

**DANGEROUS
GIFTS
A BABYLON STEEL NOVEL
GAIE SEBOLD**

**First published 2013 by Solaris
An imprint of Rebellion Publishing Ltd,
Riverside House, Osney Mead,
Oxford, OX2 0ES, UK**

www.solarisbooks.com

**ISBN: 978 1 78108 079 5
Copyright © Gaie Sebold 2013**

**The right of the author to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in
accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.**

**All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owners.**

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

To Dave. My constant star.

Chapter One

I WALKED INTO the humid, faintly citrus-tinged air of The Swamp, an Ikinchli hangout run by my friend Kittack, looking for a chat and maybe a sip of one of the few things he serves that don't dissolve the top off my tongue.

The minute I was through the door my shoulder-blades started to itch. There were a lot of hunched shoulders, a lot of people looking at me out of the corners of their eyes, and that sharp silence of conversations that have finished in mid-air. Several of the males' cranial crests were up; not a good sign in a normally laid-back bunch of lizards.

Kittack's customers are mostly, like him, expatriate Ikinchli from Incandress, their home country, where the self-appointed master race, the Gudain, are in the habit of giving them a pretty wretched time.

I glanced around for Kittack, but he must have been down in the cellar. The barmaid, Talia, was looking worried. Being a lamia, she can normally calm down punters just by giving them the eye till their knees buckle, but nobody seemed to be in the mood.

I walked up to the bar as though I hadn't a care in the world, but I kept my hands free. "Hey, Talia. Kittack around?"

"Hey, Babylon. He's just..."

I felt the Ikinchli come up behind me. He was a big lad; only half a head shorter than me, with dark chestnut scales on his head and arms fading to creamy yellow on the chest and belly; solidly muscled. Pretty, but unfortunately he didn't look friendly. He stood a foot or so along the bar, leaning on one elbow, and looking me over. "When you start serving Gudain in here, Talia?" He said, without taking his eyes off me.

Oh, dear.

"I told Kittack this place needs better lighting," I said. "I'm human, not Gudain."

"Oh?" The Ikinchli said. "Funny. Look like Gudain to me; darker, maybe. Maybe you got dirty doing Gudain's dirty work."

"Excuse me?"

"She called you Babylon, right? Only one person I know called Babylon in this town. Someone who messed in our business. Someone who helped the Gudain pull one big trick on my people."

"I don't know what you think I've done, mate, but..."

He leaned forward and hissed, "The *Itunnacklish*. There *is* no *Itunnacklish*."

Ah.

The *Itunnacklish* was a girl born, to all appearances, Gudain, who, if mated at the right time to both an Ikinchli and a Gudain male, became a fusion of the two species, proof that they had once, as Ikinchli legend had it, been one and the same. She'd been in Scalentine for her transformation, and I'd been sent to find her, not knowing, at the time, who or what she was.

She was still here, under the eye of the Diplomatic Section, but she was due to go home and take up her role as one of the ruling council of Incandress. And I had agreed, for reasons that seemed more ill-considered by the minute, to think about going with her.

Right now, though, that wasn't my problem; getting this guy out of my face without a fight, *that* was a problem.

"What she is or isn't is no business of mine," I said.

"She is *Gudain*. Only thing any Gudain wants is to live high on our sweat. She is a fraud, and you..."

I saw the fist coming in and got my arm up before it connected with my argumentative friend's head. The hitter - another Ikinchli lad - taller, skinnier and with paler colouring, looked shocked when my forearm connected with his. Lucky for him I wasn't

wearing studded bracers; those are strictly for when you *want* to rip someone's arms up. Even so, there was a loud slap, and he winced.

"You want to hit someone, why don't you take it outside?" I said.

He hissed something in Ikinchli. The other hissed back. What little Ikinchli I know mostly means something on the lines of "bring it on, big boy"; this conversation sounded similar in meaning, but rather less friendly in intent.

People were watching, some were pushing back their chairs, as if about to join in.

The cellar door swung open and Kittack walked into the room and swore. At least, I think he swore. It can be hard to tell in Ikinchli. "Babylon?" he said. "You for hire today?"

"You think this is the time?" I said, still holding my arm up between the two angry customers.

"I think this is a fine time for me to hire someone who can rip off heads and spit down necks," he said. "You want to start with these two?"

"Now, Kittack, you *know* I don't rip off heads. Generally. Fingers, perhaps. Even arms, if necessary. But no heads. And no spitting. Spitting is vulgar."

"I will pay you very much money. Maybe all the money they will never be spending in here again because *they will have no arms left to lift a drink with.*"

The two had stopped arguing and were looking at me uncertainly.

Talia slid out from behind the bar with a pot, and I heard a rattle as she dropped in a couple of coins.

"Talia," I said, "what are you doing?"

It really isn't possible for a lamia to look innocent, but she tried. "I just thought maybe I'd see if anyone wanted to, perhaps, place a little wager..."

"No bets, Talia. Besides, I don't want to fight anyone. I just came in for a nice quiet drink and a chat."

"Yes," Kittack said. "Like most people. Anyone who wants to have a big argument, they can get out of my bar, now, and not come back until they can act like respectable citizens, and leave the political stupids at home where they belong, okay?"

The first Ikinchli hissed disgustedly and turned away. "I have no home, not any more. You know why? Taken for Gudain taxes." He snatched up his coat, catching the chair and knocking it over. "You believe Gudain lies if you want. Gudain and human, I don't see no difference; humans beat up on us too. Me, I got better things to do. No pretenses, no One who is Both. When our land is cleansed of all the Gudain, *then* we can go home."

He slammed his way out, pulling a puff of cold air into the warm moist atmosphere.

His opponent let out a breath, and his crest sank. He sat down and put his hands to the sides of his head, as though it hurt, and muttered something. One of his friends reached over and slapped him on the shoulder. "More drink, hey?" he said.

Kittack signalled Talia, and turned to the lad. "You going to be any more trouble?" he said.

"No."

"Ah, is stupid peoples everywhere," Kittack said. "You drink up now, don't talk any more politics, okay?"

A few other people got up and left quietly; but I didn't like the way they were looking at me.

"Kittack, can I have a quick word?"

"Sure." He looked around, sighed, and said, "You come on in back. Talia, get Babylon a drink. On the house. And one for me."

Once she had done so, he shut the door behind us, shaking his head.

I know Kittack pretty well. We've been friends and occasional lovers for a while. "You all right, Kittack?"

“What I just did, maybe that wasn’t so smart.”

“How do you mean?”

“Never mind. What you need?”

“Advice,” I said, watching his face. “I’m thinking about taking up a job guarding the Itnunnacklish, for a few days.”

He looked away from me, fidgeting with his glass. “Why you got such a thing for her, Babylon? You done her one pretty big favour. Now you want to walk into a pile of *guak* for her?”

“I haven’t said I will, yet.”

“Thinking about it.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Why *was* I thinking about it? Sure, I needed money, I always seem to. Besides, I know what it’s like to be a symbol of something important. Been there, done that, got the screaming nightmares. She needed friends.

But already this job was putting my back hairs up, and I hadn’t even spoken to her.

“I haven’t said yes, Kittack. But I’d be grateful for some pointers about Incandress. So long as you don’t mind...”

“Mind? No. Some of them talk about home all the time: ‘oh, so wonderful, why we ever leave,’ you know? Sometimes I say, if it was all so wonderful, what you doing here, wailing all over my bar?” He shook his head. “Me, I don’t talk so much. But okay. Incandress, she is warmer than here. Lots of hot pools, too.” He looked mournful for a moment. “Very good for the blood, hot pools.”

“I’m sure they are. But I really meant the people.”

“Ah, okay. Well, you know, Gudain, some are maybe decent. Treat you okay. But to many, anyone who is not Gudain is a beast, made to work, and just waiting to sacrifice Gudain maidens to the Old. The Old don’t want sacrifice maidens, what good is a Gudain girl to some Ikinchli who is dead for two hundred years? But some Gudain, they believe this, or maybe they just want to.”

“I remember you told me.” The Maiden Sacrifice legend got dragged out whenever someone wanted an excuse to beat the Ikinchli up, it seemed like.

“Oh, and the Gudain, they are very...” He paused. “They don’t like to talk about bouncy. Or think. Or do, much.”

“What? They don’t talk about sex?”

He grinned at me. “All this bouncy is very animal, you know? The Gudain, they are most superior and have no animal needs.”

“They must *do* it, otherwise where do little Gudain come from?”

“Not many little Gudain. Also, just don’t *mention*. For Gudain bouncy is only to happen with the one person, after much delicate ceremony, and in private, and never, ever to speak of. Not even jokes.”

“You’re kidding.”

He shook his head, still grinning. Bloody lizard; *he* wasn’t the one who was going to have to weld his mouth shut if he went to Incandress.

“And religion?” I said.

“They worship the Great Artificer. Who is like big super-Gudain who raise Gudain up from rolling around in hot mud with the rest of us, and make them all special. They go to a special house and burn smelly smoke to talk to him.”

“All right. So what about your people, Kittack? Anything I need to not mention?”

“The Itnunnacklish, she is a good subject to stay off.”

“Since, *if* I take the job, I’m going to be standing right next to her most of the damn time, I’m hardly going to be talking about her. Like that’s going to help. And Ikinchli religion?”

Kittack’s tail shuddered; it took me a moment to realise he was actually embarrassed. It’s not a state he visits very often.

“They say, every Ikinchli who dies has all the wisdom of their life, and all those bits of wisdom, they are the Old. So gods and ancestors, they are pretty much the same thing, for Ikinchli.” He gave a long, hissing sigh. “You don’t accuse anyone of kidnapping maidens for sacrifice, probably you be fine. Me, I don’t go to ancestor ceremonies in a long time. The older I am, the more it seems is all smoke and mirrors, you know? And I see people get treated like *guak* all the time, what are the Old doing? Nothing. Is no surprise some Ikinchli get tired waiting for the Old, and start fighting back. You sit on someone long enough, one day they will bite your bottom.”

“Are we talking civil war here?”

“War, I don’t know. Big mess and lots of people dead, maybe.”

“Sounds pretty much like war to me,” I said. “Enthemmerlee wants to prevent that, doesn’t she?”

“Wants, yes. But you going to have your work cut, Babylon, to keep her safe. Plenty of Gudain want her dead, for what she is. Ikinchli too. The ones who hate Gudain and think she is a trick they are playing, but also, some of the ones that believe she is real. Because, there is a big difference between you believe in something, and it turns up, you know? Sometimes a thing looks better when it is still a long way away.”

Yes. The Avatars on my home plane had looked a lot better (or at least, more impressive) before I’d become one of them.

Kittack stared into his glass.

“Kittack?”

“I got family, back home. Tried to make them come here, but they won’t.”

“I didn’t know.”

“I said to them, Scalentine is a bit crazy, but at least you got a chance here. But, ‘Oh, no, can’t leave, got to look after the ancestors, got to keep the family farm,’ why? This farm? It is some mud, some rocks, lucky if you get half a crop. If you do, the *guak* come and say, ‘Oh, look, you got some food, now you owe us big taxes, thank you so much.’”

“Guak? I thought that meant shit?”

“Also is a word for the Fenac. They are like the militia here, only mostly not so decent. What can I do? I send the family some money.” He swallowed the rest of his drink, and blew out air through his nostrils.

“If I go,” I said, “you want me to try and get in touch with your people while I’m there?”

He turned his cup around in his hands, the webbing between his fingers flexing. “They are old,” he said. “Change, new things, these frighten them. Gudain, too. And you, maybe.” Okay, maybe I look a little like a Gudain. Unlike Ikinchli I don’t have scales, a tail or a long blue tongue. But I’m more of a bronze colour; Gudain skin is green-tinged.

“So the Ikinchli won’t trust me because I look like a Gudain and the Gudain won’t trust me because I’m *not*. Great. Well, thanks.” I got up.

“Babylon.”

“What is it?”

“I got to ask *you* a favour now.” He was looking at his glass again, not that there was anything in it.

“What would that be, Kittack?”

“You got your foot into politics, with this. Politics and religion both. Me, I got a bar to run, you know? Best, maybe, you don’t come in here for a while.”

“Ah. Right. So you don’t want to hire me after all.”

He tried to smile. “Can’t pay what you’re worth anyway. I’m sorry, okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Me too.”

THAT LITTLE ENCOUNTER had put me in a grim mood. I needed to get my head freshened, as I had a couple of clients that afternoon, and a party to prepare for. I headed home through the smart part of town; by the good hotels and the Exchange hall. There’s a little park there where, in summer, people walk about and lie on the grass, and listen to musicians or strolling players, or get themselves a little loving. Too cold for much of that, now; one draggled lutist stamping and blowing on his fingers, and a meaty chunk of a man standing on an upturned crate. He had two chins and thick black hair, and had a little symbol sewn onto his coat: it looked like a square with a triangle on top. Standing with their hands clasped behind them, either side, were a skinny big-eyed boy no older than sixteen, who, in contrast to the speaker, lacked any chin at all, giving him a chickenish look, and an older, more solid lad who seemed faintly familiar.

They’d already drawn a bit of a crowd: the lute-player, obviously hopeful that he’d get a bit of attention when the speaker was done; a handful of delivery-boys taking time off their bosses wouldn’t approve; a couple of the freelance whores, underdressed for the weather. A mostly human crowd, for a wonder. The good people of Scalentine, eager for a moment’s amusement.

“Fellow Citizens! Look around you!” The chunky man invited, gesturing in case they hadn’t understood his instructions. “What do you see?” he said. “The best hotels, the best eating-houses, shops full of finery and gold. But for ordinary citizens, the price of grain is rising by the day. The bread is being torn from the mouths of children. Can *you* afford these places? No.” I wondered if he meant the tall, human exquisite about two feet in front of him, who was wearing a year’s worth of a dockworker’s earnings, and a hairstyle so fantastically elaborate it looked as though it were designed by a clockmaker. “And why are these things beyond your reach? Because other forces are pushing you aside. Forces that do not belong here, and the people who encourage them, and befriend them, and ride side-by-side with them over the rights of those who built this city.” I wondered whose rights were being violated, exactly. As far as I was aware, no one knew who had built Scalentine. I should have left; this was doing nothing for my mood. But the speaker had an oddly hypnotic quality.

“Friends, I – Angrifon Filchis, a son of the city through ten generations – am here to tell you that our time is coming.” He leaned forward, encompassing the crowd with his pale brown, slightly bulbous eyes. “Rightful citizens are weary. They see other people getting the biggest slice of a loaf their forefathers ground the grain for. We know what is due to us. We are the Builders.”

“Who’s *us*?” Someone said.

“Why, *humans*, friend. People like you and me.”

Oh, great, one of *those*. I thought they’d gone back under their rock, but maybe it was getting crowded under there.

“Why is the price of grain so high? Why is it so hard for decent people to find work? Because there are too many people who have come here to leach off what our fathers built. People who only help their own, always giving each other a hand up, selling to each other at a discount, creating their own cabals and secret gatherings within *our* city. And our rulers, what

are they doing? They're ignoring the problem. They're saying it *isn't* a problem. Now why is that, friends? Why do you suppose that's happening?

"I'll tell you why. Because in the *very midst* of our rulers these people have friends and supporters. Some of them even have high positions of their own; and you can't always tell, can you? Because not all of them are obvious, oh, no. You can spot dra-ay or monishi or barracklé. But can you spot weres? Not unless it's a full moon, you can't. And I say it's time we fought back. It's time we rooted out these weeds—" he made a yanking gesture with one pudgy hand "—before they can grow and spread. Root them out, I say, before they strangle all our futures! Root them out and let the good crops grow!"

"Root them out!" The chicken-necked boy yelled, with squawky enthusiasm, jerking his fist. "Root them out!"

"Root them out!" someone in the crowd yelled. "Root them out!"

Failing to be picked up by the crowd, this rousing cry whimpered out. "What do you mean, exactly?" someone else said. "Are you saying, you know, that people should, like, attack people? Because the millies'd have something to say about that."

"No, of course I'm not saying any such thing!" Filchis said. "Why, that would be incitement, and I wouldn't dream of it. All I'm saying is that maybe those who don't belong here should be encouraged to leave. Although I will say to you: ask yourselves what happens when someone breaks the law. Someone who, perhaps, is supported by those very forces I speak of. Is justice done?"

He leaned forward. "Let me tell you about something that happened recently. A friend of mine was walking home, minding his own business, and he was *set upon*, because he was in some part of the city the dra-ay consider theirs! *In our own city!* He was beaten bloody! And when he went to the militia, what did they do? Why, they gave *him* a warning. And you know why? Because the militia itself, the militia that's supposed to protect our interests, has been infiltrated. So ask yourselves how you feel about a law that is biased against you."

"This friend of yours," I said, "where was he?"

"A district that is being overwhelmed by the dra-ay," Filchis said. "The point is, it was in *Scalentine*. Our own city!"

"Only I've been in a dra-ay district, and I didn't get beaten up."

He looked me over, then smiled with a sort of greasy gallantry. "But you, madam, carry a sword, and look as though you could use it. Perhaps they felt it was easier to set on a man walking alone and unarmed."

"Your friend was walking around unarmed?" someone else said. "Daft, is he?"

There were a few snickers, and Filchis shot the speaker a flat, ugly look. "And shouldn't the militia be doing something about that?" he said. "What sort of city is it where everyone needs to carry weapons? Besides, what right have the dra-ay to tell us where we can't go in our own city?"

"Well, I can't walk into your house any time I please," I said. "That's called the law, I believe."

Another voice rose, if that was the word for a bass rumble like someone rattling gravel in a drum. "You know what I heard? I heard some human tried to get into one of the sacred spaces, where they keeps their gods. 'Cos that, that really annoys 'em. They tend to be real specific about it, too. They have signs up in like eighteen languages telling people to piss off out of it, and if you can't read, they'll tell you, in yer own language. Smart bastards, the dra-ay. So either this friend of yours is a bit soft in the head, or he was looking to cause trouble. That's what it sounds like to me."

Filchis was peering over the crowd. "Would you trust the propaganda and rumour-mongering of dra-ay over the words of an honest human?"

The crowd was shifting back and I finally got a glimpse of the speaker. “Depends,” she said. “Show me an honest human, first.”

She was short – as in, she came up to just above my waist. Her skin was a deep green-brown, the colour of river water under trees, and she had small sharp tusks, a shortsword tucked into a battered leather scabbard, and the easy, flexed stance of a professional fighter.

“Well,” Filchis said. “I see. So you’ve been listening in. Perhaps you’ve been sent, to infiltrate our ranks, hmm? To act as a spy?”

“A spy?” She grinned a grin that looked as though it might have been a few people’s last sight. “And me so carefully disguised, eh?”

There was more laughter.

“But if you were,” Filchis said, “and you went before the authorities and accused the humans here of attacking you, of causing trouble, who would be believed?”

“If I accused *you* of attacking *me*?” She looked him up and down, and snorted. “They’d ask me how much cloud I’d smoked.”

“Shut up, greenie,” the older of Filchis’s two companions said.

I had definitely seen him before. And there was something familiar about his idiocy, too; although, let’s face it, it’s not exactly rare.

“Greenie? *Greenie*? That’s the best insult you can come up with? Bloody hells, mate, my son can do better’n that and he’s only just got his first sword. My name’s Gornack, if you want it. What’s yours?”

“Brendrin Klate. A proper *human* name.”

I caught Gornack’s eye as she briefly sought, and gave up on finding, any sort of response to that. Considering some of the human names I’ve encountered, which you had to practically knot your own vocal chords to pronounce, it made about as much sense as anything else.

“Of course, at least with her sort you can *tell*,” someone in the crowd said, a female voice, soft and cultured. “Not like those weres, now. They hide. They *sneak*.”

“My sort? Now you want to explain exactly what you mean by ‘my sort?’” Gornack said. “Cos I’d like to know. Really.”

Filchis said, “We honest citizens have nothing against people who go about their business *openly*. But what about those who pretend to be other than they are, who turn into uncontrollable animals every full moon? Even *their* laws insist they be restrained. That tells you something, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, so I’m all right because you can *tell* I’m a savage? That’s real forgiving of you,” Gornack said.

“*You* said savage,” Klate said. “No one *else* said savage.”

“Now,” Filchis said, “we don’t want any trouble. It doesn’t take much for others to accuse us of *starting* things, of being the source of disturbance, so let’s keep it calm, shall we?” His voice was smoothly, eminently reasonable, his gaze moving over the crowd, pausing briefly, moving on.

Then something hit him high on one well-padded cheek. The sudden jag of red on his pallid skin was startling in the grey winter light. He yelped and clapped his hand to his face.

“Bastards! They’re throwing rocks!” The older bully-boy started forward, and I saw the glint of a dagger. I dropped my shoulder ready to shove into the crowd, to get between him and whoever he was aiming for.

A child screamed, ear-drillingly high.

Crap. People were pushing forward to see, pushing back trying to get out of the way. A figure in a blue cloak ducked out of the crowd and skittered away, a flicker of pale green

about her feet; someone deciding they liked their politics less physical. Gornack roared, “Get those cubs out of here!” She grabbed the children and pushed them towards their mother, who was standing, her hands up, looking wide-eyed and helpless.

“She’s attacking the children!” Klate was aiming his blade for Gornack; I got in front of him and kicked him in the crotch. He gaped and buckled, bringing his head conveniently close to be grabbed and firmly introduced to my knee. He dropped. I glanced up at Filchis, who was wiping his face, and watching with remarkable calm. Then there was the drum of boots, and a battlefield yell: “Militia! Break it up, break it up *now!*”

About time. No one else seemed in immediate danger of death, so I decided to make my exit before I got arrested. I didn’t have time, and it always irritated the Chief something rotten. Making up with him was fun, but I generally preferred not to have anything to make up for.

Gornack was also making a hasty exit. She nodded at me as she went past, as though we knew each other, and I felt a little pang. There was something about her that reminded me of my friend Previous.

Filchis was wiping juice from his face – it had been some sort of fruit, not a rock – and ranting at the militia. ‘This is *none* of my doing. I was stating my opinion, as the laws and ordinances of the city entitle me to do, and I was viciously attacked by some thug...of course they’ve disappeared. That sort isn’t going to stand around and face the consequences. No, I did no such thing. It’s because of what I was saying, isn’t it? There are forces in this city...oh, I could be a babe in arms, and somehow this would be made to be *my* fault...’ and so forth. Well, he did bear some resemblance to a baby, I suppose – babbling nonsense and creating shit. I didn’t wait to hear the rest.

I walked home with my insides all of an itch. And it might have been my imagination, but I couldn’t help feeling that there were more sideways looks, more mutterings, more people huddled in groups like nervy sheep who’ve smelled a wolf, than was normal for Scalentine.

This city’s not the safest in the planes. But generally, it’s an accepting sort of place. If you’re willing to rub along with your fellow creatures and don’t cause more trouble than you can help, it’ll welcome you with open arms, at least one of which won’t be holding a dagger because it needs to be free to take your money.

Seemed like Filchis and his friends wanted to change that.