

STAN NICHOLLS

ORCS: INFERNO



“Wall-to-wall action.” —DAVID GEMMELL on Orcs

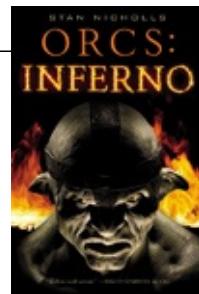
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*For Jacob Harry Fifer, who will hopefully
read this one day, and probably wonder
what the old boy was up to.*



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Discontented with life in pastoral Ceragan, orcs warband the Wolverines were intrigued to receive a message from Tentarr Arngrim, the wizard known as Serapheim, who had previously aided them. Arngrim described a world where orcs were brutally dominated by human invaders. Worse, their oppressors included Serapheim's depraved daughter, the sorceress Jennesta, once the warband's ruler whom they believed dead. Although suspicious of Arngrim's motives, Stryke, the Wolverines' captain, persuaded his band to embark on a mission to help their fellow orcs, and possibly exact revenge on Jennesta.

The Wolverines held five peculiar artefacts called instrumentalities, created by Serapheim, which they referred to as stars. The means by which the band was deposited on Ceragan, the stars could carry their possessors between worlds, though Stryke was untutored in operating them. But he also had an amulet, taken from the body of Arngrim's murdered messenger, and its markings provided a key.

At full strength the warband consisted of five officers and thirty privates. Stryke commanded. Beneath him were two sergeants. Haskeer was one; the other, Jup, the band's solitary dwarf, had stayed behind in Maras-Dantia, the Wolverines' anarchic birthplace. There should have been a pair of corporals too. Coilla, the only female member and its Mistress of Strategy, was present. But her counterpart, Alfray, had fallen in battle. Death had also taken six of the privates.

To get the numbers back up, Stryke recruited a clutch of Ceragan novices, and replaced Alfray with an ageing orc called Dallog. This was less than popular with some of the Wolverines. They were even more disgruntled when local clan chief Quoll forced his popinjay of a son, Wheam, onto the band.

Bidding farewell to his mate Thirzarr, and their hatchlings Corb and Janch, Stryke first took the band to Maras-Dantia to search for Jup, in hope of him resuming his role of sergeant. They succeeded and Jup, along with his partner Spurrall, rejoined. But one of the new recruits, and Liffin, a veteran member, were killed by marauders. Haskeer in particular blamed Wheam and the other tyros for this, and openly expressed contempt for them.

Before they left Maras-Dantia the band encountered two humans, Micalor Standeven and Jode Pepperdyne, who posed as merchants. In reality, Pepperdyne was Standeven's slave, and they were running from tyrannical ruler Kantor Hammrik, to whom Standeven was indebted. Standeven's plan was to steal the orcs' instrumentalities to pay off Hammrik. Stryke would have abandoned the duo, or worse, had they not warned him of an impending raid; and in the fight that followed, Pepperdyne saved Coilla's life. So when the Wolverines had to quickly exit a life-threatening situation, using the stars, Pepper-dyne and Standeven went with them. Their destination was the world of the warband's mission.

The Wolverines were unaware that an indefinite number of instrumentalities existed, scattered across endless worlds. Nor did they know that a clandestine group, the Gateway Corps, was dedicated to tracking them down. The activation of Stryke's stars was detected by the Corps, and its human leader, Karrell Revers, ordered his deputy, female elf Pelli Madayar, to recover them at any cost. Accompanied by a multi-species snatch team, and armed with potent magical weaponry, Pelli set off in pursuit of the Wolverines.

Arriving in Acurial, a world as luxuriant as Maras-Dantia was corrupted, the Wolverines were horrified to discover the orc populace had had their martial spirit bred out of them. Playing on this docility, and the ploy that Acurial possessed non-existent weapons of magical destruction, Peczan, a

human empire, had invaded.

Tangling with the occupiers, who had a command of magic—rare among humans—the Wolverines found that not all orcs in Acurial were placid when they were rescued by a resistance group whose members' fighting instincts had reawakened. It was headed by Brelan and his twin sister Chillder. Its leader in hiding was their mother, Sylandya, Acurial's deposed ruler. The Wolverines joined the insurgency. They trained the rebels, and Coilla formed an all-female warband dubbed the Vixens.

Opposing the resistance were General Kapple Hacher, Governor of what Peczan regarded as a province; and Brother Grentor, High Cleric of the Order of the Helix, wardens of the magic. As heads of two of the empire's main pillars in the prefecture, the military and the spiritual, Hacher and Grentor were often at odds. But the arrival of Jennesta, Peczan's pitiless emissary and both men's superior, overshadowed their differences.

Pelli Madayar's Gateway Corps unit also arrived, covertly observed events and plotted to seize the Wolverines' stars.

The resistance discovered that a comet named Grilan-Zeat, which had appeared at crucial points in Acurial's history, was soon to return. Their hope was that it would be seen as an omen, and along with a call to arms from Sylandya would inspire the submissive populace to revolt. A prophecy was attached to Grilan-Zeat. It said that a party of liberators would accompany the comet. Some in the resistance believed the Wolverines might be these longed-for champions, and portrayed them that way to further encourage the citizenry.

With comet and prophecy as carrots, the rebels applied a stick. They increased harassment of the occupiers with the intention of bringing down their wrath, which in turn would spur the masses to react. The Wolverines were involved in a succession of attacks on the invaders. Until one particularly ambitious raid went badly wrong; an attempt to assassinate Jennesta was foiled, ending with her snatching four of the five stars. Stryke wondered if there could be a spy in the resistance, or even among the Wolverines themselves. Then the fifth instrumentality, in Coilla's care, was stolen from a rebel hideout. There was little doubt that this was also Jennesta's doing. As the comet became visible, it looked as though the Wolverines would never see Ceragan again. They had no choice but to fight on alongside the resistance. And in the weeks that followed, the bellicose nature of the orcs of Acurial began to resurface, to their human oppressors' cost.

The Wolverines didn't know that Jennesta had used esoteric sorcery to duplicate their instrumentalities. But the Gateway Corps was aware through their own magical means that another set of instrumentalities had been brought into play, making their mission of containment all the more urgent.

Despite the animosity between their races, Coilla and Pepperdyne grew close as the insurrection built, and the normally reticent human related some of his history. He was a Trougathian, a member of an island race on Maras-Dantia whose misfortune was to occupy a strategic location between rival nations. Trougath was afflicted by war for generations, until finally betrayed by a supposed ally, and broken. Its population scattered, and some were enslaved, with the upshot that Pepperdyne became little more than Standeven's chattel. The largely nomadic Trougathians were maligned and reviled, not unlike orcs.

Events in Acurial took a dramatic turn when, in a resistance safe house, Standeven was found with the dead body of an orc intruder, though he denied any wrongdoing. The mystery deepened when the dead orc turned out to have Coilla's stolen instrumentality. Wolverines and resistance alike were suspicious of what Standeven might have been up to, but nothing could be proved.

Their spirits lifted by regaining the star, the band set out to get the others back from Jennesta.

Staging an ambush, they achieved this; although some in the band thought it went a bit too easily.

Sick of Hacher's running of the province, Jennesta transformed him into one of her zombie bodyguards. She had Brother Grentor murdered. And when Sylandya came out of hiding to rally the populace, Jennesta assassinated her. That proved a miscalculation. Far from stifling revolution, it stoked the flames.

With the resistance close to victory, Jennesta and a group of loyal human followers fled for the coast, the Wolverines in pursuit. But as the band prepared to attack her, the Gateway Corps appeared and Pelli Madayar demanded the Wolverines' instrumentalities. Stryke's refusal unleashed an onslaught of powerful magic from the Corps. Sandwiched between them and Jennesta's advancing force, Stryke activated the instrumentalities, though he had no time to set their coordinates.

The band travelled through a succession of hostile realities, staying in each only long enough to randomly reset the stars and escape. Finally arriving in a barren but unthreatening world, Stryke calibrated the instrumentalities properly. His plan was to return Pepperdyne and Standeven to Maras-Dantia, then take the band back to Ceragan.

But the stars inexplicably deposited them in a world of islands, on an isle inhabited by dwarfs. The orcs' seemingly miraculous arrival saved them from massacre by the dwarfs, who took them for gods. Shortly after, the island was raided by human slavers, the Gatherers, who carried off a number of dwarfs, including Spurrall. Securing two boats and a crude map, the Wolverines set out to rescue her. The Gateway Corps, who had followed the warband to this world, were on their trail.

Spurrall found herself at the mercy of the Gatherers' ruthless leader, Captain Salloss Vant. She immediately began fermenting mutiny among her fellow captives, one of whom, a lame female called Dweega, was thrown overboard by the slavers. Picked up by the Wolverines, Dweega was able to tell them the Gatherers' course. But the band had to fend off a seaborne attack by the Gateway Corps before continuing their hunt. And Standeven was growing morbidly obsessed with the warband's star-

On board the Gatherers' ship the dwarfs rebelled, and Spurrall faced up to Vant and killed him. Taking control of the vessel, the dwarfs began sailing it back to their home. En route they were attacked by a fearsome creature called the Krake—one of “the Lords of the Deep”—and the ship was sunk.

One of their boats having been damaged by the Corps, the Wolverines landed on a nearby island for repairs. It turned out to be occupied by a group of goblins who held captive a number of kelpies who, despite being sentient, were traded as meat. The orcs made common cause with them and killed the goblins. Learning that the Gatherers sailed a predetermined route, and the kelpies' island was their next port of call, to gather slaves, the Wolverines took a goblin ship and headed there. They didn't know that Spurrall and a handful of other dwarf captives, having survived the shipwreck, had washed up on the kelpies' island, and been nurtured by them.

Jup and Spurrall were finally reunited. Feeling honour-bound, Stryke agreed to return the liberated dwarfs to their island home. On the way, Coilla and Pepperdyne's friendship, frowned on by many in the band, escalated and they secretly became lovers.

Shortly after the orcs reached the dwarfs' island, the Gateway Corps appeared, and Pelli Madayar again demanded Stryke's instrumentalities. His refusal sparked a battle, with the Wolverines facing the Corps' sorcery. The band narrowly avoided being overwhelmed when Jennesta arrived with her force, and magical combat broke out between her and the Corps.

At the height of the chaos, Jennesta confronted Stryke. And to his astonishment she was with his mate, Thirzarr, who was in an hypnotic trance, one step from the full zombie state, and under Jennesta's control. With horror, Stryke realised that Jennesta must have travelled to Ceragan to

capture Thirzarr, and could have inflicted untold destruction on his adoptive world.

Jennesta offered Stryke a deal: surrender the Wolverines to her, for conversion to undead servitude and Thirzarr would be freed from her bondage. Refuse and Thirzarr would become a zombie, never to recover. Stryke struggled with the proposition, and turned it down. At which point Jennesta declared that the outcome would depend on one-to-one combat between Stryke and Thirzarr. At Jennesta's command, Thirzarr launched a murderous attack on Stryke. He desperately fought to suppress the killing instinct that could have had him slaying his mate. Only chance, and the intervention of Coilla and Wheam, prevented it.

Rescued from Jennesta's malign presence, Stryke yielded to despair. The Wolverines, retreating in disarray, saw no prospect but failure.

Events were finally coming to a head in Maras-Dantia.

Jennesta had led an army to the snowbound north, into the shadow of the advancing glacier. Once there, they laid siege to Ilex's great ice palace.

She didn't care about the fate of her Manifold Path army. An alliance of humans, orcs and mercenary dwarfs united in common cause against the God-fearing forces of Unity, the Manis were no more than a convenience to her. The only thing that interested Jennesta was inside the palace.

The situation had been compounded by treachery. Mani dragon mistress Glozellan had sided with Jennesta's enemies and brought her charges into play. A squad of leathery behemoths, saw-like wings beating furiously, spewed gouts of flame over the army. And Jennesta's father, Serapheim, used his sorcery to paint the grim sky with images that grossly lied, to sway her militia and break its spirit. Though she expected no better from that quarter.

As more snow began to fall, stinging the troops' flesh and blinding their vision, she grew impatient. Accompanied by her orc commander, General Mersadion, and half a dozen of her ablest Royal Guardsmen, she gained entry to the palace.

Its murky corridors held the stench of age-old corruption, and aberrant, inhuman sounds echoed through the crumbling pile.

Jennesta and her group were not the first to get in. Several advance parties of Manis had entered before them. Their corpses littered the place. Without exception they were terribly mutilated, and in many cases it looked as though they had been partially consumed. Despite his orcish spirit the general's disquiet was palpable, and the guardsmen, holding aloft oil-fed lanterns, were plainly anxious. Jennesta paid no attention.

They had hardly penetrated the labyrinth of twisting passageways and cavernous chambers when misshapen figures began moving from the shadows.

The Sluagh, a loathsome shape-changing race reckoned by many to be demons, infested the palace. Alien in form and in deed, they were entirely merciless. As they swiftly proved when the two hindmost guards in Jennesta's party were brought down and torn apart. Ignoring their screams she hurried on, the general and the other troopers, ashen-faced, close behind.

They hadn't gone far before the creatures struck again. Lurching from the gloom, fibrous hides glistening moistly in the dim light, one of them snared a guardsman with sinewy tentacles. At the ready this time, the soldier's comrades and the general turned to hack at the Sluagh.

"Leave him!" Jennesta snapped.

Their fear of her outweighed any feelings of solidarity. They abandoned the shrieking trooper. Glancing back, Mersadion caught a glimpse of the man's fate, and shuddered.

There was a respite as Jennesta strode on, looking for a way to reach the palace's lower levels. But it was short-lived. Turning into a narrow passage they found a pack of Sluagh ahead. Slavering and giving off a confounding babble, the beasts advanced. With her own safety at stake, Jennesta acted, fashioning a spell with an intricate movement of her hands, though with an air of blasé impatience rather than any kind of dread. A searing flash lit the darkness. The Sluagh burst open like ripe melons sliced with an invisible axe, liberating their steaming viscera as they fell.

Jennesta continued walking, lifting the hem of her gown above the mess. The others followed, gingerly stepping over the carcasses, hands pressed to their faces to keep out the stench.

They came to an arched doorway opening on to a flight of steps that went down into pitch blackness. A faint rhythmic throbbing could be heard from below. Jennesta ordered two of the three remaining troopers to stay at the entrance and stand guard. From the expressions the pair wore it was obvious they didn't know whether to be relieved or alarmed. There was no such ambiguity on the third soldier's face when she pointed to the stairs and told him to take the lead.

After descending for only a short time there was a commotion from the guards left above. It began with yells and ended in screams, quickly stifled. Unmoved, Jennesta told her two surviving underlings to keep going. The light from the lamp carried by the leading trooper wavered in his unsteady hand, casting grotesque shadows on the moist walls.

The periodic throbbing grew louder the deeper they went. But now it was mixed with other, discordant sounds; the grind of stone on stone and the creaking of timbers. There was a trembling underfoot. Tiny fragments of ice started to fall, shaken loose by the vibration. The sensation was like minor earthquake.

The stairs came to an end, depositing them in a wide corridor that ran into darkness in both directions. Except not quite. To their right, there was a weak glimmer of light. Jennesta ordered the guardsman to extinguish his lamp. In the ensuing blackness the pulsating light could be seen clearly, outlining the shape of a sizeable door. They went towards it.

Small chunks of debris were falling now, and seeps of dust. The rumbling grew, pounding the soles of their feet. And there was something strange about the air. It felt charged, oppressive, and far too warm given the chill atmosphere.

There was a movement to their rear. Looking back, they could make out one of the Sluagh at the foot of the stairs, and several more behind. The guardsman lost his nerve. He dropped the snuffed lantern and ran, past the door bleeding light and along the passageway. His dash lasted less than twenty paces. A Sluagh's feelers whipped down from the ceiling, snared him and hoisted him up. Howling, legs kicking, he disappeared into shadow.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Jennesta hurried to the door, General Mersadion in tow. It was unlocked, but heavy and hard to move. She let him take the brunt of shifting it. On the other side was another, much shorter corridor, leading to an archway. The space beyond was bathed in beating light.

She got him to secure the door, then said, "Looks like it's just you and me, General."

Pointing at the source of the light he asked, "What is it, my lady?"

"Think of it as a... gateway. It's very old, and it was what inspired my father to create the artefact that rightly belong to me."

He nodded, as though he understood.

"Activating the portal has released the energy that's destroying this palace," she added offhandedly.

Mersadion looked no more comfortable for the explanation.

They approached the arch. It led to a set of wide steps that swept down to a capacious chamber that housed five massive, rudely worked standing stones, arranged in a semicircle. At its centre was a low granite dais, studded with what appeared to be gems. Issuing from the dais' surface was something wondrous.

It was as though a waterfall had been upended. But it wasn't a liquid cascade. It was light. Countless millions of tiny multicoloured pinpoints, spiralling, twisting, surging upwards in a never ending, constantly replenished flow. The dazzling vortex was the source of the throbbing beat, and a sulphurous odour hung in the air.

~~There were a number of beings present. Standing just beyond the arch, Jennesta scanned them. Her father, Tentarr Arngrim, known to the covert world of sorcery as Serapheim, was at the forefront. Jennesta's sister, Sanara, the most human in appearance of Arngrim's brood, was by his side. The rest were Wolverines, the wretched orc warband who had subjected Jennesta to the bitterest of betrayals. All were transfixed by the glittering spectacle.~~

Jennesta saw the female orc, Coilla, standing close to the dais and staring at the torrent. Coilla mouthed, "It's beautiful."

Standing next to her the dwarf, Jup, nodded and said, "Awesome."

"And mine!" Jennesta declared loudly as she lost patience and strode down the stairs, Mersadion in her wake.

All heads turned to them. For a split second Jennesta's steely poise faltered. But she was confident in the superiority of her magic over anything here, spell or weapon.

"You're too late," Serapheim told her. His tone was cooler than Jennesta cared for.

"Nice to see you too, Father dear," she returned acerbically. "I've a contingent of Royal Guards at my heels," she lied. "Surrender or die, it's all the same to me."

"I can't see you passing on the opportunity to slay those you think have wronged you," Sanara said.

"You know me so well, sister." She thought how prissy Sanara was. "And how pleasant to see you in the flesh again. I look forward to despoiling it."

The Wolverines' leader spoke. "If you think we're giving up without a fight, you're wrong." He indicated his troop with the sweep of a sturdy hand. "We've nothing to lose."

"Ah, Captain Stryke." She cast a derisive eye over his warband. "And the Wolverines. I've relished the thought of meeting you again in particular." Her voice hardened with the tenor of authority. "No throw down your weapons."

There was a flurry of movement. Someone came out of the host, sword drawn. Jennesta recognised him as the band's healer, an aged fool of an orc called Alfray.

Instantly, Mersadion was there, blocking the attacker's path. The general's blade flashed. Alfray took a blow. He swayed, his eyes rolled to white, and he fell.

There was a moment of stasis, an immobility of all present as they took a collective intake of breath.

Then Stryke, Coilla, Jup and the hulking brute Haskeer fell upon the general and hacked him to pieces. The rest of the band would have joined them if it hadn't been over so quickly.

Jennesta saw no reason to spend any of her magic intervening. But she quickly acted when the vengeful orcs turned to her. An apple-sized ball of fire manifested on the palm of her outstretched hand. Its intensity immediately grew, the brilliance hurtful to the eyes of everyone looking on.

Serapheim cried, "No!" at the backs of the advancing Wolverines.

Jennesta hurled the fireball at them. They scattered and it missed, passing close enough to sever a few limbs that they felt its scorching heat. The fiery globe struck the far wall and exploded, the sound of its report filling the chamber. Chunks of masonry came down with a further resounding crash. She had already begun forming another fireball when Serapheim and Sanara stepped in.

Jennesta wrapped herself in a cloak of enchantment, a conjured field of protective vigour, near transparent save for the slightest tinge of shimmering green. Her father and sibling did the same, and a duel of sorcery commenced.

Blistering spheres and searing bolts were exchanged, needles of energy and sheets of power were flung. Some volleys the bubble-like defensive shields absorbed; others were deflected, causing the

hellish munitions to ricochet. Multicoloured streaks sliced the air. There were intense detonations throughout the chamber, cleaving wood and stone.

All the orcs could do was take shelter. Except for a small group, oblivious to the mayhem, who clustered around their fallen comrade.

Under the onslaught, and the building power of the vortex, the palace was beginning to destruct. The rumblings grew louder. Fissures rippled across the flagstone floor, cracks appeared in the walls.

The combined might of Serapheim and Sanara was proving too strong for Jennesta. Her forehead was sheened with perspiration, her breath was laboured. She fought to maintain concentration. Her stamina, and her confidence, were waning.

Sensing that she was weakening, her father and her sister increased the ferocity of their assault. Her protective shield started to waver. When its emerald tint slowly changed to a pinkish crimson Serapheim and Sanara knew the sign. They upped their barrage.

Jennesta lost her hold. The shield silently burst into a golden nimbus that dissolved to nothing. She staggered slightly, then steadied herself with an effort of will. She let out an exhausted breath.

Serapheim darted forward and grabbed her wrist. She was in too much of a daze to stop him. He began dragging her across the chamber.

The Wolverines wanted to kill her. They came forward with blades in their hands.

"No!" Serapheim bellowed. "She's my daughter! I've a responsibility for all she's done! I'll deal with this myself!"

Reluctantly, they obeyed.

Serapheim was pulling Jennesta towards the dais and the sparkling portal. When they were almost there she came to herself, and realised what he intended doing. She showed no fear.

"You wouldn't dare," she sneered.

"Once, perhaps," he told her, "before the full horror of your wickedness was brought home to me. Not now." Holding her in an iron grip, he thrust her hand towards the portal's cascading brilliance, the tips of her fingers almost in the flow. "I brought you into this world. Now I'm taking you out of it. You should appreciate the symmetry of the act."

"You're a fool," she hissed, "you always were. And a coward. I've an army here. If anything happens to me you'll die a death beyond your wildest imagination." She flicked her gaze to her sister. "You both will."

"I don't care," he told her.

Sanara backed him.

It seemed to Jennesta that they might have had tears in their eyes. She thought them weaklings for it.

Serapheim said something about evil and some prices being worth paying. He pushed her hand nearer to the sparkling flux.

She looked into his eyes and knew he meant it. She tried to conjure a defence, but nothing came. Her cocksure expression faded and she began to struggle.

"At least face your end with dignity," he said. "Or is that too much to ask?"

She spat her defiance.

He thrust her hand into the vortex, then retreated a pace.

She squirmed and fought to pull her hand free but the gushing fountain of energy held it as tightly as a vice. A change came over the trapped flesh. It began to liquefy, releasing itself as thousands of particles that flew into the swarm of stars and spiralled with them. The process increased apace, the vortex gobbling up her wrist. Rapidly she was drawn in to the depth of her arm, which likewise

disintegrated and scattered.

~~The band was rooted, their expressions a mixture of horror and macabre fascination.~~
Her leg had been sucked in now, and it was melting before their eyes. Strands of her hair followed as though inhaled by an invisible giant. Jennesta's disintegration speeded up, her matter eaten by the surging vortex at a faster and faster rate.

When it began to consume her face she finally screamed.

The sound was instantly cut off as the energy took the rest of her in several gulps.

She was plunging down an endless tunnel. A tunnel that sinuously twisted and turned. A tunnel without walls, like a vast, transparent tube; transparent but faintly iridescent. Outside, if the word had any meaning, there was both nothing and everything. Nothing in the sense of being utterly devoid of recognisable points of reference. Everything in that the dark blue velvet beyond the walls was peppered with countless stars.

She fell, helplessly. And caught a glimpse of a pinpoint of light, far, far below. It grew at a remarkable rate, rapidly swelling to the size of a coin, a fist, a shield, a wagon wheel. Then it was all embracing and rushing at her, obliterating everything else.

She dropped, not into light, but complete darkness.

To her amazement, she woke up.

She was on her back, lying on what felt like soft grass. The air was balmy, and she could smell the sweet perfume of flowers in full bloom. Other than distant birdsong, all was quiet. Blinking at the sky she saw that it was a perfect blue, adorned with a smattering of pure white clouds. The sun was high.

Two revelations occurred as her mind began to clear. First, she was alive. Second, this obviously wasn't Maras-Dantia. It also dawned on her that she was naked.

Her limbs were leaden, and she felt battered, though it seemed she had no major injuries. She tried to raise her head, but she was weak and nauseous, and found it too much of an effort. Her sorcery was also apparently depleted. She struggled to conjure the simplest of rejuvenation spells, and got nothing.

But she had enough of her senses intact to feel the power coursing through the ground beneath her. The raw magical energy in this place was of a strength and purity that far outdid the almost spent vitality of Maras-Dantia.

So she had no option but to lie where she was, in hope of regaining her vigour naturally.

She couldn't tell how long she was there; she was feverish, and such rational thoughts as she had were on matters other than the mere passing of time. They mostly concerned the retribution she would exact on her father, her sister and the hated Wolverines. If she ever got to see them again.

The day slid into evening. It began to get dark, and cooler. Overhead, stars were appearing.

She heard a sound. It took a moment for her to identify it as an approaching horse. The animal was plodding slowly, and coupled with the squeak of wheels and the jangling of chains it became obvious it was pulling a wagon. It came to a halt close by. Someone dismounted. There was the crunch of boots on gravel, then an absence of sound as whoever it was walked onto the grass.

Somebody gazed down at her. She could only make out that it was a human male, and he was robustly built. He stared for what seemed an age. Not just at her nakedness, but her general appearance. By any yardstick she was beautiful, but her beauty had aspects most observers found disquieting. Her singular eyes were part of it, as was the perplexing configuration of her features: a face a mite too wide, particularly at the temples; a chin that came almost to a point; a vaguely conver-

nose; a shapely but overly broad mouth, and a mass of coal black, waist-length hair. But it was her skin that was most arresting. It had a slight silver-green lustre, and a dappled character that gave the impression she was covered in minute fish scales.

She was fully aware of the depraved nature of the man's race, more than once having admired the inexhaustible cruelty. If his intentions had been dishonourable in any way there wouldn't have been much she could have done about it.

But instead of subjecting her to lust or brutality he performed an act of compassion he would later albeit briefly, regret. Stirring himself, he spoke. His tone was kindly, concerned. When there was no reply he bent and wrapped her in his rough cloak. Then he gathered her up with the ease of a mother lifting her child, and as gently. He carried her towards his wagon.

Jennesta finally got a better idea of where she was. Even in the dying light she glimpsed a verdant landscape. She saw meadows, cultivated fields and the rim of a forest. Not far away stood a range of rolling green hills.

They came to a road, and the wagon. The man put her aboard tenderly, slipping a couple of folded sacks under her head as a pillow. When they set off he drove carefully.

Lulled by the swaying of the cart, she lay, fatigued, looking up at the rising stars. Despite her fever and her weakness she turned the same thought over and over in her mind.

She had had the luck to come across a good man.

The following week was a blur.

She had been taken to a farmhouse. It was modest, and needed thatching. There were chickens and pigs in the yard. In the house was the farmer's wife and her brood; four youngsters, all boys.

The farmer and his wife tended Jennesta. They fed her, bathed her and spoke soothingly to her until she got back her senses.

She feigned memory loss, and let them assume she had been attacked and robbed of everything. They just about accepted that the odd greenish patina of her skin was the result of a childhood malady and soon seemed to ignore it. And it wasn't so outlandish, they told her, in a world that had orcs in it.

The reference to that particular race revitalised Jennesta. She interrogated the couple, demanding all sorts of information. Where were these orcs? Were they the only non-human race in this world? What was the humans' political set-up and where did its power lie? They found her questions baffling and couldn't understand why she didn't know the simplest of facts. Jennesta blamed her contrived amnesia, pretending to recall a blow to the head.

What she learned was that she was in Peczan, the cradle of a great empire. It was incomparably mighty, though it had its enemies. Most of these were barbarian kingdoms, often at each other's throats, and of little account. Peczan's only possible rival was the orcs, who occupied a far-off land called Acurial. But even they posed little threat, Jennesta was told, given their aversion to warlike ways. Naturally she couldn't accept her hosts' talk of the orcs of Acurial being docile, and felt sure they spoke from ignorance. But she held her tongue on the subject.

What she learned set her planning. Now there was a goal, and she turned her will to achieving it.

She had almost entirely recovered physically. Her magical abilities were another matter. They had started to return, but feebly, though she still felt the land's amazing fecundity. Her plan could hardly be realised from a decrepit farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. She needed to move on. That meant fully regaining her powers, and the use of people to serve her purpose.

Jennesta applied another kind of power to the oafish farmer. His conquest took just days. Once

~~seduced, he was clay in her hands, and she remade him in her own image. Where there had been humanity, now there was only a dimwitted devotion to her whims. Where there had been tenderness towards his family, now there was callous indifference.~~

Such was her hold on the man that he willingly conspired in replenishing her powers. In the event his wife's contribution was poor fare, mean and stringy. But the hearts of the four boys proved extremely nourishing. Her abilities restored, Jennesta had no further need of the farmer. She dispensed with him by simply removing the cloud from his mind and allowing him to see what had been done. His suicide provided her with a fleeting distraction.

The farmer was her first acolyte. There would be many more.

She had heard of a nearby town, and lost no time getting there, taking the farm's wagon and what little money she could find. The so-called town turned out to be not much more than a village. But it did have a tailor. Finally rid of the farmer's wife's drab hand-me-downs, she made sure her new clothes included a hood and a veil, should her appearance be an issue.

She also learned something she found intriguing, and which the farmer hadn't bothered mentioning. Unlike the vast majority of humans in Maras-Dantia, in this world they had a command of magic. At least, some did. These adepts belonged to the Order of the Helix, a sect with as much sway in the empire as its political masters.

The Order's nearest lodge was in the region's administrative centre, a provincial city a day's ride away. Compared to the sleepy hamlets and villages she passed on the road, its bustling streets gave her a measure of anonymity. More importantly, it connected her with a strand of the empire's web.

Jennesta had no trouble finding the Helix lodge; prominently located, it passed for a major temple. She was less lucky trying to penetrate it as anything other than a supplicant. The Order was male dominated. There were females in its ranks but they were few, and hardly any had real power. Rebuffed, she looked for a weak spot.

The Order's local overseer was an elderly, addle-headed bachelor who had never met anything like Jennesta before. She captivated him with ease. In half a year she had become his indispensable aide, and was grudgingly admitted to the Helix ranks under his patronage. By year's end she occupied his position, thanks to the judicious administering of poison.

She had a power base.

The ruthless efficiency with which Jennesta ran the lodge, and reports of her outstanding magical abilities, attracted the attention of the Order's upper echelons, as she intended. The upshot was a summons to the capital, and Helix's headquarters.

Competition for preferment was much stiffer once she entered the Grand Lodge, and advancement was frustratingly slow. Applying pressure on obstructive officials, swearing oaths she would later break, forming fragile alliances, corrupting the susceptible, bullying the weak and eliminating rivals needed all her guile. It also took time.

Another two years went by before the Order of the Helix was hers.

She immediately turned her attention to infiltrating government. As magic and politics intermingled in Peczan, she had already earned a certain notoriety that opened previously slammed doors. By virtue of her position at the pinnacle of Helix, she was automatically granted access to the citadels of the ruling class and the parlours of the influential, despite their thinly-veiled resentment of a female. Once again, she set about climbing.

A further year of machination and murder passed. She completed it as an upper-ranking official; a

~~position of considerable power, though short of the highest. Any hopes she might have had about reaching the apex of empire were allowed to slip away. It wasn't that she didn't have an insatiable appetite for power. It was simply that she had all she needed, and saw no point in wasting more time laying siege to the summit, where she would be too noticeable in any event.~~

Jennesta never stopped thinking about orcs. She thought of the Wolverines in terms of revenge. And she thought of the orcs of Acurial as an opportunity.

It had long been her ambition to command an unparalleled army, and given their inexhaustible passion for warfare, no race was better suited to fill its ranks than the orcs. In this, Jennesta was perpetuating the dream of her mother, the sorceress Vermegram, who long ago mustered the orcs of Maras-Dantia. With such a force, and armed with the instrumentalities, Jennesta saw no limit to conquest. But like Vermegram, the magical means to totally control the race had eluded her. The orcs who served her in Maras-Dantia were kept in line with iron discipline and brutal punishments; the doctrine of fear Jennesta applied to all her underlings. That had proved insufficient, as the actions of the cursed Wolverines attested. The irony was that she had all but perfected a method of control when her father consigned her to this world. A world whose only orcs inhabited a distant land.

So she was intrigued, during her fourth year, when she started to hear rumours about military action against Acurial. This wasn't because Acurial posed any kind of threat to the empire or its interests. It was motivated by a desire for expansion, a hunger for natural resources and to bolster Peczan's influence in the region. But even a dictatorship must occasionally placate the opinion of its subjects, particularly when planning to send their young into combat. The orcs reputed passivity went some way to assure people that an invasion would be a walk-over, but a pretext was needed.

It was Jennesta's idea to put out that the orcs had magic at their disposal, destructive enough to menace the empire. Ignorance about far-off Acurial was so prevalent that this story was widely believed. Jennesta earned kudos for the ploy, but her request to accompany the invasion force was ignored. She set about fresh intrigues to get what she wanted.

The invasion was launched, and succeeded, with minimal Peczan casualties. Which seemed to confirm that Acurial's orcs were too passive to resist; something Jennesta still found hard to believe. The empire's bureaucracy ground into action and started to administer what was now a province. Draconian laws were enforced. Helix lodges were established. While all this was going on, Jennesta fought to curb her impatience, never an easy task, and continued her campaign to get to Acurial.

Half a year into the occupation she gained a concession. On the principle of knowing your enemy, she had argued for being allowed to study the orcs. Her hope was that this would take her to Acurial. It didn't. But Peczan shipped back a sizeable number of orc captives. They were paraded through the streets of the capital as living tokens of the empire's triumph, then handed over to Jennesta for what was officially referred to as "appraisal."

She was confounded by what she saw. These orcs did indeed seem passive, even submissive. Her instinct was to test their apparent meekness to its breaking point. On her orders they were humiliated, demeaned, beaten, tortured and subjected to arbitrary executions. The majority offered no more resistance than cattle sent for slaughter. But a few, a very few, snapped out of their apathy and tried to fight back with a ferocity she knew of old. This convinced her that the race's martial tendencies were not so much absent as dormant, and could be reawakened.

She told her superiors about it. She demonstrated it to them by having selected subjects goaded to fury. The fact that at least some orcs were capable of defiance was no surprise to them. The situation in Acurial was becoming troublesome. There had been organised attacks on the occupying forces, and they were escalating. Jennesta persuaded them of the need to send an emissary to shake things up in

the province. Her Helix reputation, and not least her ruthlessness, landed her the role.

But shortly before she was due to leave, she saw her father.

From time to time, Jennesta would walk the streets incognito, usually at night. She did it partly to gain a sense of the city's mood, but mostly to hunt for victims when she felt in need of sustenance. She went out alone, certain that her powers could better anything the city might threaten, though there were those who would have assassinated her given the chance.

She found herself in one of the more sordid quarters, as she often did. Such places tended to have an abundance of people who wouldn't be missed. There had been the usual minor inconvenience of men trying to approach or harass her. Most turned away when they saw her look. The persistent were given a taste of the Craft, leaving them stung or injured or worse. Jennesta remained unperturbed.

Weaving through a street that seemed to house nothing but taverns and bordellos, something caught her eye. A man was walking some distance ahead. Like her, he was hooded, and he had his back to her. But she thought she recognised his frame and gait, although there was no sign of a slight limp. Certain she must be mistaken about who it might be, nevertheless her curiosity was stirred, and on impulse she followed him. He was doing his best to keep to the shadows. She did likewise.

After trailing him for some time through bustling streets they came to a quieter but no less rundown district. At one point the man slowed and looked back. Luckily for her, Jennesta was able to take refuge in the gloom of a cloister. Hidden by a crumbling column, she got a fleeting glimpse of his face. It was thinner than when she last saw him, and he looked drawn. But there was no mistake.

Very little shocked Jennesta. This was a rare and notable exception. But surprise was soon replaced by cold fury.

It seemed her father hadn't seen her, and continued his journey. She followed, doubly careful not to be spotted. He led her deeper into the low neighbourhood. Others lurked in the shadows here, but father and daughter both radiated something the night dwellers found unsettling, and they went unmolested. The streets became lanes and the lanes narrowed to twisting alleys. At last they arrived at a blacksmith's shop with adjoining stables, so ramshackle they were presumably abandoned. Her father paused at a side door and again looked back. Jennesta was well hidden. Satisfied, he pushed the door just far enough to slip in, then quietly closed it behind himself.

She lingered where she was for a moment. There was no question that she would act. Her dilemma was how. Remembering the last encounter with her father, she considered summoning Helix and military reinforcements. But there was a good chance he wouldn't still be here when they turned up. More importantly, he looked far less robust than he used to, and perhaps not so much of a challenge. Although she didn't know who else might be in there with him, of course. In the end her rage at his presence, and a hunger for vengeance, overrode any other considerations. She made for the door.

It wasn't locked, and opened at her touch. Inside was a short wooden passageway leading to another door that stood slightly ajar. She approached it stealthily. Peering through the crack, she saw a barn-sized interior lined on two sides with stalls for the horses, all derelict now. Ahead of her were stacks of powder-dry bales of hay. She crept to them and hid there.

There was a murmur of voices. The interior was ill-lit, but she could make out two figures. One was her father. The other was a much younger man, no more than a youth, with a striking mop of red hair and a freckled face. Like Serapheim, he carried no obvious weapon. The pair were conversing earnestly. Serapheim dug into a pocket, took out an amulet on a chain and handed it to the youth. The young man stared at it for a moment, then put the chain around his neck and tucked the amulet into his

shirt. They carried on talking, and Jennesa, keeping low, moved forward in an effort to hear.

Seraphim held up a hand to halt whatever the youth was saying, then turned in her direction. "You can come out," he said, his voice clear and steady.

Jennesa cursed herself for thinking he wouldn't detect her presence. She stepped out of hiding. The youth looked shaken. Her father displayed no such reaction. He seemed calm as she walked towards them, though she judged his appearance as weaker than when they last met.

"You look a mess," she told him.

"You haven't changed," her father replied.

"Thank you," she gave back wryly.

"It wasn't a compliment."

"I thought you were dead."

"Don't you mean hoped?" He didn't wait for a response. "Luck and the Craft got me out of the palace. Just."

"And not without cost, by the looks of you." He said nothing and she added, "So how do you come to be here? Or need I ask?"

"I thought the... task was done in Ilex. It was only later that I realised you hadn't perished, or had at least arrived somewhere you could do no harm. And when I saw what you were up to in this world..."

She wanted to say You can do that? but bit it back. "You can't be that far-looking if you weren't aware of me tracking you tonight."

"I let myself be preoccupied. Humans do that. We're not perfect."

"That wins a prize for understatement. I assume your arrival at this particular time has some significance?"

"I've been here a while. I've watched you. I know you're intending to go to Acurial."

"Ah. Your beloved orcs. So that's why you came here."

"We owe them, Jennesa. For what we've done to them. What Vermegram tried to do."

"My mother was a visionary!" she snapped. "I'll never understand why she got entangled with a weakling like you."

"Perhaps I was weak in turning a blind eye to her... misguided notions. But I believe she came to see the error of her ways."

"There was no error in her ambition," Jennesa replied icily. "It was right, and she almost achieved it."

"I can't allow you to carry on what she started."

"And how do you think you'll stop me? By repeating what you did to me in Maras-Dantia? You failed." She rapped her chest with a fist. "I'm here, in front of you. You'll fail again."

"I'll have allies."

"Not in this world. None in the empire and certainly none in—" She checked herself as a thought struck.

His thin smile seemed to confirm her suspicion. "Not all orcs are like those in Acurial. As you well know."

No, she thought, not in this world. She turned her attention to the youth, as much to give herself thinking time as anything. He looked awed. "And is this one of your... allies?" she asked, contemptuously.

"Parnol's an apprentice; a very promising one." He laid a hand on the boy's arm and fixed Jennesa with an even gaze. "And he's under my protection."

~~She didn't think her father would have made that point if this Parnol was capable of defending himself magically at any high level. So he had to have another function. She was beginning to guess what that was.~~ "Careful, Father," she said. "You don't have Sanara here to help you." She flicked a glance at the youth. "And he doesn't look comparable." Parnol shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm warning you, Jennesta," Serapheim bristled.

"Do it now."

"What?"

"If you're so confident you can defeat me, why bother with plots and schemes? We can settle this now. Right here."

"It doesn't have to be this way," he reasoned. "Reflect on the course you're taking."

"Oh, save your breath, old man," she retorted disgustedly.

"If you can see the light," he persisted, "as your mother did—"

"To hell with this." She swiftly brought up her hand and lobbed a fistful of flame at him.

For all his age and brittleness, Serapheim was faster. A swathe of energy instantly appeared, embracing him and his apprentice. When Jennesta's searing volley struck, it dissipated harmlessly. She summoned a defensive shield of her own and continued her fiery assault. At first, her father didn't respond, until, under the increasing salvo, he retaliated. Blast and counter blast illuminated the cavernous barn.

It was all too reminiscent of their duel in Ilex, but Jennesta was determined on a different outcome. She invested all her concentration and considerable skills in overcoming her father's defences. Yet despite her resolve, and Serapheim's apparently diminished state, she couldn't break through.

Then she noticed her father produce an object from the folds of his cloak. Or rather, a cluster of objects, interlocked. In a heartbeat she realised it was a set of instrumentalities. Her eyes widened at the sight. She burned with frustration at having what she most desired so near yet beyond her reach.

Her aggravation heightened when she saw that her father was manipulating the artefacts. He had them directed at Parnol, who was doing little beyond looking terrified. Jennesta guessed what was about to happen, and nothing in her magical armoury seemed able to pierce Serapheim's barrier and prevent it.

In a rush she realised the flaw in her father's strategy. The barricade of energy he conjured was focused solely on repelling magic, which left another possibility. But Serapheim was slotting the last instrumentality into place, and she had just seconds to do something about it. More in desperation than in hope, she acted.

The sunburst spell she unleashed was simple. It was merely the generation of an eruption of light, but blindingly intense. When she opened her eyes she saw that it had left Serapheim and Parnol in disarray, and both had instinctively turned their backs on her. But her father was still fumbling with the instrumentalities. Gathering up her gown, Jennesta plucked out the dagger she kept strapped to her thigh. She drew back her arm and flung the blade with all the strength she could muster.

In that speck of time, two things happened simultaneously. Serapheim activated the instrumentalities, and his apprentice, still dazzled, lurched into the dagger's path. Unimpeded by the shield, it struck the youth square between his shoulder-blades. Serapheim cried out. Parnol staggered from the blow, then whipped away by the power of the instrumentalities, he vanished.

Shocked by what had happened, his concentration broken, Serapheim lost his hold on the protective shield. As it dissolved, Jennesta began to conjure a further, lethal strike. Her father hastily adjusted the instrumentalities, and with a last look mixing sorrow and anger, he disappeared too.

She stood alone. There was disappointment at not having eliminated her father, and particularly at

letting the instrumentalities elude her. But she judged it at least a partial victory.

~~*The sulphurous tang of magic hung in the air. It mingled with the smell of burning timber, stray bolts from their battle having started several fires in the building.*~~

She left it to burn.

Jennesta set out for Acurial not long after, and many were glad to see her go.

She had no way of foreseeing what would unfold there. No hint that she would triumph in her quest for the instrumentalities, yet see her other plans ruined, thanks to the intervention of the detestable Wolverines.

Nor could she imagine that she would eventually find herself on a corpse-littered beach on a world of islands, poised between the prospect of victory and having everything turn to ashes.

There was chaos.

All across the island, battles were raging between Jennesta's loyalists and the Gateway Corps. Most of the dwarfs who inhabited the isle, and who had survived the initial clash, had fled to their boltholes or the upper slopes of the sacred volcanoes. Seashore and jungle resonated with the flare of magic and the ringing of blades.

The Wolverines were gathered in the strip of pebbly land between beach and tree-line, sheltering behind an outcrop of rock. They were still reeling at what Stryke and Coilla had told them.

Two of the band's best scouts, Hystykk and Zoda, had been dispatched to discover Jennesta's whereabouts. They returned crestfallen.

"She's not where you last saw her, Captain," Zoda confirmed. "There were too many of her troopers about for us to look much further afield."

"So where the fuck is she?" Haskeer said.

Coilla shrugged. "Could be anywhere by now."

"This island's not so big," Stryke told them. "We can find her." As the effect Jennesta's spell had on him wore off, it was being replaced by pure anger.

"Where's she likely to have gone?" Pepperdyne asked.

Haskeer gave the human a venomous look. "If we knew that, pink face, we wouldn't be flapping our gums here."

"I mean, figure it out. It wasn't as though she was actually winning the battle, was it? It was a draw at best. And it looks to me like that elf's group holds the beach. So she'd maybe think twice before going for her fleet."

"Makes sense," Coilla said.

"Trust you to back him," Haskeer muttered.

Coilla shot him a dagger look but kept quiet.

"So what does she do?" Pepperdyne went on.

"Goes inland," Jup supplied.

"Not a lot of choice," his mate Spurrall added, lightly ribbing him.

Pepperdyne nodded. "Right. But is she going to tramp about in the jungle? I don't think so. She'd make for something more practical."

"The dwarfs' village!" Wheam exclaimed.

The others had worked that out already, and he didn't get the hurrah he expected.

"What do you think, Stryke?" Coilla asked.

"I think we're wasting time," he snapped, "when Thirzarr needs me."

"Yeah. So, the village?"

He sighed. "As good a place as any, I s'pose." To the rest he announced, "We're moving out! We run into anybody, we cut 'em down!"

"Don't we always?" Haskeer wondered.

"She won't be alone," Dallog warned, drawing another contemptuous look from Haskeer.

"I know," Stryke said. "We can deal with it."

"What about Jennesta herself?" Jup asked. "What happens if—" He saw Stryke's expression. "—when we find her? How do we handle *that*?"

"I'll think of something," his captain returned gruffly, and without further word turned and set off.

at a pace.

The band fell in behind him.

Coilla slipped an arm around Pepperdyne's waist as they walked. It drew looks.

"How bad was it back there?" he wanted to know.

"Pretty bad. I've never seen Stryke so... out of control."

"He seems all right now."

"Don't kid yourself. Take my advice: steer clear of him. He's just about bottling the fury."

"Can't blame him after what happened to his mate. I know how I'd feel if something like that happened to... somebody I care for." He smiled at her.

Coilla returned it, then sobered. "It's not just Thirzarr. He's got Corb and Janch to think about too. His hatchlings," she added by way of explanation. "And who knows what mayhem Jennesta might have wreaked in Ceragan. This is one pissed-off band, Jode."

"How can I tell?"

"What'd you mean?"

"You're orcs. Pissed-off seems to be the natural state."

She grinned again, despite herself. "Not all the time."

"Thankfully, no."

"Mind you, it was good that Wheam got pissed-off back there just when we needed it."

"Sounds like he did well."

"Yeah. Not that Haskeer believes it."

They glanced at Wheam. He was jogging along next to Dallog. But Dallog seemed more interested in Pirrak, one of the other tyros from Ceragan, with whom he was engrossed in conversation.

"Looks like Dallog's neglecting him," Pepperdyne observed.

"He has to mentor all the newbies."

"I've noticed he's spent a lot of time with that one recently."

"Maybe Pirrak needs some kind of guidance. The fresh intake are new to this, remember."

"Been quite a baptism of fire for them, hasn't it?"

"Yes. It's a wonder we haven't lost more of 'em, thank the Tetrad."

"The what?"

"You've not heard any of us say that before? It's our congress of gods. There are four of them. I'll explain some time, if you're interested."

"I'd like to hear about it. And you... believe in these gods? You appeal to them?"

"Usually when somebody's trying to part me from my head."

Pepperdyne smiled. "I know that feeling. It was the same with my people." He cast an eye over the trudging band. "I guess there's a certain amount of appealing going on right now."

"You bet."

"So how do your—*Damn*. Heads up." He nodded.

Coilla followed his gaze and saw Standeven elbowing their way. She rolled her eyes.

Pepperdyne's one-time master arrived sweating. "I need to talk to you," he insisted to Coilla in an undertone.

"About what?"

He looked around, anxious not to be overheard. "The instrumentalities," he mouthed.

Pepperdyne groaned. "Not this again."

Standeven glared at him and turned indignant. "I only want to ask the Corporal here if they're still safe."

"What's it to you?" Coilla said.

~~"A lot. As it should be to everybody here. Our only chance of getting home depends on—"~~

"I know. They're safe. You'd have to kill Stryke to get 'em. Unlikely in your case."

He ignored the jibe. "And has he mastered them yet? Has he worked out what's wrong with them?"

She jabbed a thumb in Stryke's direction. "Why don't you ask him?"

Standeven looked to Stryke, forging ahead at the column's prow. He saw the broadness of his back, the rippling muscles and, when he turned his head to scold those following, the murderous expression he wore. "I'll... wait until he's free."

"He does have a couple of other things on his mind," Pepperdyne informed him dryly.

"But they're secure, right? The stars, they're—"

"Enough. You're getting obsessed with the things. Give it a rest."

Standeven flushed redder. "There was a time," he grated angrily, "when you wouldn't have dared speak to me like that."

"So you keep telling me. And I keep saying that time's past. Live with it."

Shaking with impotent fury, his old master fell back in the column, where he was given a wide berth.

"I think he's going crazy," Pepperdyne said, at least half seriously.

Coilla shook her head. "Don't know about that. I do know the effect the stars can have."

"Effect?"

"Spending too long with 'em can make things a bit weird. We've seen it in the band."

"Weird?"

"You turned into an echo, or what?"

"Just explain, Coilla."

"Later. It's a long story. But the stars have the power to get a hold on some, make 'em act... well, bit like Standeven."

"What about Stryke? He's with the things all the time."

"Yeah, and that's a worry. But like I said, it affects some, not all. He seems to handle it. Most of the time."

"Oh, great."

"What I'm saying is, keep an eye on Standeven."

"I usually do."

They marched in silence after that, turning things over in their minds.

Stryke was leading the band along the upper lip of the beach, keeping the jungle to their right. Soon they would reach a line of sand dunes marking the point where they needed to turn inland, onto the path that headed toward the dwarfs' settlement.

As dwarfs themselves, Jup and Spurrall felt a natural sympathy with the natives, but their empathy was with Stryke. Marching four or five ranks to his rear, they found themselves eyeing him constantly.

"He looks in a state," Spurrall commented, "near frenzied. Is he going to hold it together?"

"Course he will. He's tough. What beggars belief is how history's repeating itself."

"Me and the Gatherers."

Jup nodded. "So I know how he feels."

"He helped you get through that."

"Yeah. I owe him."

"Now you can repay. He needs your support. And maybe more down the road, depending on how this plays out."

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