

**RICHARD
MORGAN**
THE DARK DEFILES

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

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This book is for Daniel

I'll be there for the seaweed, mate

Dinnae ask me how majic wurks . . . but wun way or the uthir it canny be oll its craked up tae be or ah suppose the wurld woold be toatally fukin wunderffil an happy an aw that an folk woold live in peece an harminy an so on; thatill be the day, if ye ask me. Enyway its no like that ataw, so it isnay, an just as well to say I, coz utherwyse thay wooldnae need peepil like me (an itid be ded fukin boarin to).

Naw, ahm doin no to bad these days; servises mutch in dimand . . .

Iain Banks
The Bridge

Call for justice or explanation, and the sea will thunder back with its mute clamour. Men's accounts with the gods do not balance.

George Steiner
The Death of Tragedy

BOOK I
ARSE END OF THE WORLD

'Once there was a High Quest to Northern Lands, a Bright Fellowship led out in Sunlit Glory by three Heroes from the Great War, accompanied with the Finest Warriors and Wise Men of Empire, and guided by an Angel fallen from On High . . .'

The Grand Chronicle of Yhelteth
Court Bard Edition

ONE

‘Well, that’s that, I suppose.’

Ringil Eskiath weighed the desiccated human jawbone glumly in the palm of his hand. He crouched on the edge of the opened grave, fighting off a vague urge to jump down into it.

Looks cosy down there. Out of the wind, dark and warm . . .

He rubbed at his unshaven chin instead. Three days of stubble, rasping on calloused fingers, itching on hollow cheeks. His cloak, puddled about him where he crouched, was soiled at the border and soaking up water from the rain-drenched grass. The shoulder of his sword arm nagged from the unrelenting damp.

He shut out the ache and brooded on what lay below him in the grave.

They’d come a long way for this.

There wasn’t much – shards of wood that might once have formed a casket, a few long strips of leather, cured stiff and crumbling. A mess of small bone fragments, like the leavings of some overenthusiastic soothsayer on the sery . . .

Gil sighed and levered himself back to his feet. Tossed the jawbone back in with the rest.

‘Fucking waste of five months.’

‘My lord?’

Shahn, the marine sergeant, who’d climbed back out of the grave, and now waited close by the mounds of earth his men had dug out. Behind him, the work party stood around, soil- and sweat-streaked, entrenching tools in hand, scowling against the weather. Whoever dug this plot all those centuries ago, they’d chosen a spot close to the cliffs, and right now there was a blustery wind coming in off the ocean, laced with fistfuls of sleet and the promise of another storm. The three Hironish guides they’d hired back in Ornley already had their hoods up – they stood further from the grave, were watching the sky and conversing in low tones.

Ringil brushed the traces of dirt off his hands.

‘We’re all done here,’ he announced loudly. ‘If this is the Illwrack Changeling, the worms sorted him out for us a while back. Stow tools, let’s get back to the boats.’

A tremor of hesitation – hands working at tool handles, feet shifting. The sergeant cleared his throat. Gestured half-heartedly at the soft-mounded earth beside the grave.

‘Sire, should we not . . .?’

‘Fill that in?’ Ringil grinned harshly. ‘Listen, if those bones stand up and follow us down to the beach, I’ll be very surprised. But you know what? – if they do, I’ll deal with it.’

His words carved out their own patch of quiet in the rising wind. Among the men, a touching of talismans. Some muttering.

Ringil cut them a surreptitious glance, counting faces without seeming to. A couple of those he saw had been around when he took down the kraken, but most were on the other ships at the time; or they were aboard *Dragon’s Demise* but in their bunks. It had been a filthy night anyway – rain and howling wind, band-light muffled up in thick, scudding cloud, and the encounter was over almost as soon as it began. All but a handful missed the action.

They had report from their comrades, of course, but Ringil couldn’t blame them for doubting it. Killing a kraken, at the height and heart of an ocean storm by night – yeah, *right*. It was a stock scene out of myth, a lantern-light story to frighten the cabin boy with. It was a fucking *tale*.

It was five weeks now, and no one was calling him Krakenbane that he’d noticed.

He supposed it was for the best. He’d held enough commands in the past to know how it went. Best not to disabuse your men of their tight-held notions, whatever those might be. That went in equal measure for those who doubted him and those who told tales of his prowess. The actual truth would probably scare both parties out of their wits, and that, right here and now, was going to be counterproductive.

They were twitchy enough as it was.

He faced them. Put one booted foot on the forlorn, shin-high chunk of mossed over granite that served the grave as marker. He pitched his voice for them all to hear – pearls of dark wisdom from the swordsman sorcerer in your midst.

‘All right, people, listen up. Anyone wants to sprinkle salt, go right ahead, get it done. But if we stay here to fill this hole in, we’re going to get drenched.’

He nodded westward, out to sea. It was not long past noon, but the sour afternoon light was already closing down. Cloud raced in from the north, boiling up like ink poured in a glass of water. Overhead, the sky was turning the black of a hanged man’s face.

Yeah – be calling that an omen before you know it.

His mood didn’t improve much on the way back to the boats. He took point on the meandering sheep track that brought them down off the cliffs. Set a punishing pace over the yielding, peaty ground. No one made the mistake of trying to stay abreast or talk to him.

By way of contrast, there was raucous good cheer at his back. The marines had loosened up with the permission to lay wards. Now they tramped

boisterously along behind him, good-natured bickering and jeering in the ranks. It was as if they'd poured out their misgivings with the salt from their tooled leather bags, left it all behind them in the tiny white trceries they'd made.

Which, Ringil supposed, they had, and wasn't that the whole point of religion anyway?

But he was honest enough to recognise his own released tension as well. Because, despite all the other pointless, empty graves, despite his own increasingly solid conviction that they were wasting their time, he too had gone up to those cliffs expecting a fight.

Wanting a fight.

Little vestiges of the feeling still quivered at the nape of his neck and in his hands. Enough to know it had been there, even if he hadn't spotted it at the time.

Last resting place of the Illwrack Changeling.

Again.

This being the ninth last resting place to date. The ninth grave of the legendary Dark King they'd dug up, only to find the detritus of common mortality beneath.

Has to be an easier way to do this shit.

Really, though, there wasn't, and he knew it. They were all strangers here, himself included. Oh, he'd read about the Hironish Isles in his father's library as a boy, learnt the arid almanac facts from his tutors. And growing up in Trelayne he'd known a handful of people who'd spent time there in exile. But this was not knowledge with practical application, and anyway it was decades out of date. Fluent Naomic aside, he had no useful advantage over his fellow expedition members.

Meanwhile, Anasharal the Helmsman, full of ancient unhuman knowing when they planned the expedition back in Yhelteth last year, was now proving remarkably cagey about specifics. The Kiriath demon was either unwilling or unable to point them with any clarity to the Changeling's grave, and instead suggested – somewhat haughtily – that they do the legwork themselves and inquire of the locals. *I fell from on high for your benefit*, went the habitual gist of the lecture. *Is it my fault that I no longer have the vision I gave up in order to bring my message to you? I have steered you to journey's end. Let human tongues do the rest.*

But the Hironish islanders were a notoriously closed-mouth bunch – even Gil's dull-as-dishwater tutors had mentioned that. Historically, they'd been known to harbour popular pirates and tax evaders despite anything the League's heavy-handed customs officers could do about it. To lie with impassive calm in the face of threats, to spit with contempt at drawn steel, and to die under torture rather than give up a fellow islander.

So they certainly weren't about to spill the secrets of settled generations to some bunch of poncy imperials who showed up from the alien south

and started asking, *Oh, hey, we hear there's this dark lord out of legend buried around here somewhere; any chance you could take us to him?*

Not just like that, anyway.

It took a week of careful diplomacy in and out of the taverns in Ornley and then out to the hamlets and crofts beyond, just to find a handful of locals who would talk to them. It took soft words and coin and endless rounds of drinks. And, even then, what these men had to say was sparse and contradictory:

– *the Illwrack Changeling, hmm, yes, that'd be the one from the dwenda legend. But he was never buried up here, the dwenda took him away in a shining longship, to where the band meets the ocean . . .*

– *crucified him on Sirk beach for a betrayer, was what I heard, facing the setting sun as he died. His followers took him down three days later and buried him. It's that grave up behind the old whaler's temple.*

– *the Illwrack Betrayer was brought to the Last Isle, to the Chain's Last Link, just as the legends say. But the isle only manifests to mortal eyes at Spring solstice, and even then, only with much purifying prayer. To land there would require an act of great piety. You should ask at the monastery on Glin cliffs, perhaps they can make offerings for you when you return next year.*

Yeah, that's right – jeers from further down the tavern bar – you should ask his brother out at Glin. Never known him turn down a request for intercession if it came weighted with enough coin . . .

You know, I've had about enough out of you whelps. My brother's a righteous man, not like some worthless bastard sons I could—

They'd had to break that one up with fists. Start all over again.

– *the grave you seek is on a promontory of the Grey Gull peninsula, no more than a day's march north of here. On approach, Grey Gull may seem a separate island, but do not be deceived. Certain currents cause the inlets to fill enough at certain times to make it so – but you can always cross, at worst you might have to wade waist deep. And most of the time, you won't even get your boots wet.*

Hagh! – a greybeard fishing skipper hawks and spits something unpleasantly yellow onto the tavern's sawdust floor, rather close to Ringil's boot – not going to find that grave this side of Hell! That's where the Aldrain demons took that one – screaming to Hell!

No, no, my lords, forgive him, this is just fisherfolk superstition. The last human son of Illwrack is buried at the compass crossroads, on a rise just south of here. Some say the hill itself is the Changeling's barrow.

– *the truth, my lords, is that the dwenda hero was laid to rest in the stone circle at Selkin, where his retainers . . .*

So forth.

It was a lot of digging.

But in the absence of the imperial expedition's other main prize – the legendary floating city of An-Kirilnar, which they also couldn't seem to find right now – there really wasn't much else to do but tramp out to site after site and dig until disappointed.

Disappointment is a slow poison.

Initially, and for some of the closer sites, practically every figure of note on the expedition tagged along. There was still a palpable air of journey's end hanging over them all at that point – a sense that, after all that planning, all those sea miles covered, *this was it*. And whatever *it* was, no one wanted to miss it.

True above all for Mahmal Shanta – he went out of sheer academic curiosity and at the cost of some substantial personal discomfort. Really too old for a voyage into such cold climes anyway, Shanta was still getting over flu and had to be carried on a covered litter by six servants, which was awkward over rough ground and slowed everybody else down. Gil rolled his eyes at Archeth, but in the end what were you going to do? The elderly naval engineer was a primary sponsor of the expedition: his family's shipyards had built two of the three vessels they sailed in and reconditioned the third, and even in illness he held onto stubborn and canny command of the flagship *Pride of Yhelteth*.

If anyone had earned the right, it was Shanta.

Archeth's reasons for riding along were twofold, and a little more pragmatic. She went because she was overall expedition leader and it was expected of her. But more than that, she badly needed something to take her mind off the lack of any Kiriath architecture standing above the waves off-shore. Not finding An-Kirilnar had hit her hard.

Marine commander Senger Hald went ostensibly to supervise those of his men detailed to the search, but really to put an unquestionable marine boot on the proceedings. And Noyal Rakan went beside him, to show the Throne Eternal flag and remind everyone who was supposed to be in charge. The two men were coolly amicable, but the inter-service rivalry was never far beneath the surface, in them or the men they commanded.

Lal Nyanar, captain of *Dragon's Demise* mostly on account of Shab Nyanar's substantial investment in the expedition, went along even when the prospecting was done overland, apparently out of some belief that he was representing his absent father's interests in the quest. Gil didn't really begrudge him; Nyanar wasn't much of a sea captain – the sinecure commands his family had secured for him back in Yhelteth were largely ceremonial or involved river vessels – but he did at least know how to follow orders. Out of sight of his ship, he deferred to the expedition leaders and kept his head down.

The same could not be said of the others.

Of the expedition's other investors who'd actually made the trip north, Klarn Shendanak stuck close to the action because he didn't trust Empire men any further than you could throw one, and that included Archeth Indamaninarmal, jet-skinned half-human imperial cipher that she was. Menith Tand followed suit and stuck close to Shendanak because he harboured a standard Empire nobleman's distaste for the Majak's

rough-and-ready immigrant manners and would not be one-upped. And Yilmar Kaptal went along because he mistrusted both Shendanak and Tand in about equal measure. The three of them didn't quite spit at each other outright, but having them at your back was like leading a procession of alley cats. Shendanak never went anywhere without an eight-strong honour guard of thuggish-looking second cousins fresh down from the steppes, which in turn meant that Tand brought along a handful of his own mercenary crew to balance the equation and Kaptal flat-out demanded that Rakan muster a squad of Throne Eternal just in case . . .

Egar usually tagged along at Gil's shoulder just to see if there'd be any kind of fight.

One grey morning, on the way to a talisman-warded grave that would prove to contain nothing but the skeleton of a badly deformed sheep, Ringil stopped and looked back from the top of a low rise, squinting against the rain. The whole bedraggled entourage spilled up the trail behind him like the survivors of a shipwreck. He reckoned sourly that he hadn't seen such a mess since he led the expeditionary retreat back to Gallows Gap eleven years ago.

Bit harsh, was Egar's considered opinion. *On the expeditionary, I mean. That was an army we had. You imagine trying to lead this lot into a battle and out the other side? We'll be lucky if they're not all at each other's throats before noon.*

Don't, Ringil told him wearily. *Just – don't.*

They went. They dug. Found nothing and came back, mostly in the rain.

But – to the Dragonbane's evident disappointment – there never was a fight.

Instead, Gil's train of gawkers and minders slowly began to whittle away in the face of repeated let-down and the god-awful weather. Each found other, more compelling matters to occupy them. Archeth withdrew into brooding isolation aboard *Sea Eagle's Daughter*, and could occasionally be heard right across the harbour, yelling abuse at Anasharal in the High Kir tongue. Nyanar went back to residence aboard *Dragon's Demise*, where he instructed and supervised an endless series of small deck repairs and wrote self-importantly about it in the captain's log. On the shore side of things, Yilmar Kaptal took to his rooms at the inn on Gull's Flight Wynd and asked Rakan for a brace of Throne Eternal to guard his door. Shendanak and Tand stomped about the streets of Ornley, shadowed by their men, glaring at the locals and each other whenever they crossed paths. Desperate to bring the temperature down, Hald and Rakan both habitually stayed in town with the bulk of their respective commands, put their men through punishing work schedules, held exhaustive training sessions, did anything they could to head off the simmering sense of boredom and frustration.

Egar found himself some local whores.

And Mahmal Shanta sat with a racking cough in his stateroom aboard the flagship *Pride of Ybelteth*, spitting up phlegm, drinking hot herbal infusions and poring over charts, all the while trying to pretend he was not planning their empty-handed return home.

The search went on, pared back to Ringil and a marine detachment under Hald's occasional command to do the digging. The unspoken understanding – Gil was the sharp end. He had the spells and the alien iron blade; if the Illwrack Changeling popped up out of the next grave in fighting temper, Ringil Eskiath was the man to put him down. As they exhausted the more promising fragments of legend and hearsay closer to town, Nyanar and *Dragon's Demise* were detailed to carry them whenever a site was – or was reputed to be – sailing distance away. Which was all the time these days.

It was starting to feel like clutching at straws. Like going through the motions. Gil's patience, never his strong suit, was frayed down to shreds. The itch to kill something stalked him day and night. What he wouldn't give for the Illwrack Changeling to erupt from the damp earth and grass right in front of him right now, sword in hand, undead eyes aflame.

He'd cut the fucker down like barley.

The sheep track wound its unhurried way across the shoulder of the hill, dropping by hairpin increments into the valley below. A couple of ruined crofts showed hearth ends and tumbled dry stone walls rising out of the heather like longboats drowned in shallow water. Bedraggled-looking sheep dotted the slope, stood at a distance, chewing patiently, watching them pass. One or two of the nearer ones beat ungainly, lumbering retreat from the path, as if warned in advance of Gil's state of mind.

I'm going to put that fucking Helmsman over the rail when we get back. I'm going to sink it in Ormley Sound without a cable and leave it there to rot.

If Archbeth doesn't beat me to it.

I'm going to—

He jerked to a halt, awareness of the thing that blocked his path coming late through his seething mood. He teetered back a couple of inches.

Behind him, he heard the marines' banter dry up.

The ram stood its ground on the path. It was big, bulking nearly twice the size of the sheep they'd seen, and it was old, fist-thick horns coiling twice around and then out to wicked downward-jabbing spikes. Its fleece was a filthy yellowish white, matted across a back as broad as a mule's. It stood well over waist height on Ringil, and it stared him down out of pupils that were slotted black openings into emptiness. Its chin was raised towards him, and it seemed to be smiling at some private joke.

Ringil took a sharp step forward. Jerked arms upward and wide – not unlike, it suddenly dawned on him, one of the charlatan witches you saw pissing about at magic in Strov Square.

The ram stayed where it was.

'I'm in no mood for you,' Gil barked. 'Go on, fuck off.'

Silence. A couple of nervous guffaws from the marines.

The moment stretched and broke. The ram took a step sideways, tossed its head in a gesture as if to say *look up there*, and ambled off towards one of the ruined crofts.

Ringil looked, a flinching glance, back up the rain-soaked hillside and—
Black flap of cloak, glimmer of faint blue fire in motion.

A dark figure, moving on the ridgeline, head down as if watching him.

He blinked. Stood there, locked still, trying to be sure. The flicker of movement, out of the corner of his eye.

There and gone.

Oh, come off it.

He came back round, spotted the ram standing at the wall of the ruin. It still seemed to be watching him.

'Sir?'

Shahn was at his side, face carefully expressionless. Ringil looked past him at the men, who were mostly squaring away twitchy grins, squinting up at the sky and trying to seem serious. He couldn't really blame them; he was about to shrug off the whole thing himself, when he noticed the Hironish guides. They stood apart, off the path, and hastily averted their eyes as soon as he looked their way. He stared at them for a couple of moments, and they steadfastly refused to meet his gaze. But he caught the glance one of them could not help casting towards the ruin and the ram.

Ringil followed the man's gaze. He felt his pulse pick up.

The *ikinri 'ska*, pricking awake in him like some dozy hound by the fireside at the sound of the latch.

'Sergeant,' he said with distant calm. 'Get everybody down to the boats, would you?'

'Sir.'

'Wait for me there. Tell Commander Hald and the captain I won't be long.'

'Yes sir.'

Ringil was already moving towards the ruin. He barely heard the man's response, was barely aware of the marines as they mustered behind Shahn's snapped order and tramped off at a brisk march. He was off the path now, knee-deep in the rain-soaked heather, and he had to force his legs through it to make headway. Ahead of him, the ram, apparently satisfied, tossed its head again and trotted through a gap in the tumbled wall of the croft that might once have been a doorway.

The sky had darkened overhead with the gathering cloud. The wind seemed to be picking up.

He reached the ruin and looked in over a wall that barely came up to his waist. The ram was nowhere to be seen. Ringil prowled the wall, swept a speculative glance up and down the interior, making sure. Knee-high

growth of grass across the floor space, shaped stones from the tumbled walls scattered here and there, the splintered, rotted-wood remnants of what might have been furniture a long time ago. At one end wall, the stonework was blackened where hearth and chimney had once stood.

Something was gathered there, crouched by the hearth-space, waiting for him.

He couldn't quite see what it was.

At the ruined doorway, gusts from the rising wind agitated the long grass, bowed it back as if offering him passage inside.

Ringil nodded to himself. 'All right, then.'

He stepped in over the threshold.