the stories of his youth. All of them ghost stories. ‘Wrath...’ he murmured. ‘Wrack ... Dread ... Black Pit ... the Anguish Coast.’

Tulan grunted, but not unkindly. ‘You’re young, Reuth.’ He held another titbit of meat over the brazier. ‘We may be ignorant provincials here in these lands, friend Kyle, but I know a tale or two. I’ve heard tell of lands where people name their children “Fool”, “Louse”, or even “Splitnose”. Know

you why they would do such cruel things to their own children?’

Kyle smiled his understanding. ‘To turn away the attention of the gods – or demons.’

‘Exactly. So, tell me, friend Kyle, if you wanted to ruin a place what would you name it?’

His smile twisted to its side. ‘I suppose I’d tout it as Paradise. Or Bounty.’

‘Exactly. And if you wanted to keep people away?’ Tulan turned his questioning gaze on Reuth.

The lad nodded. ‘I see.’

‘Or perhaps they are just awful places,’ Kyle suggested.

Tulan burst out in a great bout of laughter. ‘Perhaps indeed they are, friend Kyle.’ He rubbed his hands again on his already greasy furs and leathers. ‘So. You will bunk here on the *Lady’s Luck*, yes?’

Kyle motioned that he had no objection.

‘You have gear? I could send Storval.’

‘No – no thank you.’

The captain waved to Kyle’s side. ‘Need you another blade? We have plenty.’

He could not stop his hand from going to his belt where he carried his sword wrapped in leather. ‘No. It is quite all right. I will repair it.’

The big man shrugged. ‘Suit yourself. Storval will see you bunked. We’ll push out with tomorrow’s evening tide, yes?’

Kyle rose. ‘Very good. Thank you.’ He bowed to the captain and noted how Reuth now could not keep his gaze from the wrapped blade at his side. He descended to the rowing deck. Tulan bellowed. ‘Storval! Rouse your worthless hide! See to this man’s berth!’

While the first mate rubbed his eyes and stretched, Kyle stood with his hand still resting on his covered sword. He wondered whether these two had heard certain tales of the war against the Lads. Stories making the rounds of the invasion and rebellion. Of the Malazan commander Greymane named Stonewielder here, and his foreign companion, and of two swords – one grey and one pale. The grey one was gone. The stuff of mere legend now. But the rumours also told of an ivory sword carried by a foreign warrior. A blade that could cut through anything. A sword he’d heard the stories here named Whiteblade. A weapon, they said, fit for a god.

These stories were closer to the truth than even their tellers knew. For the blade came to his hand from the hand of the Sky-King Osserc himself, and Kyle was beginning to suspect just what it might be. The possibilities terrified him. And so he dared not leave it out of his sight, yet he dared not show it either. The burden of it was a curse. A damned curse. So had Greymane named the stone sword he had wielded. And now Kyle understood the man completely.

He clenched the weapon in its leather wrap more tightly to his side. Storval motioned curtly to the steps down into the low-roofed storage cabin beneath the stern deck. ‘You may sleep here tonight,’ he growled, then smiled wolfishly and added, ‘But after tomorrow it’s the rowing benches for you – what say you to that, foreigner?’

Kyle shrugged indifferently. ‘Beats the ground.’

The first mate sneered his disbelief and waved him down.

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