

GAME CHANGER

A Story of the Spiralchain

Jeremiah L. Schwennen

Nur – Shortly After the Escape of the Children of the Line

Lyda stopped fighting. Or perhaps it was better said that she stopped fighting *directly*. With her head hung low, she walked over the broken glass that littered the street of this massive, towering city. She wore boots—scavenged weeks ago—but even through them, she found herself wincing at the sound of glass crunching beneath her feet. Once, she had possessed an almost masochistic disregard for pain, but that part of her was gone now. Removed... but not far away.

Her companions also ground glass to dust beneath their booted feet, but they did so on a far grander scale. She was surrounded by six of the walking suits of heavy plate mail armor that the people of this world called Trazuer. They were sentient—at least nominally—and they served the will of the Foreverot. Once, Lyda had fancied herself a servant of that same master. But she no longer bent knee to any master, certainly not one that would dispatch such cruel captors to bring her down.

The Trazuer normally carried axes and shields into battle, but their gauntleted hands were unencumbered now. They knew there was no fight here; she was beaten. Their star-field armor, glimmering and glinting with inner motes of light, was impervious to any harm that she could wreak. And their nature—modified and enhanced by their maker after the events of the past few weeks—disrupted her mystic abilities utterly. She was a Gatemaker—a Gatewitch, in the parlance of her home world's ludicrous distinctions between members of the orders and rogue mystics—but she could conjure no gates because of these things.

They marched her forward in silence, directed as they marched by the Nurenai that floated overhead. As they advanced on their destination, after hours and hours of this miserable parade, she cast only occasional glances up at the levitating creature. It was not Kelestair, the Nurenai that had separated her from her Obliviate. That was likely for the best, she mused. Kelestair hated her in a way that few could match—she had seduced him easily and then betrayed him readily, and it appeared that the nature of the humanoid Nurenai did not include an abundance of forgiveness. Were that Kelestair striding across the sky as mortal men walked along the earth, he would have swept down with his glowing eyes and his crystal sword and sliced her open.

She winced as she mistimed a step and moved a bit too close to the Trazuer in the lead of their formation. She felt her jaw ache as her magic twisted, but she pulled back and managed to maintain the effect. As long as she didn't *touch* them, they couldn't disrupt or even know about the tiny working of

her magic that she was maintaining. Their abilities made it impossible to open a crossgate, or to reliably vanish in a teleporting flash, but there were other tricks in her arsenal. She was arguably the most skilled Gatemaker alive, and inarguably the most gifted one on Nur. Since her son and his miserable, misguided friends had fled, she was the *only* Gatemaker on Nur.

That meant she had leverage. That wasn't empty hope, either—had the intelligence behind the Foreverot not needed her for something, it would have ordered the Trazuer and the feminine Nurenai in command of their detachment to kill her... not to drag her to the city of Nuyoerc. She smiled inwardly, content in one simple fact that had provided her opportunity and victory time and again throughout her forty summers of life. Men were men. Whether they were inhuman creatures like Kelestair, altered children of other worlds like Hyrak, or even simple monks like Embrew, all men wanted something. Lyda had an almost preternatural talent for finding what that was and giving it to them, but never too easily. Never without handsome advantage to her. It seemed that even the vaunted Absence, the embodiment of the Rot itself, was not immune to *need*. It was a universal constant.

She focused on appearing cowed, letting none of the Rotkin see her as anything but a beaten foe. She kept her single, focused working—a transposition and intercession woven in tandem—in check, limiting the discernible signs of its existence through meditative techniques that Embrew would be shocked to know she had actually learned.

Lyda was a gifted student of many arts.

They finally reached their destination. She was tired and hungry, but more than anything else she was thirsty. It was clear that the servants of the Rot had little if any understanding of what it took to sustain life. They had not afforded her a chance to rest in days, and what little food and water she had partaken had been offered only when her body threatened to fail. Then the long-haired Nurenai had descended from her aerial vantage point—but never to actually touch the ground—and signaled to an aerial contingent of the raucous, stinking winged ape-creatures, the Weidory. Those beasts had brought food and water, all of it tainted by closeness to their fetid, clawed feet.

Thus, they had kept her alive, but had she not been accustomed to such hardship, she could not imagine that she would have been at all of use to the Absence upon her arrival. But she was a survivor of the highest order, and she would comport herself as required in this meeting.

She had been trying to find the Absence for many days when the Nurenai and Trazuer caught her. They had, in point of fact, not even *actually* caught her. They had certainly surprised her with their ability to prevent her from conjuring an escape route, but she had intended to be caught. The Absence maintained several strongholds across the face of this continent, as well as in some of the other six land masses, but none of the humans that she had tortured for information had been able to tell her where, precisely, to find the entity at any given moment.

She had finally given up and resorted to surrendering herself to its servants. It was easier than interrogating humans. The splintered sects of humanity had been growing increasingly difficult to find in the wake of a global massacre ordered by the Absence's lieutenants. For most of her life, she had been

prying information, and screams of pain, out of humans. She had, frankly, grown bored with the process. The Absence represented a new challenge.

It appeared that, in addition to having the wisdom to know that Lyda had something it needed, the Absence was also burdened with another quite-human trait: a thirst for vengeance. The Children of the Line had mucked about in the affairs of this world – that was, she thought, all they *ever* did. Muck about. But their existence and their interference, and perhaps most brazenly, their escape, had driven the Rotkin to fanatical action, closing tight an already iron grip on the various factions of humanity. One had thrown their lot in with the Rot, while the others had simply scattered further, suffering great losses and going deep to ground.

The vengeance of the Absence had come close to exterminating the whole of humanity on this world. In fact, she had not seen any other humans during the whole of her week or more in the care of these walking suits of armor. Whatever dregs of Nurian humanity remained, they were wise enough to avoid trouble.

The Trazuer marching in escort around her parted ways, four of them peeling off to stand in a neat line at the glass doors to the glimmering tower before them. It was night – always night, thanks to the undulating mass of darkness that enshrouded this world – but the tower still gleamed. At its peak it was a spire, but below that upward-thrusting spike, it had a rounded top covered in triangular panes of silvered glass. It was the tallest building she had ever seen, but when she looked around, it appeared there were once others that dwarfed it in this gargantuan city. Those other buildings were shattered husks now – cracked and broken and toppled all around them. This one still stood, a monument to human hubris. Why had these humans needed such a structure? Why had they been so compelled to reach this high?

She almost smiled at that. Why indeed? Why did any human – man or woman – want what they wanted? It was their nature to want, of course. The more improbable the want, the more fervent the desire.

It should have come as no surprise to her that this was the lair of the Absence. It craved ostentatious displays the way she craved the feeling of men in authority broken beneath her feet. Perhaps it was possible that they could all get what they wanted?

The Nurenai gestured to the two Trazuer that remained at her side, and if they communicated in that gesture, she could discern no evidence of it. But the floating fiend remained aloft as the two escorts pushed open the tall, broad doors of soot-streaked glass. Lyda followed them out of habit and stepped across the threshold, moving past their eerily polite stances at either side of the door.

Once, there had probably been people that lived and worked in this towering edifice. Once, it likely had furniture and comforts and more. Once, it had been a tribute to the genius of humanity.

It was none of that any more. Inside the building – a bronze plate next to the door proclaimed its name Krysluhr – there was only a swirling, vacuous nothingness. The Trazuer remained at the sides of

the doors, where the stoop gave way to the crushing impossibility of darkness and distorted space. They reached out with gauntleted hands and shoved her into the void.

"You sought audience." The words came from all around her, inside of her, and from very far away. The voice was layered and nuanced, cultured and rich... yet somehow completely devoid of emotion. It was a flawless replication of human speech save for that all-pervasive flaw. That dichotomy said much of the being's nature to Lyda.

"I thought we might find common interest in such a meeting," Lyda said warmly. She felt the alien presence of what could only be the Absence scraping across her mind, and she allowed it to do so without resistance. Even if it found her tiny, delicate working of magic, something this mighty would have no reason to fear it. "I believe you want something from me?" she asked.

The pressure of the creature's inhuman mind against hers intensified, and she cried out under the sudden onslaught. It continued unabated, and she fell to her knees in the darkness. In spite of the yawning nothingness all around her, there was solid ground below her. It made no sense. In the presence of this unseen being, it did not have to.

"There is nothing mankind can provide that will balance the scales for what mankind has taken," its deep, imperfectly perfect voice proclaimed. The words struck her like a fist in the face, and she recoiled from the power of the impossible impact.

"Perhaps," Lyda said, wiping the back of one hand across her mouth. There was blood there. "But if you seek to overwhelm the worlds of the Spiral, I can open the way. Now, your forces slowly batter at the doors. I can invite you in. That is what you want of me, isn't it?"

"You misunderstand," the voice of the Absence replied. Its simple statement struck her like a kick in the gut, and Lyda gasped again. Its nature was too vast. She suspected that she may have made a mistake coming here. This wasn't like manipulating Embrew or Hyrak or Narred or even Kelestair. If it *needed*, it did so in a way unlike any other creature in creation. She realized with a sickening shudder that it was beyond her capacity to seduce or deceive.

"When I am ready to end the Spiral of Worlds, I will do so," it continued. "Nothing prevents me. Nothing stays my hand."

"Your Epheirm were made to prepare the way," Lyda said through gritted teeth. "They cannot do that without first *entering* the worlds." She knew this to be true—she had shared her mind with one of the slippery creatures for years.

"Yes," the Absence said. "They have proven insufficient to the task before them. That is why the other castes have been formed. As my essence envelops each travesty-world, my armies grow. When I have encircled all that ought-not-be, I will unleash my armies. We shall cross in the space-between-spaces. We have no need of gates or their makers."

The words struck with negligible force, but their content was nearly bone-breaking. The Absence and its creatures didn't need the gates to travel? If that were true, she had over-estimated her value entirely.

"But your sweep across the worlds is slow," she said, grasping for an idea. Her scheme had to adjust, and she had too little information to make the maneuver cleanly.

"The Chain must fall. It *will* fall. Nothing made by humans lasts forever," the Absence said dismissively.

"What if you could move faster?" she asked.

The Absence questioned, "Then you see why I brought you to me?"

"Maybe. I have an idea of a method that might work to hasten your moves against the distant worlds," Lyda said. She was making the pitch—setting the hook that might ensnare the Absence into an alliance. It would never be a partnership of equals, though; that delusion had died the moment she had felt the force of the entity's personality against her flesh.

But the Absence was having none of it. It roared at her, volume and psychic force working in equal measure to batter at her body and mind. "You will go to the Engine and you will destroy it!" it demanded. "That is all that you can do that is of any use at all."

Lyda felt her left arm dislocate from her shoulder in the horrible barrage, and she tried, but failed, to restrain a scream of agony. "I... I could..." she said between gasps.

"No," the invisible being said. "No. Your mind betrays your lying tongue. You do not know where it is. And if you did, you do not possess the power to leave this world. You are of no consequence."

Lyda felt its decision—impersonal and implacable—the moment its will resolved to action. It would kill her. It would kill her as easily as she might crush an ant beneath her heel. It would cost the Absence no effort at all to wipe her from the face of creation.

She released her magical working and reached her hand *into* her mouth. Space bent around her movements sluggishly—even this simple working was deformed by the presence of the Absence. She drew out a large bag, half the size of her body, from the tightly constrained, widely expanded space she was holding there. It was a sack of tent-cloth, sturdy and thick, and it bulged with numerous heavy glass bottles. She reached into the bag in a frantic scramble and plucked one bottle out. It was the most familiar of the bottles—one she had studied a great deal in her travels. It was stoppered with a gemstone the size of a baby's fist.

"Your creatures can travel without gates—of course they can!" she shouted. "Gates are a human invention, aren't they?" She held the bottle up before her, as though displaying it to the Absence. Inside the glass, a syrupy black liquid glistened. "I should have already known that. I did it myself to get here. When I came, I was joined with this," she sloshed the dark liquid in its imprisoning bottle, "Epheirm. But such travel can only bring those beings, your first servants, here to Nur, correct?"

The Absence's determination to end her did not falter, it merely paused—a metaphorical sword hung overhead, not sheathed. "At this time, that is true," it said. "Only here has my nature overwhelmed that

of physical reality enough that the Epheirm can slip through the abhorrent Chain. In time, when my nature, my endless entropy, has surrounded all of man's works, that will no longer be the case."

Lyda thrust the bottle forward again and said, unable to keep the icy tide of desperation that gripped her from slipping into her words, "What if there were a way to move *now*? What if I told you that I could teach you, and through you, them," she gestured to the whole bag of bottles, "how to slip through the Chain earlier?"

"I want the chain *destroyed*," the Absence said softly. Its softer words struck her harder than its loud ones, and she was thrown back a dozen yards, smashing into the nonexistent floor with a shuddering thud. The bottle in her hand only survived the impact because she cradled it against her torso as she rolled into a fetal ball.

"Then send your servants to do so. But only I can teach them how to do it. How to change everything for you in this war," Lyda said, wincing. She felt the biting pain of at least one broken rib in her chest.

The Absence retorted, a glimmer of hate in its voice for the first time, "You imagine yourself to be special. All humans make this mistake."

"On this one matter, I *am* special," Lyda said. She forced her way to her feet, in pain beyond any she had felt before. Her entire body was one massive bruise from simply standing in this entity's presence. "In two hundred years of practice and study, the Order of Gar has never produced a magician of my skill. I alone can destroy a transit corridor in mid-travel. Do you know what that means?" she asked.

"You... can break the Chain?" the Absence asked. For the first time, its words did not strike her as anything harder than a warm, scentless wind.

"In very, very small ways. But I can show you how. And I will do so merrily in exchange for only a single, effortless thing from you," she said. She forced a smile to her lips. Either it took the bait, and she would gain what she wanted... or it would not, and she would be dead.

"Speak on," the Absence said.