

THE
SILK MAP

ALSO BY CHRIS WILLRICH

The Scroll of Years

THE SILK MAP

A GAUNT AND BONE NOVEL

CHRIS WILLRICH



an imprint of Prometheus Books
Amherst, NY

Published 2014 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover illustration © Kerem Beyit
Cover design by Nicole Sommer-Lecht

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228
VOICE: 716-691-0133
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.PYRSE.COM

18 17 16 15 14 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Willrich, Chris, 1967-

The silk map : a Gaunt and Bone novel / by Chris Willrich.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-61614-899-7 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-1-61614-900-0 (ebook)

1. Missing person—Fiction. 2. Fantasy fiction. 3. Maps—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3623.J57775S54 2014

813'.6—dc23

2013047298

Printed in the United States of America

For my parents, who've always been ready to walk a thousand miles for us.

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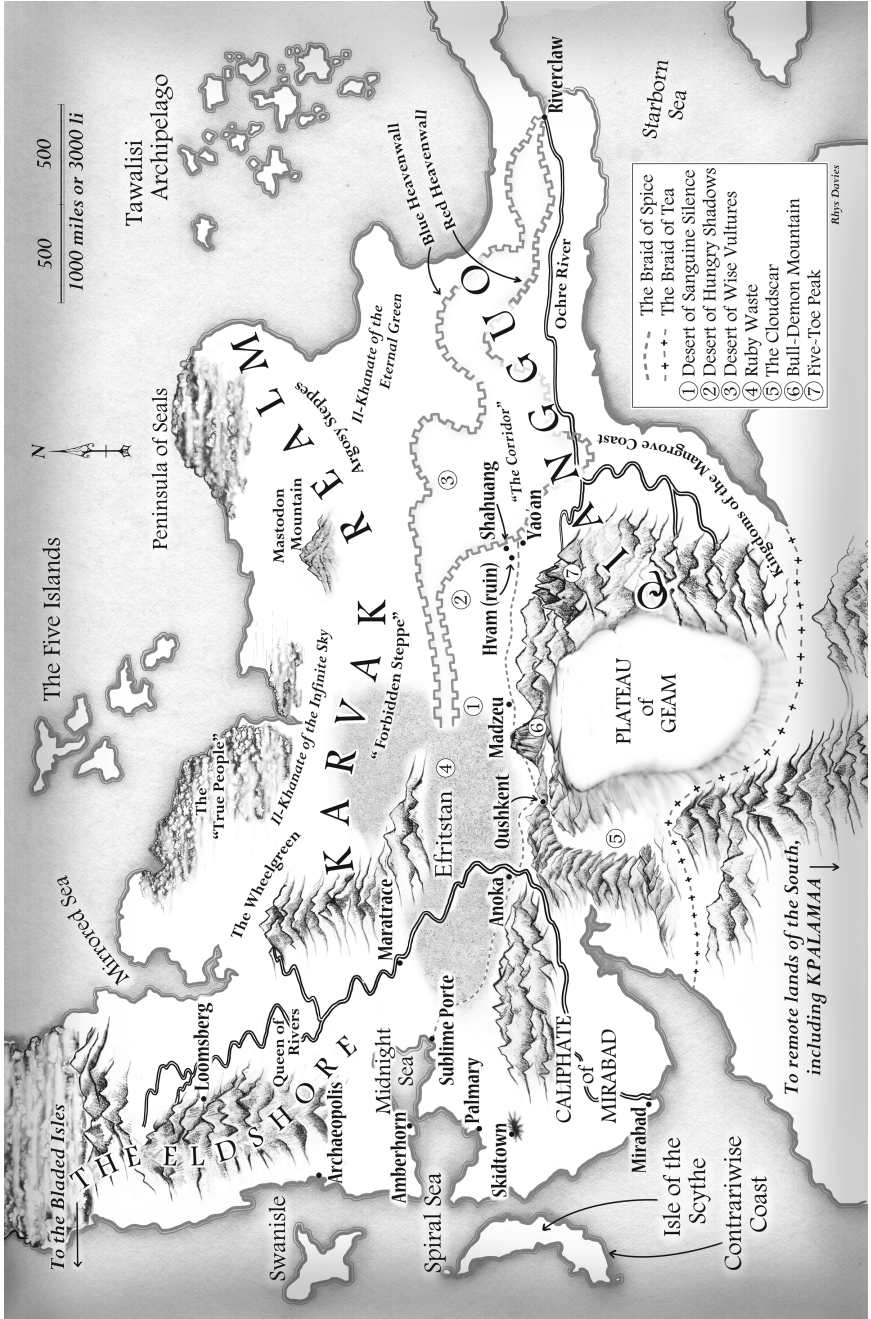
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A NOTE ON DISTANCES:

For simplicity the distance unit li is assumed to be roughly three miles.



500
1000 miles or 3000 li



- The Braid of Spice
- - - The Braid of Tea
- ① Desert of Sanguine Silence
- ② Desert of Hungry Shadows
- ③ Desert of Wise Vultures
- ④ Ruby Waste
- ⑤ The Cloudscar
- ⑥ Bull-Demon Mountain
- ⑦ Five-Toe Peak

Rhyr Davies

To the lands of the South,
including KPALAMAA ↓

PROLOGUE

MONKEY MIND

Spinning in a twilight world between darkness and light, earth and sky, Being and The Other Thing, Monkey flees.

In her dreams she's flying again over Qiangguo and the lands that encircle it, bright emeralds of the Mangrove Coast, green sprawl of the Argosy Steppes, browns, reds, and grays of the deserts where the great trade road meanders like a thread woven by a trembling hand. Monkey would tremble too, if it were all real. Once she truly leapt across clouds and made Heaven shake; now she can't even scratch her nose.

Yet in her mind she's free. And she sees things, and she hears.

Things that certain parties wish she hadn't.

She winks over her shoulder at the dozen dark shapes that dog her, careening through the sky like black meteors. Although meteors really shouldn't have arms, claws, and three blazing red eyes.

They are intimidating, these dream-monsters, but she is Lady Monkey and she's not about to hide at home, not when her curiosity's aroused.

As she descends from her cloud-leap, she hears the whispering of the Heavenwalls, those twin fortifications that cross the land like coiling dragons, meeting at Qiangguo's capital in the east and in the heart of the desert in the west. There an eternal firestorm swirls in the sands where true dragons go to mate.

And Monkey, because she is Monkey, hears the hiss of their power, their breath, as it is siphoned into the Red Wall and the Blue, and drawn across the land, absorbing still more vitality from the land itself as it goes. At last this accumulated *chi* converges at Qiangguo's capital and whorls through the Purple Forbidden City, unheeded by the inhabitants save as a gust of wind here, a rumble of stone there. Having swirled and mixed, the chi flows back to the Heavenwalls' tails, and the cycle continues. Back and forth the power travels, unguided, for it is as yet unmastered, waiting for someone to give it shape.

There is something uneasy about its whisperings today.

Monkey's dream-form descends near the earth, where three of the clawed shadow-shapes catch up with her.

One slashes, and Monkey's blood falls upon the nearest Wall, the red. A second does likewise, and blood falls upon the water of a nearby lake. The third's three eyes flash in expectation.

"You will perish here," it says, voice deep and urgent as an avalanche, *"and be poisoned in the waking world."*

Its words are full of refined loathing, the kind ordinary mortals only aspire to. Anybody can hate, but it takes multiple lifetimes of caustic living to become a Charstalker.

Monkey, she has to admit to herself, might be in a bit of trouble. Still, she is the dream-image of a power that shook Heaven.

As she falls past a juniper tree, she stretches her sky-metal staff to catch a branch, thinking thoughts of lightness. The branch groans and swishes back into place, throwing Monkey in a new direction. She somersaults as she moves, surprising one Charstalker with a bash to the shadow-cranium.

The creature becomes a billow of black smoke, snaking its way west and south toward its master. There are sounds of alarm from a nearby village, as dreaming people sense the battle.

A second Charstalker veers in for a slash, but Monkey's free hand shoots out and grabs the thing in what passes for the neck. It rakes at Monkey like a housecat being given a bath. This might not have been a good idea. The third Charstalker spoke true; these wounds might poison Monkey's own chi.

However, at that point they collide with the bricks of the Red Heavenwall.

The Charstalker, triple-eyes flashing with rage, becomes a smoke-trail, following its companion. There are shouts from a guard post atop the Wall, as dream-soldiers sense the conflict.

"You will not get to do that to me," says the third, and Monkey feels claws digging into her neck. *"You are dream-stuff, not stone."*

Monkey falls down the wall, losing a branch. She hits ground hard but rises and grabs at the Charstalker.

"You can't get rid of me. I'll take too much of your flesh with me. If you die in dreams, you'll be an empty shell. To live, you must accept the poison and become like me."

"Wondrous Lady Monkey is not like anyone!" she answers, and runs beside the Wall.

She came to this spot for a reason. It's the heart of the unease she's sensed in the Heavenwalls' chi. There is an old, great fissure here in the Red Heavenwall, beside a huge pond amid the junipers. Here an Emperor died alongside his daughter, she who founded the secret society of the Forest.

Monkey runs across the water and leaps inside.

"No—"

Entering the Wall is like stepping into a gale. Ordinary mortals would not notice a thing, except perhaps a sense of heightened anticipation as they stood among the terra cotta soldiers in this modest tomb for an emperor. But here the chi of the land courses, its path swirling and twisting in this wound.

Before its power, the Charstalker cannot maintain its dream-form. It comes apart, and shreds of it whip beyond the chamber, passing through the stones. Monkey can't know what will become of it, but it's too weak to poison the mighty chi of Qiangguo.

The chi of Qiangguo . . . now Monkey, rubbing her neck in its midst, feels all around her the unease that she scented before. She scowls a dream-sowl. It is as if she's forgotten something, having slept so long . . .

"You're up to something," she addresses the life-force of the land. "What is it? You can tell wise Monkey. When have I ever troubled you?"

It's as if a blast of air roars down from cold mountains. It knocks dream-Monkey off her feet. She collides with the toppled statue of an emperor, broken by tomb-robbers.

She lands on one hand and sneezes.

"*You're* looking for an Emperor again, aren't you? You still won't consider me?"

Again the wind howls; she somersaults out of the tomb, across the water, and onto a treetop, perched upon her staff.

She sniffs and smirks. "I scented it. An outlander? You're not trying *that* again? Your last three couldn't even figure out what was happening, let alone survive the trip. And of course, the Forest keeps hiding the home-grown candidates. No, you're just going to have to accept it. No chi-wielding Emperors for you."

She flips, leaps off the waters of the pond, and arrives back in the shadow of the Wall. Dream-Monkey breathes deep, taking in the air from the fissure.

"No . . ." she says. "You picked *that* one . . . but as I scented him, I know him.

The son of ne'er do wells. It's against his blood to rule anything. Perhaps not even himself. You can't be so crazy. Unless . . ." She sniffs, sensing a tendril of chi leaving this place for a remote land. "You're in cahoots with something . . ."

Dream-Monkey glances to her right, and sees Charstalkers swarming around her staff like nine scholars' scattered ink.

This won't do.

She sighs, turns to the fissure, and sucks in as much air and chi as a supernatural simian can. Turning, she *foofs* a blast of vital breath to the east.

Charstalkers scatter like spooked pigeons. They're all still present, however, and Monkey has just one chance. She leaps and rolls and snatches the staff. She is vulnerable for just one moment, as she gathers strength to cloud-leap once more. Claws slash, and dream-blood flies.

Screeching, she launches herself across the world. Just like in the old days.

Whenever her blood drops near a dreaming village, sleepers imagine they can fly.



Monkey passes over meandering rows of desert dunes, over the fires and lightning strokes of the Dragonstorm, over forests of endless shadow and snowy mountains that seem draped in light.

At last she descends to a gray ocean of the far West, a place where true dawn hasn't quite begun, where three immense, craggy islands spear through the gloom.

She lands upon a titanic promontory that resembles a dragon's head, petrified just before rending another stony dragon on the opposite side of a narrow, sheer-sided strait. An extension of the third island is also present, stretching like a draconic head lowered beneath the other two, its skull forming skerries breaking the white waves two thousand feet below Monkey.

Down there are men. They ride dragon-prowed longboats, warring amid the skerries with spear and axe. They are a peculiar lot, pale as though imbued with the elemental essence of snow, their hair and beards often an outlandish red or yellow. Their blood is as red as any mortal's, however.

But the warriors aren't what truly snatches Monkey's interest. What she perceives most is the chain.

A vast coil of steel wraps around the “neck” of the stone dragon she stands upon, stretching across the strait to loop the similar rock formation opposite. In between, it plunges into the waters, and she can perceive how it also snares the dragon-shape beneath the waves.

She can perceive it—because of the invisible chi crackling through the links.

Monkey is so overcome, she does a backflip.

“Oh! Oho! He’s not really to be Emperor at all, is he? He’s bait, for . . . oh, that’s *crazy*. I like crazy.” Monkey frowns. “Though I do feel sorry for the kid, a little.”

A cold breeze cuts across dream-Monkey’s nose, and she shakes her head. Somewhere down there a warlord raises the severed head of his adversary, becoming the “master” of the Great Chain. Until next time.

“I get it,” Monkey says. “It can’t work unless we get him out of the trap he’s in . . . and the best tools for that are his very own parents. It’s time for Monkey to earn again her reputation.”

She prepares to cloud-leap, but the nine Charstalkers have found her.

Monkey plunges off the promontory just in time, splashing among the dream-warriors. She doesn’t know how conscious they are of the dream-state, but they do notice her, babbling in some barbarian tongue Monkey can’t bother to take the minutes to learn. They jab spears and hurl axes, so Monkey doesn’t feel too sorry for them when she plucks nine dry hairs from the top of her head and blows them hither and yon with the last Heavenwall chi in her lungs.

Each hair lands upon a pale warrior, and each warrior’s appearance blurs and becomes the spitting image of Monkey.

When the Charstalkers land, it isn’t pretty. They rend and bite and poison, and mortals can’t shrug such things off. Here in this cold land, nine brutal men will awaken with darkness in their hearts.

But this is not Monkey’s problem. Bracing herself against a rocky underwater shelf, she cloud-leaps again.

The world rushes past her in a white-green-blue-gray-brown blur, until the great mountains of her continent stab the sky below her feet.

“You have no idea,” she whispers to the unhearing tiny figures of Per-simmon Gaunt and Imago Bone. “You have no idea he’d be far safer where he

is. But I can see it now . . . it's him or the whole world, kids. Even Wondrous Lady Monkey has to fall in line on this one. But she's going to turn it to her advantage; she always does."

As the world rushes toward her and her dreams turn dark, she murmurs, "Forgive me."