

STAR SEER

A Story of the Spiralchain

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Onus

Canticlara held her husband's cold body in her arms. The air was cool and the night dark, lit only by the glimmering of countless stars overhead and the fires of a horrible battle on the ground far below.. She rocked slowly back and forth clutching him close to her and murmuring words in the first tongue. The language of her people was not any special kind of magic, but it brought her comfort. It had been those words that sealed the vow of marriage between her and Tahdiras, so long ago. A custom they borrowed from the humans--perhaps one of the only good things brought into their world by those damned, destroying encroachers.

Blood was drying across his face. The woman, Lyda, had done this to him. She had used magical powers that did not belong to her--abilities granted by the twice-damned Wyr--to strip the very life from his body. It was impossible for Canticlara to know how great the damage done to him, inside where she could not see, had been. What mattered was that he was gone... but he had not died inside, under the stone and wood of human structures.

The Amrywgi had no ceilings. No roofs. They were creatures of Onus, and they were as much a part of its weather as its land. They danced in the rainstorms and they stood proud against the blowing wind. They had, long before the coming of man, traveled the breadth of their world in accordance with the weather, their insight into the days to come granting them wisdom to stay ahead of the worst of the weather. They roamed and they laughed and they loved and they waited for a moment... a moment that they had all foreseen but not a one among them understood. A crack in the sky that would bring them both joy and pain.

She rubbed at the blood on his dark skin, wiping it away. He was so still. His eyes... she had opened them as soon as the Gatemaker had departed. She saw in those lifeless eyes the light of stars reflected. The endless sky lived now in him, pouring the potential of a deathless, ageless universe into those small orbs. Eyes that had once been her everything.

She remembered the past with perfect clarity--that was a talent of her own, not an attribute of her people. Many of them let go of the decades of indistinct time ages ago, but Canticlara remembered. And so she remembered the day of the first arrival--in her youth, long before she was granted agelessness. She remembered the shuddering explosion that woke them all, Tahdiras even then lying next to her, long before vows and promises were a part of their customs. They looked up from the soft bed of straw where

they lay and watched two bolts of light, comets the size of the moons, streak across the heavens. A bolt of violet light and a bolt of verdant light, racing in opposite directions from a single, horrifying hole in the center of the sky.

It seemed as though those comets would strike the very moons of Onus, but they did not. They were much closer to the world than the moons, it seemed--such relativity had never before been important to the Amrywgi. The stars simply were, as were the moons and as was the sun. Nothing else mattered.

But those bolts traveled far and eventually struck the seas. Those of the first race that dwelt nearest the waters at that time told the story many times afterwards--Canticlara and Tahdiras had not been there to see it. But they spoke of the bubbling heat of the sea as the comets cooled, and of the reptilian forms that emerged from the site of impact. They approached these beasts--creatures that her people named impyreans in the first tongue. Creatures that the humans would call dragons.

There was a period of peace even after the coming of the two impyreans. What they did not tell to the Amrywgi--perhaps because they did not know themselves--was that they were only the beginning. That less than a year later, the black circle would appear once more in the sky and seven burning spheres of blue-white light would tumble from it, racing across the sky to strike the surface of Onus at seven different points, cooling to reveal large spherical devices that opened to discharge hundreds--thousands--of humans.

They were so like the Amrywgi. In form, nearly identical. Her people were fascinated by them--especially Tahdiras. He had always been so inquisitive. So gentle and warm.

She placed her hands upon his shoulders, working at the flesh and the strong muscles that had once held her. They were stiff and the skin did not spring back from her touch. He was like clay rather than flesh, clammy. Empty. She stared up at the stars to keep her tears from flowing.

The tendencies of the humans--their violence and their quarrelsome nature--quickly showed themselves. They worked hard to establish human settlements, to tame the land and to direct the fate of Onus. They learned to harness the mystic currents of the universe, winds that blew close upon the skin of this world. They seemed like angry, but ultimately noble, children... and at the insistence of Tahdiras and those like him, those more burdened by compassion than Canticlara, the Amrywgi served as their mentors and advisors. Some grew close--an entire race of intermingled blood grew up in the South.

Humans changed everything. But it wasn't until the first murder that any of the Amrywgi realized how dangerous this was.

One tribe of humans, those who manipulated something they called the Purpose, energy unlike the other natural forces, had learned to move in secret, their actions invisible to the forward-facing gaze of the Amrywgi. Never before had the future held such mysteries, but still the Amrywgi had trust that all would be well. The humans were like them--they had come from the stars. They were kin. Why else would they be able to mate and bear children together?

So no one saw the coming of the night when, in a human castle, a human who bent lightning to his will grew angry with an Amrywgi that would not speak to him of the future. Never had their kind shared their insight, not directly, and so the Amrywgi simply did as his people always had. He protected the humans from the knowledge of the consequences of their actions. Wasn't that what they wanted?

The human killed the Amrywgi in the depths of his human dwelling with the power of his human magic.

And the Amrywgi was no more. The light of his eyes went out far from the light of the stars...

And the lie was born.

Lying there in her arms, Tahdiras drew in a shallow, gasping breath. His flesh was still cold and clammy, but the first blush of health, the first wash of color, appeared in his face. His body trembled slightly, each of its organs rousing from torpor, energized by the light of the stars from which they were made.

For nearly two hundred years, from the moment of that murderous act in the bowels of a city called Rega Holc on the far northern edge of the world, the Amrywgi told a lie for their own protection. They told of the horror, of the eternal torment that their kind experienced when killed away from the sky--away from the stars. They spoke of it in whispers and in shouts, spreading its message far and wide among the humans. Some of their kind feared this was giving the humans a weapon to use against the Amrywgi, but those who led among her people, Canticlara included, believed it the best course of action. There were many of the humans that would not hesitate to kill an Amrywgi that stood in their way, but a relatively small number of them were capricious or cruel.

The Amrywgi withdrew, moving farther and farther away from the humans. They isolated themselves and spread their stories. And in a small way, the lie was built upon a truth. When one of them died removed from the glorious expanse of the stellar landscape, it was an unbearable anguish--but not for the spirit of the deceased. They had no way of knowing what terror that death held for the one that was gone. But it was agony for all those that remained. A psychic terror and a pain so deep and great that it could be felt in their bones, and in the very stones of the world. To confront death, to confront the end of existence for one that was as one with the stars... it was unthinkable. Unimaginable. The old death, the death of old age, at the end of the three centuries that each Amrywgi was allotted... this was not like that at all. This was so much worse. That was sleep. This was... pain.

But if they perished under the open sky, the stars would restore them. The bond they shared with the universe would sustain them even beyond the failing of their faculties. It was how the Amrywgi knew, in the end, that the humans were not children of the stars. They came from the stars, perhaps, but they were not children of the stars. They were removed from the miracles of the universe. And they had tried to remove that connection from the Amrywgi as well. Jealous children, destroying that which they could not possess. Granting immunity to the death of old age at the cost of consigning so many to the painful, empty death that humanity had brought to their people.

Canticlara had not known if the stars would restore her beloved Tahdiras. He turned and convulsed as life returned to him, his eyes still wide open but not yet seeing. The mind was always the last thing to wake, and sometimes it did not.

Tahdiras was more broken than the rest of her people--tormented by the Wyr and forced to serve their will in exchange for promises they had no intention of keeping. He was ageless, as they all were now, but... but he could not see the days to come. He could not even always remember the days that had already gone. And there was no way to know if that process had stolen his ability to regenerate in the light of the stars.

Tears streaked her face as tiny tears welled at the corners of his eyes. He would be whole. He would be with her again. The captivity of her people below the waves of the Silent Sea was over. The Wyr were a distant memory, no longer plentiful enough to plague her race. Tahdiras was the last of those Amrywgi that had been most tortured into serving the Wyr. The remaining Amrywgi, ageless, bereft of their perfect vision and rendered invisible to the sight of their prophetic enemies, had never known the lash of the Fatewakers. They would welcome him home to Amrywgin Fen and the long road to healing his broken spirit would begin.

In the sky, the stars twinkled merrily, signs of a rightness returning to the universe.

All around her, on the ground far below the massive pillar of stone where she held her beloved, the signs of war were unmistakable. Human war. Costing countless human lives. She did not care. Nothing could, or would, ever make her care about humans again. All that mattered was that her people were free and her husband was, at last, returned to her.

His eyes focused at last, and she heard a word escape from dry lips. She leaned in closer to hear that word as he repeated it, for its syllables were unfamiliar to her at first. It was not a word in the first tongue--it was a human word.

"Adam?" Tahdiras asked in a hoarse whisper.

"No, my love," Canticlara whispered back, pulling him even tighter against her. "He is gone. That torment is behind you. You are free."

And Tahdiras wept. And Canticlara wept. And overhead, the stars sparkled.

A few minutes later, they had composed themselves and Tahdrias' strength had returned to such an extent that he could make the climb. They scaled the Stepping Stone and crept through the quiet remains of the battlefield. They had a long journey before them to reach Amrywgin Fen and the peace that they had both awaited for so long.

And they looked only forward on that journey.

Had they looked up at the stars just once more, on that cold stone pillar called a Stepping Stone by foolish men intent on naming everything... they would have seen something horrifying.

One of the stars--eternal and unending, the source of life for the Amrywgi, blinked out... Swallowed by the darkness between stars, between worlds, between spaces. The first fingers of an endless blackness were here, wrapping around Onus.

And those that once could see... Did not.