

Emperor of Thorns (The Broken Empire)

By Mark Lawrence

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Mark Lawrence brings to a thrilling close his epic trilogy of a boy who would be king, a king who would desire an empire—and an empire on the edge of destruction…

King Jorg Ancrath is twenty now—and king of seven nations.

His goal—revenge against his father—has not yet been realized, and the demons that haunt him have only grown stronger. Yet no matter how tortured his path, he intends to take the next step in his upward climb.

For there is only one power worth wielding…absolute power.

Jorg would be emperor. It is a position not to be gained by the sword but rather by vote. And never in living memory has anyone secured a majority of the vote, leaving the Broken Empire long without a leader. Jorg has plans to change that—one way or the other. He's uncovered even more of the lost technology of the land, and he won't hesitate to use it.

But he soon finds an adversary standing in his way, a necromancer unlike any he has ever faced—a figure hated and feared even more than himself: the Dead King.

The boy who would rule all may have finally met his match...

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Editorial Review

Review
“A hard-edged tale of survival and conquest in a brutal medieval world well told and very compelling, it is different than anything I have ever read.”—Terry Brooks, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Shannara series

“Mark Lawrence is the best thing to happen to fantasy in recent years.”—Peter V. Brett, international bestselling author

"One of fantasy’s most talented authors.”—Fantasy Faction

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.” Married with four children, he lives in Bristol.

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1

I failed my brother. I hung in the thorns and let him die and the world has been wrong since that night. I failed him, and though I’ve let many brothers die since, that first pain has not diminished. The best part of me still hangs there, on those thorns. Life can tear away what’s vital to a man, hook it from him, one scrap at a time, leaving him empty–handed and beggared by the years. Every man has his thorns, not of him, but in him, deep as bones. The scars of the briar mark me, a calligraphy of violence, a message blood–writ, requiring a lifetime to translate.

The Gilden Guard always arrive on my birthday. They came for me when I turned sixteen, they came to my father and to my uncle the day I reached twelve. I rode with the brothers at that time and we saw the guard troop headed for Ancrath along the Great West Road. When I turned eight I saw them first–hand, clattering through the gates of the Tall Castle on their white stallions. Will and I had watched in awe.

Today I watched them with Miana at my side. Queen Miana. They came clattering through a different set of gates into a different castle, but the effect was much the same, a golden tide. I wondered if the Haunt would hold them all.

“Captain Harran!” I called down. “Good of you to come. Will you have an ale?” I waved toward the trestle tables set out before him. I’d had our thrones brought onto the balcony so we could watch the arrival.

Harran swung himself from the saddle, dazzling in his fire–gilt steel. Behind him guardsmen continued to pour into the courtyard. Hundreds of them. Seven troops of fifty to be exact. One troop for each of my lands. When they had come four years before, I warranted just a single troop, but Harran had been leading it then as now.

“My thanks, King Jorg,” he called up. “But we must ride before noon. The roads to Vyene are worse than

expected. We will be hard pushed to reach the Gate by Congression."

"Surely you won't rush a king from his birthday celebrations just for Congression?" I sipped my ale and held the goblet aloft. "I claim my twentieth year today, you know."

Harran made an apologetic shrug and turned to review his troops. More than two hundred were already crowded in. I would be impressed if he managed to file the whole contingent of three hun¬dred and fifty into the Haunt. Even after extension during the recon¬struction, the front courtyard wasn't what one would call capacious.

I leaned toward Miana and placed a hand on her fat belly. "He's worried if I don't go there might be another hung vote."

She smiled at that. The last vote that was even close to a decision had been at the second Congression—the thirty–third wasn't likely to be any nearer to setting an emperor on the throne than the previous thirty.

Makin came through the gates at the rear of the guard column with a dozen or so of my knights, having escorted Harran through the Highlands. A purely symbolic escort since none in their right mind, and few even in their wrong mind, would get in the way of a Gilden Guard troop, let alone seven massed together.

"So, Miana, you can see why I have to leave you, even if my son is about to fight his way out into the world." I felt him kick under my hand. Miana shifted in her throne. "I can't really say no to seven troops."

"One of those troops is for Lord Kennick, you know," she said.

"Who?" I asked it only to tease her.

"Sometimes I think you regret turning Makin into my lord of Kennick." She gave me that quick scowl of hers.

"I think he regrets it too. He can't have spent more than a month there in the last two years. He's had the good furniture from the Baron's Hall moved to his rooms here."

We fell silent, watching the guard marshal their numbers within the tight confines of the courtyard. Their discipline put all other troops to shame. Even Grandfather's Horse Coast cavalry looked a rabble next to the Gilden Guard. I had once marvelled at the quality of Orrin of Arrow's travel guard, but these men stood a class apart. Not one of the hundreds didn't gleam in the sun, the gilt on their armour showing no sign of dirt or wear. The last emperor had deep pockets and his personal guard continued to dip into them close on two centuries after his death.

"I should go down." I made to get up, but didn't. I liked the com¬fort. Three weeks' hard riding held little appeal.

"You should." Miana chewed on a pepper. Her tastes had veered from one extreme to another in past months. Of late she'd returned to the scalding flavours of her homeland on the Horse Coast. It made her kisses quite an adventure. "I should give you your present first though."

I raised a brow at that and tapped her belly. "He's cooked and ready? "

Miana flicked my hand away and waved to a servant in the shad¬ows of the hall. At times she still looked like the child who'd arrived to find the Haunt all but encircled, all but doomed. At a month shy of fifteen the most petite of serving girls still dwarfed her, but at least pregnancy had added some curves, filled her chest

out, put some colour in her cheeks.

Hamlar came out with something under a silk cloth, long and thin, but not long enough for a sword. He offered it to me with a slight bow. He'd served my uncle for twenty years but had never shown me a sour glance since I put an end to his old employment. I twitched the cloth away.

"A stick? My dear, you shouldn't have." I pursed my lips at it. A nice enough stick it had to be said. I didn't recognize the wood. Hamlar set the stick on the table between the thrones and departed. "It's a rod," Miana said. "Lignum Vitae, hard, and heavy enough to sink in water."

"A stick that could drown me . . ."

She waved again and Hamlar returned with a large tome from my library held before him, opened to a page marked with an ivory spacer.

"It says there that the Lord of Orlanth won the hereditary right to bear his rod of office at the Congressional." She set a finger to the appropriate passage.

I picked the rod up with renewed interest. It felt like an iron bar in my hand. As King of the Highlands, Arrow, Belpan, Conaught, Normardy, and Orlanth, not to mention overlord of Kennick, it seemed that I now held royal charter to carry a wooden stick where all others must walk unarmed. And thanks to my pixie–faced, rosy–cheeked little queen, my stick would be an iron–wood rod that could brain a man in a pot–helm.

"Thank you," I said. I've never been one for affection or senti¬ment, but I liked to think we understood each other well enough for her to know when something pleased me.

I gave the rod an experimental swish and found myself sufficient inspiration to leave my throne. "I'll look in on Coddin on the way down."

Coddin's nurses had anticipated me. The door to his chambers stood open, the window shutters wide, musk sticks lit. Even so, the stench of his wound hung in the air. Soon it would be two years since the

arrow struck him and still the wound festered and gaped beneath the physician's dressings. "Jorg." He waved to me from his bed, made up by the window and raised so he too could see the guard arrive.

"Coddin." The old sense of unfocused guilt folded around me.

"Did you say goodbye to her?"

"Miana? Of course. Well . . ."

"She's going to have your child, Jorg. Alone. Whilst you're off riding."

"She'll hardly be alone. She has no end of maids and ladies¬in–waiting. Damned if I know their names or recognize half of them. Seems to be a new one every day."

"You played your part in this, Jorg. She will know you're absent when the time comes and it will be harder on her. You should at least make a proper goodbye."

Only Coddin could lecture me so.

“I said . . . thank you.” I twirled my new stick into view. “A present.”

“When you’re done here go back up. Say the right things.”

I gave the nod that means “perhaps.” It seemed to be enough for him.

“I never tire of watching those boys at horse,” he said, glancing once more at the gleaming ranks below.

“Practice makes perfect. They’d do better to practise war though. Being able to back a horse into a tight corner makes a pretty show but—”

“So enjoy the show!” He shook his head, tried to hide a grimace, then looked at me. “What can I do for you, my king?”

“As always,” I said. “Advice.”

“You hardly need it. I’ve never even seen Vyene, not even been close. I haven’t got anything that will help you in the Holy City. Sharp wits and all that book learning should serve you well enough. You survived the last Congression, didn’t you?”

I let that memory tug a bleak smile from me. “I’ve got some mea¬sure of cleverness perhaps, old man, but what I need from you is wisdom. I know you’ve had my library brought through this chamber one book at a time. The men bring you tales and rumour from all corners. Where do my interests lie in Vyene? Where shall I drop my seven votes?”

I stepped closer, across the bare stones. Coddin was ever the sol¬dier: no rugs or rushes for him even as an invalid.

“You don’t want to hear my wisdom, Jorg. If that’s what it is.” Coddin turned to the window again, the sun catching his age, and catching the lines that pain had etched into him.

“I had hoped you’d changed your mind,” I said. There are hard paths and there are the hardest paths.

The stench of his wound came stronger now I stood close. Cor¬ruption is nibbling at our heels from the hour we’re born. The stink of rot just reminds us where our feet are leading us, whichever direc¬tion they point in.

“Vote with your father. Be at peace with him.”

Good medicines often taste foul, but some pills are too bitter to swallow. I paused to take the anger from my voice. “It’s been nearly more than I can do not to march my armies into Ancrath and lay waste. If it’s a struggle to keep from open war . . . how can there be peace?”

“You two are alike. Your father perhaps a touch colder, more stern and with less ambition, but you fell from the same tree and similar evils forged you.”

Only Coddin could tell me I was my father’s son and live. Only a man who had already died in my employ and lay rotting in my service still, out of duty, only such a man could speak that truth.

“I don’t need him,” I said.

“Didn’t this ghost of yours, this Builder, tell you two Ancraths together would end the power of the hidden hands? Think, Jorg! Sageous set your uncle against you. Sageous wanted you and your brother in the ground.

And failing that he drove a wedge between father and son. And what would end the power of men like Sageous, of the Silent Sister, Skilfar, and all their ilk? Peace! An emperor on the throne. A single voice of command. Two Ancraths! You think your father has been idle all this time, the years that grew you, and the years before? He may not have your arching ambition, but he is not without his own measure. King Olidan has influence in many courts. I won't say he has friends, but he commands loyalty, respect, and fear in equal measures. Olidan knows secrets."

"I know secrets." Many I did not wish to know.

"The Hundred will not follow the son whilst the father stands before them."

"Then I should destroy him."

"Your father took that path—it made you stronger."

"He faltered at the last." I looked at my hand, remembering how I had lifted it from my chest, dripping crimson. My blood, father's knife. "He faltered. I will not."

If it had been the dream–witch who drove a wedge between us then he had done his job well. It wasn't in me to forgive my father. I doubted it was in him to accept such forgiveness.

"The hidden hands might think two Ancraths will end their power. Me, I think one is enough. It was enough for Corion. Enough for Sageous. I will be enough for all of them if they seek to stop me. In any event, you know in what high esteem I hold prophecy."

Coddin sighed. "Harran is waiting for you. You have my advice. Carry it with you. It won't slow you down."

The captains of my armies, nobles from the Highlands, a dozen lords on petitioning visits from various corners of the seven kingdoms, and scores of hangers–on all waited for me in the entrance hall before the keep doors. The time when I could just slip away had . . . just slipped away. I acknowledged the throng with a raised hand.

"My lords, warriors of my house, I'm off to Congression. Be assured I will carry your interests there along with my own and pre¬sent them with my usual blend of tact and diplomacy."

That raised a chuckle. I'd bled a lot of men dry to take my little corner of empire so I felt I should play out the game for my court, as long as it cost me nothing. And besides, their interests lay with mine, so I hardly lied.

I singled Captain Marten out amongst the crowd, tall and weath¬ered, nothing of the farmer left in him. I gave no rank higher than cap¬tain but the man had led five thousand soldiers and more in my name.

"Keep her safe, Marten. Keep them both safe." I put a hand to his shoulder. Nothing else needed to be said.

I came into the courtyard flanked by two knights of my table, Sir Kent and Sir Riccard. The spring breeze couldn't carry the aroma of horse sweat away fast enough, and the herd of more than three hun¬dred appeared to be doing their best to leave the place knee–deep in manure. I find that massed cavalry are always best viewed from a certain distance.

Makin eased his horse through the ranks to reach us. "Many happy returns, King Jorg!"

“We’ll see,” I said. It all felt a little too comfortable. Happy fam¬ilies with my tiny queen above. Birthday greetings and a golden escort down below. Too much soft living and peace can choke a man sure as any rope.

Makin raised an eyebrow but said nothing, his smile still in place.

“Your advisors are ready to ride, sire.” Kent had taken to calling me sire and seemed happier that way.

“You should be taking wise heads not men–at–arms,” Makin said.

“And who might you be bringing, Lord Makin?” I had decided to let him select the single advisor his vote entitled him to bring to Con¬gression.

He pointed across the yard to a scrawny old man, pinch–faced, a red cloak lifting around him as the wind swirled. “Osser Gant. Chamberlain to the late Baron of Kennick. When I’m asked what my vote will cost, Osser’s the man who will know what is and what isn’t of worth to Kennick.”

I had to smile at that. He might pretend it wasn’t so, but part of old Makin wanted to play out his new role as one of the Hundred in grand style. Whether he would model his rule on my father’s or that of the Prince of Arrow remained unclear.

“There’s not much of Kennick that ain’t marsh, and what the Ken Marshes need is timber. Stilts, so your muddy peasants’ houses don’t sink overnight. And you get that from me now. So don’t let your man forget it.”

Makin coughed as if some of that marsh had got into his chest. “So who exactly are you taking as advisors?”

It hadn’t been a difficult choice. Coddin’s final trip came when they carried him down from the mountain after the battle for the Haunt. He wouldn’t travel again. I had grey heads aplenty at court, but none whose contents I valued. “You’re looking at two of them.” I nodded to Sirs Kent and Riccard. “Rike and Grumlow are waiting outside, Keppen and Gorgoth with them.”

“Christ, Jorg! You can’t bring Rike! This is the emperor’s court we’re talking about! And Gorgoth? He doesn’t even like you.”

I drew my sword, a smooth glittering motion, and hundreds of golden helms turned to follow its arc. I held the blade high, turning it this way and that to catch the sun. “I’ve been to Congression before, Makin. I know what games they play there. This year we’re going to play a new game. Mine. And I’m bringing the right pieces.”

2

Several hundred horsemen throw up a lot of dust. We left the Mat¬teracks in a shroud of our own making, the Gilden Guard stretched out across half a mile of winding mountain path. Their gleam didn’t survive long and we made a grey troop as we came to the plains.

Makin and I rode together along the convolutions of the track on which we once met the Prince of Arrow, headed for my gates. Makin looked older now, a little iron in the black, worry lines across his brow. On the road Makin had always seemed happy. Since we came to wealth and fortune and castles he had taken to worry.

“Will you miss her?” he asked. For an hour just the clip and clop of hooves on stony ground, and then from nowhere, “Will you miss her?”

“I don’t know.” I’d grown fond of my little queen. When she wanted to she could excite me, as most women could: my eye is not hard to please. But I didn’t burn for her, didn’t need to have her, to keep her in my sight. More than fondness, I liked her, respected her quick mind and ruthless undercurrents. But I didn’t love her, not the irrational foolish love that can overwhelm a man, wash him away and strand him on unknown shores.

“You don’t know?” he asked.

“We’ll find out, won’t we?” I said.

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