

CHRIS  
WILLRICH

THE SCROLL  
OF YEARS

A GAUNT AND BONE NOVEL



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*For Becky*



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# PROLOGUE

The howls of trained springfangs fluted through the gorge. Someone in the temple had seen him, or they'd been loosed for someone else. Imago Bone froze. Springfangs could hear a rabbit scratch itself a mile off.

But the Door of Penitence was not going to come to him.

He shifted until he sat, there on the track he'd just stumbled upon amid the boulders flanking this desert ravine, and with the silence due him from long years of thieving, Bone removed his boots. His bare feet greeted the cooling desert air. He'd never walked this particular track, but he knew the Brothers and Sisters of the Swan, surely with love and mercy in their hearts, had set pit traps here. Nevertheless, it was his best chance. In the ebbing sunset, casting jagged red-edged shadows everywhere like a promise of future blood, he had to trust to his feet.

For speed Bone had buried his pack half a day back, and thus as he stood he laced the boots together and tied them to his belt, so that their jostling could deliver a metaphorical kick in the behind. He could use all the motivation he could get.

He picked his way along the path, his progress slowing as the sun departed. Overhead the Sanctuary glowed pink, a granite promontory painted and sculpted to resemble a titanic, ravaged white feather that had crashed to earth. By now there should be a light high in the upper sanctum, but that window was dark. Below too, shadows pooled everywhere. Lighting like a grasshopper from rock to rock, Bone squinted for thief-worthy landing spots. Increasingly he relied on the skin of his feet to test those stones, and soon he less resembled a locust than a water-strider as he stretched out one leg, then the other.

More howls, closer now. With the gorge's echoes he could not determine the direction. Time for the boots? No.

*Nothing we do is direct.* The words of Master Sidewinder came to Bone, borne on memory's winds from Bone's first night amid the thousand towers of Palmary. *Our work is too delicate for that. We do not fight, save by ambush. We pass the paucity of doors, where a wealth of windows awaits. Why stalk an Everlux amid its score of guards, when a gawking noblewoman's necklace will do as nicely?*

*Why run races with springfangs?* Imago Bone wished he could answer his long-dead teacher. Success would have to do for his reply.

If he could continue slow and silent, he might have a chance. Already he could discern a white wall beyond the oranges, browns, and shrub-covered greens of the narrow path, with an iron door set into it. Peace and security, that contrast promised, though not for him. He thought of his lover awaiting him, days away in the desert. It was hard to maintain this deliberate pace. He wanted to demolish the distance between himself and his answers.

But even penitents on their way to and from ordeals in the Sandboil took this path slowly, avoiding the sharpest rocks. And the pits.

His right foot was just brushing upon an unusually large and inviting flat slab of a stone, when he had a vision of this bend in the path as seen from above, on the day when Brother Clement had, perhaps unwisely, shown Bone the bell loft. Looking down, Bone had observed this track snaking amid the rugged scree on the north side of the gorge, and a line of little figures just reaching this bend. Not for the first time, the city thief had wondered at the religious fervor that brought this order out into the desert, twenty miles from the shady spires of Palmary. The believers of the Swan (his lover included, depending upon her mood) even admitted their goddess was dead. Yet as if by some principle of sympathy, they displayed great talent for ushering others to the same state. Bone had noted then, how the penitents' leader had them detour well around the flat stone. He'd thought it peculiar at the time . . .

He paused, precarious, foot extended.

It was at that moment that the springfangs growled.

Bone looked up and saw that the beasts had not caught up with him after all.

They had instead been waiting for him, hiding behind the rocks on either side of the path.

The two lithe creatures scrambled atop boulders, regarding their prey. Heart hammering, he regarded them back. They had the bulk of bears and the grace of leopards. Their coats were a swirl of oranges, reds, yellows, and browns, and by day they were well camouflaged for the desert. In the moonless dusk they appeared scabrous, save for the slitted eyes that glimmered in the last rays of the sun, and the long, tapered ears that jabbed backward like daggers poised to throw.

Bone wanted to throw one of his own daggers, but at best that would slow

one of the twain. The springfangs made rattling sounds in their throats and bared their teeth.

It was the teeth of springfangs that made them the stuff of scholarly feuds and campfire legends. Each boasted an asymmetrical set, so that one of the pair bore an oversized saber-like canine upon the left side, and the other brandished a matching tooth upon the right. The skin on the opposing side of the mouth was thin and readily pulled back to reveal a phalanx of grinders. Some scholars and campfire wags had it that ancient wizards bred matched pairs to drag their chariots and rend their enemies. Whatever their origins, today a mated duo would hunt side-by-side, their synchronized attacks simulating one voracious maw.

Bone wished for his own mate about now. In his mind's eye he saw Persimmon Gaunt beside him, her red tresses an answer to the sunset, the rose-and-spiderweb tattoo upon her cheek a symbol of her passion and intellect, the daggers in her hands twin promises that someone watched his back.

But it was Persimmon, pregnant in their hideaway, who was depending upon him.

He edged backward . . . backward . . . wanting every bit of running start he could manage, keeping his eyes on the springfangs, hoping their instincts would overcome any training regarding this path, avoiding their predators' gazes and watching their haunches, awaiting the telltale quiver that presaged their leaps—

Now. He took a running jump, aiming well beyond the wide, flat stone.

The springfangs leapt half a heartbeat later, converging upon the dust he'd left behind. But one took a wild swipe mid-air and buffeted Bone.

He stumbled hard onto the path, the wind knocked from him. He scrambled to his feet, getting a glimpse of the beasts coiling into crouches and launching themselves into a run.

Their charge led them over the area he'd found suspicious.

With a crack of wicker, a clatter of sand and stones, and twin yowls of outrage, the springfangs fell into the trap. A scream confirmed there was something pointy down below.

But Bone was barely conscious of this, for he was lurching down the path as fast as he could manage. No time for finesse. With feet bleeding, but no worse, he fairly collided with the iron door.

*We do not celebrate our victories*, came Master Sidewinder's voice, *until we are safely in our dens*. Bone was a long way from celebrating. Panting, he eyed the lock. He was familiar with the work of all Palmary's locksmiths and many in Amberhorn to the north. Breaking into their workshops was once a favorite pastime of his. He carried a dozen customized picks.

But to identify the maker, and choose the right pick, in this light . . . The lock appeared to be a Hookworm Special. No, a Dodder Number Nine. . . . The half-diamond pick was called for . . . But the Xenocrates Conundrum greatly resembled the mid-series Dodders and required the snake-rake . . .

With a screech one of the springfangs clawed its way out of the pit. It lost no time sighting Bone and seeking vengeance for its howling mate.

Bone snatched the half-diamond pick, rattled the lock, and swung the iron door open. He barely registered his triumph and the alcove beyond as he slipped inside and flung the door shut.

As he clutched the bolt the springfang slammed the door back open, hurling Bone against the wall.

Luck was with Bone in two respects. First, the alcove was small and opened directly onto a wide stairway heading down; the springfang's momentum carried it into a tumbling plummet. Second, there were also two narrow stairways up, and one was close beside him.

He scrambled upward without another thought. Growls (and perhaps human screams) echoed through the Sanctuary of the Fallen Feather, but he had no time for them. His objective was in the tower in any case. That he might reach it rather more noisily than planned could not be helped.

The room he reached held desert survival gear—robes, dried meat and fruit, packs, tents and the like—and as there were many wicker boxes, Bone shoved several of them into the stairway, plugging that access point. Angry growls confirmed he was followed. He ducked through a beaded curtain, recalling with annoyance that the Sanctuary interior contained few actual doors.

He entered a hallway and realized at once something was wrong here. Something other than the bloody-footed thief and the bloody-minded springfang, that is.

There were no Brothers or Sisters, and the tapestries depicting the Swan Goddess lofting an ocean in her feathers and quenching the scorching primeval sun lay torn and strewn. Here and there lay a bloodstain upon the wall or floor.

Bone had no time to wonder about it. He ripped strips from a holy tapestry to bind his oozing soles before, wincing, he reunited his boots with his feet. Even so, the blood he'd left already would lead the springfang here before long. He got his bearings and found a spiral stairway ascending toward the upper sanctum. He estimated his footpads at the level of two *mouses* in his personal scale of sound, but his taxed lungs were forcing his labored breaths toward three.

*Alas, Master Sidewinder once said, we must keep breathing. Occupational hazard.*

Bone gasped his way out into a window-lined hallway lit with the last rays of the sun and the dying flickers of neglected torches. There a young monk, draped in an oversized robe, stood regarding the desert.

"Brother Tadros," Bone said, recognizing him, "you must run!"

The gangly youth, whose garments always either smothered him or revealed his ankles, simply kept gazing out at the dimming red-orange land. Tower-fires in Palmary glowed upon the horizon. Far to the east, Persimmon's canyon home betrayed no light.

"Tadros, it's Imago Bone. You remember. Gaunt and I came here a few months ago. No one trusted us, but we're used to that. You were always kindly, at least . . ."

Brother Tadros slowly turned to stare at Bone. There was no hint of recognition. Bone, a lean-faced man with dark hair gone sandy-colored from long exposure to the sun, and bearing distinctive scars upon each cheek, one the gift of a blade, the other of a flame, was used to being remembered. Tadros' lack of reaction was more unnerving than any scream.

"You thought we'd left," Bone went on, searching for a glimmer of a response, "but your elders have been hiding us. I sneak in once a month to see Brother Clement for news and supplies. I usually take my time and climb the tower at night, but now . . . I thought something was amiss. Last night I saw the Sanctuary light swinging like a pendulum."

"In fire and glass," Brother Tadros murmured, as though from as far away as Qiangguo, "we are purged."

"That doesn't sound like Swan talk," Bone muttered. "Come on."

He got an arm around Tadros, and while the youth did not resist, it took some effort to steer him to the upper sanctum.

This was a small chapel reserved for the use of the Sanctuary's elders, for those times when their administrative duties permitted only brief observances. The true glory of the Sanctuary of the Fallen Feather was in the public sanctum, which could hold scores of visitors. This one possessed but three pews, a modest stone altar in the likeness of a swan, an earthenware bowl for sacramental rainwater, and a candleholder of red glass hanging from a steel chain. Four open-air windows allowed the shining glass to be seen from miles off.

Pews were overturned, and there were red stains near the altar. The bowl was smashed and the Sanctuary light was dark. The wind from the windows raised a chill.

"Imago Bone," rasped a voice from beneath a pew. "Such remarkable timing."

An old monk, with tufts of white hair cut to resemble wings, stared out at Bone. Tonight his eyes even had the wide round look of a swan's.

"Clement," Bone began.

"You and your lover have ravaged this place," Brother Clement said, crawling out from his hiding place with a bitter scowl, "as surely as if you had set fire to it. How fitting that you are here a day early, but still only just after your enemies have left."

"Clement, later you can curse me from here to the Starborn Sea, but now we have to—"

The springfang leapt into the room.

It crashed into an overturned pew and smashed it away with the saber-toothed side of its mouth. Clement whirled with a speed that belied his age. "The sun is quenched!" he hissed. "Be at peace!"

At his ritualized words the springfang halted and lay down, though it kept its eyes focused upon Imago Bone.

Clement said, "I see the master thief was not so masterful on this occasion."

Retrieving his breath from whatever distant star it had fled to, and shifting away from Tadros to where he'd have the best options for flight of his own, Bone managed to say, "What has happened?"

"As I said, you have happened."

"We did not do this, Persimmon and I." Bone nodded to Tadros. "What has been done to *him*?"

"Purged," Tadros whispered.

Clement placed a shaking hand upon his own temple. "He has been robbed of mind. As were Sister Una and Brother Fion. Perhaps others, I do not know. All is chaos. Many were robbed of life, and perhaps they are better off. Your enemies departed only recently. We are fortunate most of our number were in Palmary to receive a ship from Mother Church in Swanisle, although perhaps it was our weakness that brought *them* upon us—"

"Who, Clement! Damn it, who did this?"

"The assassins of mind. They who are known as Night's Auditors."

Bone steadied himself with the altar. As he did so, the springfang looked as though it might relieve Bone of his throat, command or no command. "I have heard of them . . . They leave no mark . . . They hunt kings at the behest of kings . . ."

"They were hunting *you*. You and the mad poet you call your lover. You told us you were adventurers once, but no more. That you had decided to call it quits to savagery and sorcery and settle down. You hinted you had enemies, and of course we grant sanctuary to any who ask, with no questions. But you never said how powerful your enemies were!"

"I did not know the kleptomancers would send *them*," Bone said. "I did not know we mattered so much . . ."

Brother Clement raised his quivering hands. "Tell me no more! Lest they return and claim more souls!"

"You . . . you talked."

"Of course I talked! I told them everything about you. Persimmon Gaunt and Imago Bone, poet and thief, defying law and sensibility and nature itself, weaving drunkenly about the West until daring to grasp at a mundane life. Daring to start a *family*." Clement nearly spat the word. "As if you were normal human beings, and not lost souls."

"Did you tell them where?"

"I pointed from that very window."

Bone's dagger was out and at Clement's throat. The springfang rose, a rattle in its gullet.

"Blood," Tadros whispered.

"What would you have me do?" Clement said, sweat beading upon his forehead. "You brought this upon us. I saw good folk robbed forever of their

wits, made into human cattle. I saw others slaughtered. Including some who'd sought sanctuary of their own. What good would I be to anyone if they sucked the brains from me? They would have had the knowledge they wished either way. And this way . . . Perhaps. Perhaps I can help."

Bone wanted the word *help* to end with a screeching gasp, and let the Brother's treacherous blood spurt hot upon his blade. But then the springfang would be upon him, and there would be no hope for Persimmon Gaunt.

Bone lowered the dagger, which remained as dry as his voice. "When did they leave?"

"Perhaps twenty minutes ago, on horseback, down the gorge."

Bone looked to Tadros, and back again to Clement. "And you lay cowering here? While your people suffered?"

"I blew the silent whistle for the springfangs," Brother Clement said. "In hopes they would secure our vengeance. If they failed, I wished to stay hidden."

"They found me instead."

"That does not altogether displease me."

"I have no hope of outrunning riders."

"You will not be running." Brother Clement turned and whispered into the springfang's tapered ears. He nodded to Bone. "You will be riding Smoke."

Bone regarded his recent opponent. "That animal is not meant for riding."

"Then your lover is doomed."

"I will ride."

"I take it," Brother Clement said, "her mate is dead."

"He is in your pit."

Clement lowered his head. "They were trained to avoid the traps."

"I made him forget his training."

Clement's stare was as sharp as Bone's dagger. "Take me to him."

They left Brother Tadros in the sanctum, his words "death and dust" drifting in the air behind them.

The moon was up as they reached the pit upon the penitents' path. Brother Clement slid into the trap and put his hand upon the springfang that lay there unmoving, with a spike driven through its neck.

"Mirage," Clement said, "is dead." Smoke moaned. Cool air ruffled Bone's desert robe. That, surely, was why he shivered.



"Gaunt yet lives," Bone said. *And the life growing within her.*

"Then save her if you can," said Clement, returning to the path. "But I charge you with one task, one thing only in return for all we have sacrificed. Kill Smoke, once she has borne you to Persimmon Gaunt."

"What?"

"Springfangs mate more completely than any other beings. Next to that union, human love is as a tidepool beside the ocean. Smoke will always be a fragment now, in pain. If you truly bear love within you, thief, do not rob her of her release."

Bone nodded. Smoke crouched and he climbed upon her back, wrapping his arms and legs as best he could about her powerful form. Feeling her breath and pulse and warmth, it was as if he hugged a compact volcano. "Clement—"

"Do not thank me, or apologize, or do anything but leave this place, Imago Bone, and go as far away as the land of the stars' rising."

"Then I take my leave."

"Smoke—" commanded Clement, and the shout was also a farewell. "Now!"

And there came a rush that made the landscape a blur of moonlit boulders, and which left Imago Bone clutching the beast with all his strength, as if the force of gravity was now a phenomenon that originated with the Sanctuary of the Fallen Feather and its grief. He could imagine Master Sidewinder wincing at the insane careening charge of his former student across the desert, but he could not honor the memory of his mentor's subtlety any longer. His work was too urgent for that.



The day of the assassins dawned with a hint of rain amid the coiling clouds threading the gold-and-turquoise sky. The poet Persimmon Gaunt emerged from a cave, stretched, noted the blazing beauty of the morning, and threw up over the cliff.

That business done, she arranged a set of buckets and pots and bowls here and there on the canyon terrace. Rainwater wasn't to be wasted, especially when one battled nausea every morning. She knew there was some risk of discovery (she could imagine Bone chiding her), for a bucket open to the rain was also open to sight. But an enemy would have to hunt deep within this rocky

maze to glimpse the containers. And for Gaunt to trek down to the stream bore its own risks.

For all that she was not yet showing, her body reminded her of its condition every day, and she had to be more careful in everything now. Her mother and sisters in distant, misty Swanisle would be aghast to see her facing pregnancy in her desert, in the company of her thief. With an unexpected pang she imagined the care they would now be giving her, and the ample amounts of water on hand, and the eggs and milk and pork, and the green expanse of County Gaunt all around.

Then she imagined the chiding, the nagging, the scorn.

There were ballads about women like her, women who ran off into the wide world, sometimes hooking up with similarly rootless men. Indeed, she'd written a few. Audiences liked it if the protagonists perished weeping, pining for small farms and cramped rooms and respectability. She'd given them what they wanted, for the coin that had bought her—so far—her real ending, of freedom and marvels beheld.

And one more marvel still to come.

She patted her still-flat belly and returned to her empire, a collection of cool caves set halfway up the wall of a side gorge of the great canyon, filled with simple furniture and mementos, and festooned with ropes to trigger traps. For a time she'd feared this outlaw haven would seem an imprisonment after adventures down many roads, among mountains and forests and seas and tundra.

In fact, staying in one spot had opened a door for her, of sorts.

One of her "rooms," well-lit by the rising sun, was her treasure house. While Bone's own dark vault contained a clutch of jewels, coins, and three magical prizes, her bright domain was piled with books, and paper, and quills, and ink. When her various tasks were done, she could contemplate the intricate rockscape and the wide clear sky, or delve into the realms of history and fancy; and when her mind was filled, she could record her own impressions until evening. It was in this place that she'd already completed her *Greylight Idylls*, a feat impossible under the hardships of the road.

And now that her characters were reconciled to the death of the sun and the doom of everything, Gaunt had to accept that destroying the world twice would be repetitive. Memories swirled around her like dust devils. She wondered if the stuff of her recent life could inspire her.

Gaunt snapped a stick from a nearby bush. She did not want to waste paper and ink. Her wax tablet was at the far end of the cave, and in any event she associated it with travel. She swished one title after another into the sand, the thin shadows raised by the furrows offering a kind of insubstantial ink. One by one she swept all away. As time passed, clouds greyed the sky and raindrops fell, plinking inside the buckets and spattering the sand. Still she scribbled. Her eyes lingered on the words *The Book of Tattered Days*.

The sun tore briefly through the gloom.

The thin shadow of the tracing was consumed by the thick shadow of a man.

A man who had just now managed to silently scale the cliff.

Persimmon Gaunt did not think—not until she did three things. She sprang to her feet, threw her dagger, and sprinted into the caves. As she departed her treasure house for the deeper chambers, she paused only to snatch up her wax tablet and to yank upon the cord that collapsed her bookshelves over the opening. The same trigger toppled kitchenware to block the main cave.

An image of the intruder only now entered her mind: a man in black leather who could not possibly be Imago Bone.

Indeed, he could not possibly be alive, for he had a vast, jagged shard of mirrored glass embedded in his skull.

But perhaps worse, within that glass she thought she'd glimpsed herself, and not as a reflection. She had been standing at a barred tower window, alone.

"You cannot escape."

The man's curiously gentle voice followed her like the pattering of the rain into the sitting room. It was punctuated with the sounds of shattering wood and crumbling stone.

"The climb may have wearied me, Persimmon of County Gaunt. But as my strength returns, the shard's futures grow clearer."

She passed many mementos, lit by shafts of light from fissures in the ceiling—a bit of sailcloth from a pirate ship, a river stone from Swanisle, a ptarmigan feather from the tundra, a seashell from the drowned mountains of the South, a chip of peculiarly hovering stone from a wizard's tower—and ascended a rocky slope, ducking through the low entrance to Bone's haven and tugging another cord.

A kingwood portcullis, hauled here with great difficulty weeks ago, whacked down in front of the treasure room.

She took back all the curses she'd flung at Bone for that particular plan. As she sought the three magical souvenirs from the wizard's tower, she heard the man knocking aside her precious books from his path.

"You will compose no more poems, Persimmon. You shall have but one more journey. Be at peace! Life's conundrums will be for others to fathom. Life's wonders will be for other eyes. Accept this like a human being. Do not wriggle like a fish within a net."

She opened a teak box and grabbed the vial of ur-glue, the flask of luck-draught, and the jar of horomire. These were alchemical treasures of a lifetime which she and Bone might never possess again.

She shoved the ur-glue into a pocket, chugged the luckdraught in one burning gulp, and raised the horomire to the light. The oozy substance was the color of yesterday's sunset and it responded but sluggishly to her tipping and turning, as if it acknowledged gravity's pleadings only after a contemplative sip of tea.

A new voice spoke, rasping as with a throat full of dust. "That will not save you, Persimmon of County Gaunt." The second intruder had either bypassed the kitchen's barrier, or had already slipped inside.

The man who now crouched before the portcullis also wore black, and he bore a family resemblance to the man with the shard in his brain. But this one was old, not young, pocked and hulking rather than smooth and slim. He bore an iron lantern upon a thick chain around one hand, and the hissing flame inside sometimes careened outside and skittered to catch up with the lantern's movements, as though the connection of vessel and fire was more a partnership gone sour than a matter of cause and effect. Traceries of light, invisible to all but a close observer, coiled outward from the flame and snapped at the portcullis, like a clutch of incandescent baby snakes.

"It is simply 'Persimmon Gaunt,'" she said, meeting the man's bloodshot eyes. "I refused to be 'Persimmon Oakdaughter.' But a surname is useful now and then." She backed away, found amid shadows the thick rope that dangled from a fissure in the ceiling. She looped it around her free hand.

"Persimmon Gaunt," said the older man, "it is our business to understand potentialities. And we have perceived that nothing within your pile of treasures, or in your collection of meager skills, can defeat us."

"Then you needn't be worried." She was getting a sense of the horomire's weight. She pulled at the rope, throwing her full weight into it.

All the while the luckdraught flamed through her veins and pores. She felt alight with optimism. Even if she died she knew she would look astounding while doing so. She wanted to write an epic about a former farm girl who battled assassins. She wanted to live it.

New strength burst through her and she pulled, and pulled, and was rewarded with a distant sound of rumbling stones. The rope slackened.

"Whatever that may have accomplished," the lantern bearer said, "it is too remote to affect us."

She was ready to hurl the jar, but she waited, waited . . . "Truly? Then I am but a foolish woman."

She remembered arguing with Bone. *What kind of home has a self-destruct mechanism?*

*It would not be the strangest thing I've seen in the houses of the rich,* he had replied.

*We are not rich!*

*That depends greatly on perspective.*

The assassin frowned at her from beyond the portcullis. "You cannot bait me in this fashion. And Imago Bone cannot help you either. We've foreseen that only if someone who despises Bone grants him a boon can he intervene. And even were he to appear, we would deal with him."

"You have everything calculated."

"That is our business," said the younger man, who had finally broken her barricade. Gaunt winced to think of him stepping on her books.

Her first impression had been correct; he should not be alive. His face was nearly bisected by a ragged shard of magic mirror that protruded from the tip of his skull and sliced down to his nose. At times one eye or another looked askance at its shifting images. Gaunt again saw herself in the tower, which she recognized as the stronghold of the rulers of Palmary. She also perceived that within this vision she appeared slack-jawed and vacant of gaze.

"We are Night's Auditors," said the younger man. "We sift the stuff of human life, both within and without, both things dreamed and things made manifest, both past and future. It is our calling to reduce the irrational to dust, in honor of a future when all things are gridded, accounted, controlled."

"Really?" Gaunt said, and though she should have been terrified, the luckdraught still burned and perhaps more. *Closer, closer . . .* "I thought you murdered people's minds."

"That is another way we reduce the irrational."

"For gold."

"And amusement. One must earn a living. And your mind, poet, is surely a fascinating one."

"Enough," snapped the older man. "The lantern quivers with sudden new potentialities. Make this quick—"

He did not finish his command, for at that moment a mass of desert-colored fur and muscle slammed into him.

The old man was thrown across the sitting room and landed face-first upon an atlas open to a mostly hypothetical map, swirling with dragons, of the mysterious East.

The arrival of the springfang also toppled Imago Bone from its back. It seemed a wonder he had clung there at all. The face of Gaunt's lover, even with all its old scars and new discomforts, was a welcome sight. That, along with the luckdraught, made Gaunt feel flushed with triumph.

"Fool," said the young man with the shard in his head, and while his choices of fool seemed ample, Gaunt felt sure he addressed her. The springfang advanced upon him. But each nip and swipe it took, the man in black anticipated. Within the shard fluttered images of the springfang lunging and clawing—and missing.

Bone was already on his feet and giving Gaunt a tired wink. He had two daggers out and threw both in turn at the glass-maimed assassin.

Visions of blades flashed through the shard, as the man sidestepped one and ducked beneath the other.

"That's hardly fair," Bone said.

The old man had risen. An atlas burned on the floor beside him. "There is no 'fair.'" He raised the lantern, and the blob of fiery light began to burst forth from its innards. "There is only skill."

*Enough.* Gaunt hurled the horomire through the kingwood bars.

The shard showed the vessel smashing against the stones. The younger assassin lunged to catch it—

Blazing tendrils whipped from the older assassin's lantern to snare it—

Both were too late. The jar exploded in a burst of light that recalled the colors of dying fires, fading sunsets, scabbing blood, ancient amber. Night's Auditors, and the springfang they battled, all froze in place. As the glow died

they remained in a static tableau. Glass from the jar hung mid-air. Tongues of fire from the atlas stood like ruddy ice.

Persimmon Gaunt shuddered and flushed and was drenched in sweat, as the last of the luckdraught fled her system. She felt as though she'd won a footrace or wrestled a bear or passed a full night lovemaking.

"You were correct," she told the assassins. "I could not *hurt* you . . ."

Imago Bone was not quite as lucky. He was not caught in the horomire but the tip of his boot just connected with the effect, and he could not shift his foot. "Hm. Well. Good morning, Mistress Gaunt! Well done! Care to bring me a dagger from the treasure room?"

The caves were full of such things, tucked here and there in the crevices. Gaunt found one and pulled on the portcullis' rope.

It would not budge.

"My dear, I would love to oblige," Gaunt said, "but the horomire effect appears to intersect the barrier." She tossed Bone the dagger and he caught it in mid-air. He began slicing at the boot.

"Bless and curse the work of wizards," he said. "This also suggests I will not be able to slit these fine gentlemen's throats." He rubbed his eyes, looked at her anew, expression shifting from murderous intent to almost motherly concern. "Are you well? Did they harm you?"

"Not at all, thanks to the portcullis. And the horomire. They are trapped in someone else's web for a change."

Bone paused to regard the springfang. "Good. Although that very ensnarement means I cannot honor a promise."

"How so?"

Bone studied the cave shadows. "One more thing on my conscience. I will explain later. I am sorry, Persimmon, but we must be free of this place."

She followed Bone's glance to the blazing lantern and the shining shard. Both were in their own fashion glowing yet. Furthermore, these lights were flickering in defiance of the horomire.

*This place*, she thought. *My home. Or so I imagined.*

In the silence that followed, the sound of pounding rain filled the cave.

"Bone," Gaunt said quickly, "it is worse than that. I have set off the rock-slide mechanism." She nodded at the dangling rope.

He stared at her. "The intended result was to seal away our treasures if we



needed to abandon them. I did not think you would be trapped in the treasure room."

"Am I not your greatest treasure?"

"That was not funny," he said.

She nodded. "Then get the axe."

"We chose this wood precisely for its great density—"

"Get the axe," she repeated, and there was no arguing with her voice.

He departed, swiftly returning with their heaviest weapon, thus far used exclusively against firewood. It cut into the portcullis, but with great diffidence. Bone's efforts were accompanied first by grunts and then snarls. The rain fell ever more heavily. The lights within the horomire flickered more rapidly, as if mocking Bone's work.

On Bone's next swing, the axe-head came loose from the handle. It flew into the upper reaches of the horomire and stuck there, suspended over the assassins' heads.

"Try it," Bone said.

Together they shook the portcullis. It splintered some more, but did not break.

"I do not think there is time," Gaunt conceded.

"The luckdraught," Bone said. "Drink it."

"Already done. Well, I am not drinking the ur-glue . . . Wait! Perhaps by tugging—"

"They had horses! Wait here!"

"That was not the brightest thing you have ever said, Bone," she teased, but he was already gone. Gaunt clutched the ur-glue, as this was all she could do. No, not all. She pocketed several large gems and a thick assortment of coins. She made sure her wax tablet was in easy reach.

One had to plan for survival, even if one was anticipating instead the arrival of a diverted flash flood.

Or the awakening of assassins. Already she thought she perceived a twitch of a finger, a wrinkle of an eyebrow, a drop in the level of the axe-head. Alas, it looked as though it would fall between them.

Bone returned with a rope. Together they wove it into the damaged bars of the portcullis, Gaunt dabbing the connections with the alchemical goop. The substance shimmered in an oily way, telling her she was using too much.



But Bone would be needing her more than the ur-glue. Ur-glue could not watch his back or hold his hand. Ur-glue could not sing him to sleep or kindle his body to passion. Ur-glue could not bind anything as tightly as she was bound to him.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, looking at her face.

“The baby-to-be,” she said, not exactly truthful, not entirely false.

“You will be leaving here. I’ll pack your tablet. I go to the horses now.”

And he was gone again.

Persimmon Gaunt prided herself on her equanimity in the face of inevitable death. Even as a child she’d perceived how her elders were terrified of the thing, and how that terror robbed them of so much living. And so she had danced in graveyards, and sketched skeletons, and composed morbid poetry, earning early the label fey.

She whispered one of her first. Not her best. But it had stayed with her.

*Laugh in rain  
As water soaks  
Your every pore.  
Scoff at pain  
And smiling note  
Your every sore.  
Life is brief—  
The light will fade,  
The bell will ring.  
Grin at grief.  
In death’s own shade  
The birds will sing.*

Yet the girl Persimmon had not understood everything, the woman Gaunt reflected. This instance was different. This was not mere death. This was loss.

*Fool.* Her thoughts echoed the word of the assassin. *Even if your hopes are slim, fight for them!*

She gathered the three remaining daggers hidden in the treasure cave, realizing here was an exceptional chance for target practice. She threw one at each assassin, and as they stuck suspended within the horomire, she reckoned that in any fair fight they would strike true. She held the last blade and hesi-

tated. She did not know why, but she intuited that Bone's unspoken promise was to slay the springfang. Something about its eyes . . .

She might try, in this manner, to honor his pledge. But that might remove one more factor in favor of her survival.

Her family's survival.

She kept that last blade and commenced slicing at the kingwood. It was slow work. But it was work.

The springfang's tail coiled a bit, the daggers advanced, and the assassins' feet shifted by quarter-inches, when the rope stretched taut and the portcullis groaned. A distant whinny could be heard over the pounding rain.

The rope itself began to fray.

She thought of hiding at the farthest reach of the cave with her dagger ready. Instead she cut at the wood once more.

The wood gave.

A gap tore free, and the rope whipped out of sight, dragging splintered spears behind. The opening was rough and narrow and full of sharp points, but it was an opening. She wormed her way through, willing herself to move slowly enough to stay unperforated, even though she saw the man with the glass in his skull begin to smile.

She was free. She ran.

Behind her a growl erupted through the caves, an axe-blade clattered, and two men groaned in pain.

She reached the terrace and scrambled down toward the canyon floor in a fashion that under other circumstances would have been madness. At the bottom Bone waited. He waved her toward a pair of black horses snorting beside a dropped rope. One was covered in sweat. Bone pointed her toward the other, fresher-looking steed, and she did not argue.

As they mounted, behind them and high overhead two men in black stepped onto the terrace. Both were covered in blood. Gaunt saw no springfang.

"Ride!" Bone said, spurring his horse with his open-toed boot. "Do not look back!"

She rode. But look back she did, even knowing several legends citing the foolishness of such an act.

As such she was rewarded by the anticipated flash flood's arrival, bursting forth from its diversion through the ceiling-fissures of Gaunt and Bone's lower

caves, filling their former home with debris and slapping the invaders aside like a giant, frothy fist.

"Do you think the flood will kill them?" she shouted over the sound of galloping hooves and the roar of waters.

"I don't think that's the key question here!"

Together they fled up a steep-sloping side canyon as they'd long-ago agreed should such a contingency arise. And just in time, for the water surged down the main path and lapped hungrily at the edges of their own. With luck they and their stolen mounts would live. But they would have to abandon the horses soon, as they had abandoned treasure, and books, and security. Perhaps there was no constancy anywhere in this world, only the road, and saying goodbye.

Goodbye to everything but each other.

As their pace slowed with the higher, rougher ground, Bone said something she could not make out. "What?"

"I promised you I would give you a home!" he shouted this time. "I am a breaker of promises!"

Lightning flashed. She thought of the springfang. She thought of the wax writing tablet he had thought to bring along, even now.

"I will go anywhere with you," she said, "through all my tattered days and as far away as the land of the stars' rising." And at first she feared he could not hear her with the rush of rock walls and the rumble of hooves and water and the roar of the sky in answer to its jagged lights.

"Good," came his reply. "Because that is where I think we must go."