

RICHARD MORGAN

THE COLD COMMANDS



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The Cold Commands is for V.
who has given me something to hold

'I tell you, it's no game serving down in the city'

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*

CHAPTER ONE

When they got down into the fringes of the forest beyond Hinerion, Gerin saw the heat shimmering off the scrublands ahead of them, and knew the crunch had come.

Live or die, this was the shape of their last chance.

‘We’re going to broil out there,’ he told the others that evening, as they sat in their chains and waited to be fed. ‘You hear the march-masters talking? It’s another six weeks to Yhelteth at least, all southward, hotter every step of the way. You think these motherfuckers are going to give us any more water or food than we’re getting already?’

‘Of course they will, idiot.’ Tigeth, city-pallid and ponderous, and apparently too bone fucking idle to want his freedom at any real cost, snorted, sniffed and blew his nose on his fingers. Like half the men on the coffle, he was coming down with a cold. He wiped the snot away on the ground and glowered at Gerin. ‘Don’t you get it? They have to *sell* us when we get to Yhelteth. How they going to do that if we don’t make it, or if we’re starved to the sinew by the time we arrive? Maybe you’re too young or stupid to grasp the fact, marsh-foot, but this is *commerce*. We’re worth nothing to them dead.’

Marsh-foot.

In some quarters of Trelayne, it was insult enough to bring down an instant formal challenge and a duel at Brillin Hill fields with the dawn. Elsewhere, it would simply get you stabbed and dumped in the river. As with everything else in the city, assumptions were general but wealth and station defined your specifics for you. And upriver or down, the Glades or the harbour-end slums, the common truth held – no one in the city of Trelayne would easily let word stand that they might have marsh-dweller blood.

Gerin had grown up in the marshes and he wouldn't have lived in the city if you'd paid him. He let the epithet pass, the way he'd watched his kin put up with it for as long as he could remember.

Too much else at stake right now.

'You ever see the trawlers come in at harbour end, Tigeth?' he asked evenly. 'You think every fish in that net makes it to market?'

Chain links rattled impatiently at Gerin's shoulder. A tight, angry voice in the gathering dark.

'What are you talking about – fish?'

It was another city dweller, Gerin didn't recall the name, this one more gaunt and work-worn than Tigeth. He'd barely spoken a word in the week they'd been marching; at rest stops, he spent the bulk of his time staring off into space, jaw set and working as if he had the last shreds of a tobacco twist between his teeth.

Like most of his kind, he still didn't seem able to get his head around the enormity of what had been done to him.

'Shit is what he's talking,' Tigeth sneered. 'Doesn't know any better. I mean, look at him; he's a stunted little marsh brat just like any other you'd see down at Strov market, reading fortunes or twitching for the crowd. Can't read, can't write, chances are he can't even count above five. He's got no idea how commercial concerns work.'

Gerin smiled bleakly.

'Well, since you and everyone else on this coffle was sold for debt, I guess that makes us about even.'

Tigeth swore and lunged at him. Brief, impotent rattle of chains and a chorus of protests as the move dragged at the other men where they sat. The gaunt man grappled Tigeth back, held the fat man's twitching hands a few inches off Gerin's face until Tigeth gave it up and slumped down again.

'Sit quiet, you fucking twat,' the gaunt man hissed. 'You want a march-master on us? Want to end up like Barat?'

Gerin's gaze switched involuntarily to the set of wrenched and empty manacles they still carried with them on the coffle. Big, tough Barat, a harbour-end pimp by trade, had come to the auction block the same way as Gerin – through the criminal courts. In the pimp's case, it was some business about cutting up the wrong slumming

noble when he got rough with one of the girls. Said noble turns out to have Glades connections, the Watch get off their lazy, drink-sodden arses for a change and ask some questions, break some uncooperative heads. Someone talks, Barat lands in jail long enough to spit in his accuser's upriver face rather than cringe, ends up on the coffle as a result. Standard stuff, that same old city song.

Barat the pimp brought with him an arrogant dislike for the debt-slaves he found himself chained to, and he spent the first three days of the march taunting them to explosions of ill-judged violence, which he then slapped down with practised thug ease and a sneer. For some reason, he'd left Gerin mostly alone, but the coffle chains were generous enough that he got to lay hands on at least four or five other men before the march-masters grew tired of the spectacle as sport, and started instead to resent the chaos it caused.

On the third day, the fifth or sixth outbreak of brawling, two or three of the caravan's mounted overseers and owners rode back down the line to see what all the fuss was about. One of them was a woman, and when the march-masters had kicked and cursed the coffle back into order, she beckoned their chief over, leaned down in her saddle to talk to him and sent him back to his colleagues flushed dark with chagrin. Gerin never heard what was said, but he knew what was coming the same way he'd know a change in the wind off the marsh.

He chose not to share the knowledge with Barat, and the pimp was apparently too slum stupid or iron-headed to work it out for himself. He started another fight later that same afternoon.

The march-masters took him at midday latrine stop the following noon, just across the river from Parashal. Four of them at once, grim, leather-faced men with long wooden clubs in hand and eyes that glinted like mica. They held him down and opened the manacles with the bolt cutters they all carried at their belts like weapons. It was an act whose irrevocability turned the pimp to snorting and kicking like a terrified horse when he saw it.

But by then, of course, it was far too late.

They dragged Barat thrashing and roaring into a nearby copse, and there they took their time beating him to death. It was close enough for the sounds to carry – solid, meaty thwacks, like a butcher

chopping joints apart; high, awful shrieks that very shortly broke down into pleading and gurgling moans; finally a silence that was worse than either, as the sounds of the beating went on. Gerin had seen more than his fair share of brutality, out on the marsh and in the streets of Trelayne both; but even for him, the killing seemed to take for ever.

Elsewhere on the coffle, less hardened men – and these included earlier victims of Barat’s thuggish bullying – bowed their heads and stared at the ground they sat upon. One or two crammed fingers to their mouths like women, and choked back vomit. Gerin made it halfway to a sneering disdain before he realised he, too, was trembling with reaction.

Or, he told himself a little giddily, just coming down with Tigeth’s Hoiran-cursed fucking cold.

Presently, the noises stopped and the march-masters emerged from the trees, trading guffaws, grinning like well-fed wolves. They carried their clubs at rakish shoulder arms. One of them swung his manacle cutters idly to and fro in the other hand, slashing at the knee-high grass. The implement’s pincer end was dipped with blood, bright where the midday sun caught it as it swung.

And later, the unspoken knowledge settled among the silent captives, also grinning, like some new, skull-headed companion on the coffle – the understanding that it could have been any one of them in Barat’s place.

‘Yeah, and speaking of that,’ Gerin told them grimly, when Tigeth had quietened under the gaunt man’s admonition. ‘You think that’s the only empty set of cuffs you’re going to see on this chain? Every day we don’t make the market in Yhelteth is coins dripping through these fucks’ fingers. You think they’ll stop or slow down for anyone who can’t hack the heat once we start across the scrub?’

‘They have to *sell* us,’ Tigeth insisted petulantly. ‘It isn’t in their interests to—’

‘They have to sell *some* of us, Mister Commerce. Enough of us to make it pay. Like I said before, you think a trawl skipper cares if he spills a few fish on the dock when he unloads?’

‘How old are you, son?’ someone asked curiously.

Gerin skinned an urchin grin in the gloom. ‘Fifteen. And contrary

to what Mister Commerce there tells you, I *can* count above five. I count thirty-five coffles on this caravan, thirty-two head on each. That's eleven hundred and twenty, less Barat, and you saw what happened to him. You think any one of us is worth the extra water or the wait while they coddle us along? This is march or die, people, and Hoiran gather in the hindmost. You're not citizens any more, you're slaves. You fall down out there, they'll maybe kick you a couple of times to see if you can get up again. But if you don't . . .' He spread his hands in the manacles, shrugged. 'They're going to cut you loose and leave you to die right where you fell.'

'Maybe that's true,' said the gaunt man slowly. 'But maybe we just like to think it'll happen to someone else. Hell, maybe it *will* happen to someone else. We've all made it this far.'

There was a murmur of agreement through the huddled figures on the chain. But as it died down, the gaunt man was gazing blankly southward, and he seemed unconvinced by his own argument.

'Never been in a desert,' he said to no one in particular. 'Never seen that before.'

Someone else sneezed violently.

'I've seen march or die,' said another man seated further away. Half his face was nightmarishly scarred, poorly healed burns so severe that even in the failing light you could see the puckered contours of the scar tissue as he moved his head. 'In the war, on the retreat from Rajal. Kid's right, that's how it works. They left the wounded where they fell. Made us march right past them, you could hear them calling after us, pleading. Begging us not to leave them for the lizards. And we weren't even slaves back then, we were still citizens, we were *soldiers*.'

Tigeth made an exasperated noise. 'It's not the same, that was a *war*. It's not the same thing at—'

'What's the matter, big man?' The gaunt captive stared at Tigeth with open dislike. 'You reckon some rich Yhelteth widow's going to buy you for a scribe and butler just cuz you can read and write? Think you'll be too good for mine-work or carrying a hod 'til you drop?'

'Nah, just too fucking fat for it,' someone jeered.

'Too fucking fat for a widow 'n all,' said someone else. 'Less she buys him for a cushion.'

General laughter, low and mean. Tigeth bristled.

‘He isn’t going to be fat by the time we get there,’ said the Rajal veteran quietly. ‘March like we got ahead of us, he’s going to be just as burnt down and blistered and broken as everybody else. If he makes it at all.’

Quiet welled up in the wake of the words. The captives looked at one another as the message sank in. Most of them had doubtless seen some casual brutality since they were arrested and sold, maybe a few of the younger and prettier among them had suffered – like Gerin – the same inevitable dungeon rapes as the women who now marched on separate coffles. But by and large these men had not yet had to face the idea they might die.

Faint, feverish chill along Gerin’s spine as he realised that up until now, nor had he. In all his twisting and scheming to get out of this, he’d envisaged a lot of bad outcomes, but none involved his own extinction. He’d foreseen various brutalities, improvising off those he’d witnessed himself in the past or had heard in campfire tales. He’d relived the memories of his rape in the debt cells, imagined that it might well happen to him again who knew how many times. He’d even brooded briefly, and unable to repress his shudders, on the chances of castration, which they said wasn’t uncommon for male slaves in the Yhelteth trade.

But he’d never once imagined his life might end. Never really believed *he* might be the one cut loose and abandoned, begging and babbling as the coffles trooped on into the desert glare. Never thought it could be *him*, Gerin Trickfinger, fifteen years old, life barely begun, lying there too weak to move, too weak for anything but husked prayers to the Dark Court, Hoiran or Dakovash, Kwelgrish or Horchalat, Firfirdar or fucking *anyone* who might be listening out there, entreaties bargaining down like a roped and filled bucket let slip through weary fingers and back down the well, hope failing; prayers to be rescued, then prayers simply to be found, albeit by more slavers or bandits; finally the simple plea that thirst and heat might kill him before he felt the first darting, tentative tugs at his flesh, as the scavengers circled his twitching body and the vultures spiralled down to take his eyes . . .

He shivered – this *fucking* cold – and stared miserably around at

his fellow captives. The gaunt man looked across at the Rajal veteran.

‘You, scar-face. You think you’ll make it?’

The veteran grimaced. Against the scarring, it wasn’t a pretty sight. Gerin thought of tusked and fanged statues he’d seen in the candlelit shadows of the temple to Hoiran at Trelayne’s Southern Gate. And they said that dark spirits were drawn to malformed and mutilated flesh. His father had once told him . . .

The scarred man shrugged.

‘Probably would, yeah. But you got to think like that. It’s all over if you don’t.’

‘Right.’

‘Look,’ said Gerin, desperate to shrug off the shiver of his own sudden fear. ‘I’m not saying most of us won’t survive. That’s not the point.’

The veteran’s ravaged features turned, fixed on him. With the onset of night, the long gleaming scimitar edge of the band could now be seen clearly, slicing out of the clouds overhead, spilling a soft, uneven light on whatever the Dark Court deemed it appropriate to touch. Some of that light seemed to catch and gleam in the man’s eye as he looked at Gerin.

‘What is the point, then?’ he asked softly.

It felt oddly like staging, like one of the tricked-up little pieces of street drama he helped set off down at Strov to pull in an audience or milk passers-by for sympathy. As if there was a correct, fixed answer to this. Gerin, having no idea what that might be, looked around at his fellow captives and their stares.

He cleared his throat.

‘We’re none of us used to desert heat,’ he said. ‘And half of us are already coming down with the fucking snots and sneezes. We’re going to be sick and stumbling tired. We get a few days into the scrublands on the rations they’re feeding us, doesn’t matter who survives, who doesn’t, *none* of us are going to be in any fit state to make any kind of escape. This is our last chance for that.’

‘Escape?’ Tigeth snorted phlegmily. ‘You stupid fucking—’

And the Rajal survivor cuffed him savagely across the head. Tigeth yelped and fell over sideways with the force of the blow. He opened his mouth to say something more but the veteran stared him down

and Tigeth thought better of it. Then the scarred man's gaze swung back to Gerin again. He opened one chained hand in invitation.

'If you have an idea, lad, I think now might be the time to spit it out.'