

RICHARD  
MORGAN

THE STEEL REMAINS



This book is for my father  
John Morgan  
For carrying me past the seaweed

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'I think you look on death as your friend,' she murmured.

'That is a strange friend for a young man to have.'

'The only faithful friend in this world,' he said bitterly.

'Death is always sure to be at your side.'

Poul Anderson

*The Broken Sword*

## CHAPTER ONE

When a man you know to be of sound mind tells you his recently deceased mother has just tried to climb in his bedroom window and eat him, you only have two basic options. You can smell his breath, take his pulse and check his pupils to see if he's ingested anything nasty, or you can believe him. Ringil had already tried the first course of action with Bashka the Schoolmaster and to no avail, so he put down his pint with an elaborate sigh and went to get his broadsword.

'Not this again,' he was heard to mutter as he pushed through into the residents' bar.

A yard and a half of tempered Kiriath steel, Ringil's broadsword hung above the fireplace in a scabbard woven from alloys that men had no names for, though any Kiriath child could have identified them from age five upwards. The sword itself also had a name in the Kiriath tongue, as did all Kiriath-forged weapons, but it was an ornate title which lost a lot in translation. *Welcomed in the Home of Ravens and other Scavengers in the Wake of Warriors* was about as close as Archeth had been able to render it, so Ringil had settled on calling it the Ravensfriend. He didn't *like* the name especially, but it had the sort of ring people expected of a famous sword and his landlord, a shrewd man with money and the potential for making it, had re-named the inn the same way, setting an eternal seal on the thing. A local artist had painted a passable image of Ringil wielding the Ravensfriend at Gallows Gap and now it hung outside for all the passing world to see. In return, Ringil got bed and board and the opportunity to sell tales of his exploits to tourists in the residents' bar for whatever was dropped into his cap.

*All that, Ringil once remarked ironically in a letter to Archeth, and a blind eye turned to certain bedroom practices that would doubtless earn Yours Truly a slow death by impaling in Trelayne or Yhelteth. Heroic status in Gallows Water, it seems, includes a special dispensation not*

*available to the average citizen in these righteous times.* Plus, he supposed, you don't go queer baiting when your quarry has a reputation for rendering trained swordsmen into dogmeat at the drop of a gauntlet. *Fame*, Ringil scribbled, *has its uses after all.*

Mounting the sword over the fireplace had been a nice touch, and also the landlord's idea. The man was now trying to persuade his resident celebrity to offer duelling lessons out back in the stable yards. *Cross blades with the hero of Gallows Gap for three Empire-minted elementals the half hour.* Ringil didn't know if he felt that hard up yet. He'd seen what teaching had done to Bashka.

Anyway, he dragged the Ravensfriend from the scabbard with a single grating clang, slung it casually over his shoulder and walked out into the street, ignoring the stares from the audience he had been regaling with tales of valour about an hour ago. He guessed they'd follow him at least part of the way to the schoolmaster's house. It couldn't do any harm, if his suspicions about what was going on were correct, but they'd probably all cut and run at the first sign of trouble. You couldn't blame them really. They were peasants and merchants, and they had no bond with him. About a third of them he'd never even seen before tonight. Introductory comment from the treatise on skirmish warfare that the Trelayne Military Academy had politely declined to publish under his name: *If you don't know the men at your back by name, don't be surprised if they won't follow you into battle. On the other hand, don't be surprised if they will either, because there are countless other factors which you must take into account. Leadership is a slippery commodity, not easily manufactured or understood.* It was simple truth, as gleaned in the bloody forefront of some of the nastiest fighting the free cities had seen in living memory. It was, however, the Lieutenant Editor in Trelayne had written kindly, *just too vague for the Academy to consider as viable training material. It is this ambivalence as much as any other that leads us to decline your submission.* Ringil looked at that last sentence on the parchment and suspected a kindred spirit.

It was cold out in the street. Above the waist he wore only a leather jerkin with loose half-length sailcloth sleeves, and there was an unseasonal early chill sloping down the spine of the country from the Majak uplands. The peaks of the mountains that the town nestled under were already capped with snow, and they reckoned

Gallows Gap would be impassable before Padrow's Eve. People were talking again about an Aldrain winter. There had been stories circulating for weeks now, of high pasture livestock taken by wolves and other, less natural predators, of chilling encounters and sightings in the mountain passes. Not all of them could be put down to fanciful talk. This, Ringil suspected, was going to be the source of the problem. Bashka the Schoolmaster's cottage was at the end of one of the town's cross streets and backed on to the local graveyard. As by far the most educated man in the tiny township of Gallows Water – its resident hero excluded – Bashka had been handed the role of temple officiator by default, and the house went with the priest's robes. And in bad weather, graveyards were a fine source of meat for scavengers.

*You will be a great hero*, a Yhelteth fortune teller had once read in Ringil's spittle. *You will carry many battles and best many foes*.

Nothing about being a municipal exterminator in a border town settlement not much bigger than one of Trelayne's estuary slums.

There were torches fixed in brackets along the main streets and river frontage of Gallows Water but the rest of the town must make do with bandlight, of which there wasn't much on a night this clouded. True to Ringil's expectations, the crowd thinned out as soon as he stepped on to an unlit thoroughfare. When it became apparent where he was headed specifically, his escort dropped by more than a half. He reached the corner of Bashka's street still trailing a loose group of about six or eight but by the time he drew level with the schoolmaster's cottage – the door still gaping open, the way its owner had left it when he fled in his nightshirt – he was alone. He cocked his head back to where the rubberneckerers hovered at the far end of the street. A wry grin twitched his lips.

'Stand well back now,' he called.

From among the graves, something uttered a low droning cry. Ringil's skin goosefleshed with the sound of it. He unshipped the Ravensfriend from his shoulder and, holding it warily before him, he stepped round the corner of the little house.

The rows of graves marched up the hill where the town petered out against outcroppings of mountain granite. Most of the markers were simple slabs hewn from the self-same stone as the mountain and reflected the locals' phlegmatic attitude to the business of

dying. But here and there could be seen the more ornately carved structure of a Yhelteth tomb, or one of the cairns the northerners buried their dead under, hung with shamanistic iron talismans and daubed in the colours of the deceased's clan ancestry. As a rule, Ringil tried not to come out here too often; he remembered too many of the names on the stones, could put faces to too many of the foreign-sounding dead. It was a mixed bag that had died under his command at Gallows Gap that sweltering summer afternoon nine years ago, and few of the outlanders had family with the money to bring their sons home for burial. The cemeteries up and down this stretch of the mountains were littered with their lonely testimony.

Ringil advanced into the graveyard, one bent-kneed step at a time. Clouds broke apart overhead and the Kiriath blade glinted in the sudden smear of bandlight. The cry was not repeated, but now he could make out smaller, more furtive sounds. The sounds, he reckoned unenthusiastically, of someone digging.

*You will be a great hero.*

*Yeah, right.*

He found Bashka's mother, as it seemed, grubbing around in the dirt at the base of a recent headstone. Her burial shroud was torn and soiled, revealing rotted flesh that he could smell from a dozen paces upwind even in the cold. Her death-grown nails made an unpleasant raking sound as they struggled with the casket she had partially unearthed.

Ringil grimaced.

In life, this woman had never liked him. As temple officiator and priest, her son was supposed to despise Ringil for a worthless degenerate and a corruptor of youth. Instead, as a schoolmaster and man of some education himself, Bashka turned out to be far too enlightened for his own good. His easy-going attitude to Ringil and the late-night philosophical debates they occasionally got into at the tavern earned him vitriolic reprimands from visiting senior priests. Worse still, his lack of condemnatory zeal gave him a reputation in the religious hierarchy that ensured he would always remain a humble teacher in a backwater town. The mother, naturally enough, blamed the degenerate Ringil and his evil influence for her son's lack of advancement, and he was not welcome in the

schoolmaster's house while she drew breath. This latter activity had come to an abrupt halt the previous month, following a swift and unquenchable fever, sent presumably by some preoccupied god who had overlooked her great righteousness in religious matters.

Trying not to breathe through his nose, Ringil tapped the flat of the Ravensfriend on a convenient grave to get her attention. At first she didn't seem to hear the noise it made, but then the body twisted wrenchingly around and he found himself looking into a face whose eyes had long ago been eaten by whichever small creatures took care of that sort of thing. The jaw hung slack, most of the nose was gone and the flesh of the cheeks was mottled and holed. It was remarkable that Bashka had even recognised her.

'Come on out of there,' said Ringil, readying his sword.

It did.

It came through the dead woman's ribcage with a cracking, sucking sound, a corpsemite fully a yard long not counting the tendril appendages it had used to puppet the corpse's limbs. It was grey in hue, not unlike some species of smooth-skinned maggot, which its body in many ways resembled. The blunt snout of the thing ended in chomping jaws set with horny ridges which could shatter bone, and Ringil knew that the tail end looked much the same. Corpsemite didn't excrete their waste, they oozed it from pores along the slug-like body, a substance that, like their saliva, was lethally corrosive.

No one knew where they came from. Folklore had it that they were originally lumps of witch's snot, hawked up and animated to voracious life by their evil owners for reasons that most of the tales were rather vague on. Authorised religion insisted variously that they were either ordinary slugs or maggots, possessed by the souls of the evil dead, or demonic visitations from some cemetery hell where the spiritually unworthy rotted, fully conscious, in their graves. Archeth had had a slightly saner theory, that the mites were a mutation produced by the Kiriath's experiments with lower life-forms centuries before, a creature designed to dispose of the dead more efficiently than conventional scavengers would.

Whatever the truth, no one was quite sure what level of intelligence the corpsemite had. But somewhere in their evolution, natural or otherwise, they'd learnt to use the carcasses they fed upon

for a whole host of other purposes. A body could serve them as a hiding place or an incubation bed for their eggs; if not too badly decayed it might also become a means of rapid motion or disguise and, in the case of humans or wolves, a digging tool. It was the use of human corpses that triggered the spate of zombie sightings throughout the north-west whenever the winters were hard.

Ringil had occasionally wondered whether the corpsemites didn't also manipulate carcasses as a form of play. It was entirely his own macabre idea, conjured up when he first read about the creatures in accounts by travellers to the Kiriath wastes. After all, he reasoned to his father's librarian, a corpsemite's own secretions would eat through a wooden casket nearly as fast as a corpse's decaying hands could open it, so why else would they bother? The opinion of the librarian, and later of his father, was that Ringil was a very sick young man who ought to concern himself, as his elder brothers already did, with more natural pursuits like riding, hunting and bedding the local wenches. His mother, who no doubt already had her suspicions, said nothing.

From his one or two previous encounters with these creatures, Ringil also knew that they could be very—

The corpsemite flexed its body free of the encaging ribs, leapt straight at him.

—*fast.*

He hacked sideways, rather inelegantly, and succeeded in batting the thing away to the left. It hit a headstone and dropped to the ground writhing, sliced almost in half by the stroke. Ringil brought the sword down again and finished the job, mouth pursed with distaste. The two severed halves of the creature twisted and trembled and then lay still. Demons and the souls of the evil dead were not, it seemed, up to repairing that kind of damage.

Ringil also knew that corpsemites moved in groups. As the slimy filigree of a tendril appendage touched his cheek, he was already spinning around to face the next one. The drops of secretion burned. No time to wipe it off. He spotted the creature, coiled on top of a Yhelteth tomb, and skewered it on reflex. The tendrils recoiled and the thing made angry chittering noises as it died. Ringil heard a clatter of response from the other side of the tomb and saw movement. He stepped wide around the worked stone

slab, saw the two smaller mites hauling themselves up out of the wreckage of a rotted coffin and its equally far-gone contents. A single downward blow sliced them both irreparably open, body fluids gushing like pale oil from the wounds. He did it again, just to be sure.

The fifth mite landed on his back.

He didn't think at all. In retrospect, he guessed it must have been pure revulsion that drove him. He dropped the sword with a yell, reached down to the fastenings of his jerkin and tore them open with both hands. In the same motion he shrugged himself halfway out of the garment, while the corpsemite was still finding out that the leather was not his real skin. The jerkin sagged under the creature's weight and helped him to pull clear. The tendrils around his waist and over his shoulders were still creeping towards each other and they didn't have time to tighten against the movement. His left arm came free and he whirled like a discus thrower, hurling the bundle of jerkin and mite off his right sleeve and away among the headstones. He heard it hit something solid.

Tendrils had touched him on the chest and back – later he would find the weals. Now he snatched up the Ravensfriend and stalked after his jerkin, eyes and ears open for any remaining members of the group. He found the garment, partially dissolved, at the base of an ancient moss-grown slab near the back of the cemetery. *Not a bad throw, that, from a standing start.* The corpsemite was still trying to disentangle itself from the leather and flapped confusedly at him as he approached. Its jaws were bared and it was hissing like a new sword in the cooling trough.

'Yeah, yeah,' he muttered and plunged the Ravensfriend down point first, impaling the mite on the earth. He watched with sombre satisfaction as it died. 'That was clean on today, you little shit.'

He stayed among the graves long enough to start feeling the cold again, and to take a brooding interest in the slight but unmistakable paunch that was beginning to threaten the aesthetics of his narrow-hipped waist. No further corpsemites showed themselves. He took an uncontaminated shred of his jerkin as a rag and cleaned the body fluids off the Ravensfriend's bluish surfaces with fastidious care. Archeth had insisted the Kiriath blade was proof against all

and any corrosive substances, but she had been wrong about things before.

The final outcome of the war, to name but one.

Then, finally, Ringil remembered that the creatures had touched him and, as if on cue, the blisters they'd left began to burn. He rubbed at the one on his cheek until it burst, deriving a certain brutal amusement from the thin pain he got out of it. Not what you'd call a heroic wound, but it was all he'd have to show for the evening's exertions. No one would be coming out here to check on the carnage until it got safely light.

*Oh well, maybe you can narrate it into a couple of pints and a fowl platter. Maybe Bashka'll buy you a replacement jerkin out of sheer gratitude, if he can afford it after he's paid to rebury his mother. Maybe that tow-beaded lad from the stables will listen in and be impressed enough to overlook this gut you're so intent on developing.*

*Yeah, and maybe your father's written you back into his testament. Maybe the Yhelteth Emperor is a queer.*

That last was worth a grin. Ringil Angeleyes, scarred hero of Gallows Gap, chuckled to himself a little in the chill of the graveyard, and glanced around at the silent markers as if his long-fallen comrades might share the joke. The quiet and the cold gave him nothing back. The dead stayed stonily unmoved, just the way they'd been now for nine years, and slowly Ringil's smile faded away. A shiver clung at his back.

He shook it off.

Then he slung the Ravensfriend back across his shoulder, and went in search of a clean shirt, some food and a sympathetic audience.