

HITCH HIKER

A Story of the Spiralchain

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Nur

Cruz slipped into her muscular form easily. The hot, roaring wind that beat against the others was not equal to the task of tumbling her in the enhanced shape. Behind her, Colton and Adam both fell back, squatting behind the cover offered by what was once a bus shelter of some kind. Beside her, the others struggled to remain standing, but only Steven, in his shadowform, could match her resilience. JC and Celia fled to join the guys in their sheltered location, protecting the huddled form of Ashleyvette between them. Becky wasn't here, of course—she was back at their current camp, keeping Anna safe from this madness.

And madness it was. Since returning to Nur, just over a month ago, they had fought repeated actions against small bands of the servants of the Rot. Whether they were called Rotkin or Voidkin—the two terms seemed interchangeable to the natives of this world—the inhuman soldiers of their enemy were beyond counting and they were always, always between the Children of the Line and whatever it was they were trying to accomplish.

Cruz gripped the glowing circle of her Node weapon in her hand. The touch of the discus ring would be fatal to a creature of the Rot, but hers was a weapon designed for throwing, and their current foe was well protected against such attacks.

The wind that roared all around them was alive. The Kolouko was one of the two elemental castes of Rotkin, a creature of hateful, blistering wind. It had a central mass, an eye of the storm, so to speak, that was vulnerable to direct assault, but reaching that weak point was never easy. Most of the time that they ran afoul of this particular type of creature, they opted to flee rather than to fight. But that was not an option tonight. They had come to this out of the way part of the sprawling city nearest the Spiralgate that had brought them here from Rettik with a serious, urgent purpose.

The elderly shape of Ashleyvette, garbed in a faded gray gown that bore more than a passing resemblance to a kimono, was the key to progress in their battle against the Rot. Their allies in the Regretters of this region had helped them to get their hands on food and supplies, even as they admonished the Children of the Line to avoid aggravating the Rot. In the weeks since their arrival, Becky, Celia, and Steven had made huge progress in working with the Regretters and unearthing at least a few meaningful rumors about the entity at the heart of the Rot. They called it the Absence, and it was the singular mission of the Children of the Line to slay the Absence and end the danger it posed to the Spiral of Worlds once and for all.

None of that would happen until this Kolouko was destroyed.

“I’ll go high,” Steven grunted in her mind thanks to Becky’s mindlink. “See if you can get inside its defenses and finish this.”

Cruz flashed a quick thought of agreement and steeled herself to charge into the whirling, invisible maw of the creature. She wouldn’t be able to throw her weapon. She had to lunge into the wind and slash its ring-shaped blade against the center of the tornado.

Steven’s night-black shape, almost impossible to see in the lampless street against the starless night sky, leapt upward. His body elongated as he raked shadowy talons against the upper reaches of the Kolouko’s dense outer wind-wall.

“I wish you were using your sword,” Cruz thought at him. The shadowbending leader of their little group didn’t reply – it was a fight that had been going on since they returned to Nur with their Node weapons in tow. Steven disliked the loss of flexibility and maneuverability that carrying the weapon brought. Cruz, like everyone else, disliked the fact that without it, his only method of truly slaying a Rotkin was a gruesome kind of absorption that she could not bear to watch.

The creature responded predictably to Steven’s assault. The servants of the Absence were usually quite well coordinated, and what any one of them knew would eventually be communicated to the others by some means they did not yet understand. That meant their enemy knew that the Children of the Line were able to kill them rather easily now, and they also knew that Steven was able to steal some of their powers through a quirk of his abilities. They resisted being consumed by Steven’s shadowform more than they resisted being slain by the Node weapons, so they concentrated their defenses on him most of the time.

Gritting her teeth, Cruz forced her way forward. The wind was alarmingly unpleasant – not burning, precisely, but warm enough and rank enough to remind her of the stinking breath of a drunk. For a moment, uncomfortable memories flickered back through her mind, but she fought them down. She had been having such problems for many weeks – since before even coming back to Nur. The slightest problems would sometimes dredge up old aches, and they were always distracting her at the worst moments.

Steeling herself against a memory that was merely awkward, not traumatic, she continued to trudge forward. The wind howled and ripped at her, but her muscles strained and her booted feet dug in one step at a time in the cracked pavement. Then, after what felt like an hour of struggling with squinted eyes in the raging storm, she crossed a threshold. The wind suddenly stilled, leaving only a glimmering greenish swirl of lightning before her. Its flickering intensified, growing notably angry, and she did not hesitate. Cruz lashed out with her weapon, slashing its rounded blade through the lightning once, then twice, then a third and final time. The light blinked out and the wind vanished, bringing with it an abrupt cooling of the air.

With a few steadying breaths, Cruz re-applied the magic that changed her shape. This form was all well and good for smashing the enemy, but she did not like to remain in it in moments of calm. It made the others uncomfortable to see her like that – or at least, she thought it did.

“That was a big one,” JC said as he escorted Ashleyvette back to where Steven joined Cruz. The others followed close behind. “Hopefully that means that they didn’t leave any more surprises for us.”

“This place is of little use to the Jadouhn or the Absence,” the old Rememberer said. Her pale, almost grayish face and long, dark hair made her look almost ghostly in the now-still night, but Cruz knew they had rarely met someone on this world who was so vibrant and alive. She was their only friend among the reclusive Rememberers of the Sixth Mass. “But it has some of the information you seek, if my memory serves.”

Steven led the way towards the building that the Kolouko had been defending. Any signs that had once identified the four-story structure of steel and glass were long gone. So too were the plants that had once filled an array of square planter boxes set into the corners of the building’s lot.

“In the wake of Second Contact, certain agencies purged files that were believed to be dangerous,” Ashleyvette explained as they climbed the shattered remains of the eight steps that led to the cracked front doors. The building had seen better days. Cruz could see few of the large rectangular windows that were not broken, and the roof appeared to have been especially hard-hit by whatever conflict had left most of this part of the city uninhabitable.

“But you really think the information we need would have survived that purge in this place?” Adam asked. “It looked like the Rot may have specifically targeted this building to me.”

She shook her head slowly as Steven helped her up the last step. “The Rot never came after our data. We policed our own files – often in an effort to prove to the Absence that we would never again transgress against it. This place was ravaged because a group of Restorers – they were quite numerous before the Paranauts departed – had made a base here. But what you want is the location of the Absence, and that was not the sort of information that was eliminated. If anyone was tracking the position of the enemy, it was the Restorers. They were intensely focused on planning. Most of them were statisticians and prognosticators by trade.”

They said little else as they worked their way into the building. It was a complete wreck, and Cruz lost what little hope she had possessed of this being the place they were looking for as soon as she saw the absolute chaos of the building’s interior. But Ashleyvette seemed unfazed by the destruction, and the Children of the Line spread out in search of books, files, or functioning computers that might hold the secret of where their enemy could be found.

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It remembered its birth with perfect clarity.

It opened its eyes, first one, then another, then, in rapid succession, all ninety-nine. With each eye, it saw only the worst in things. It saw the brilliant glowing cogs of the factory where each eye was cast

from the stuff of the Rot, rolling down a long ramp to plop against the eye before it until a chain of ninety-nine of the wet, squelching spheres was assembled. Then they each discharged a bit of moist, slimy material and a heavy press of metal slammed down from the unseen heights of the factory, molding that mucilaginous mass into the form of a Spairth.

It knew that its kind was not the most favored of the Absence, but nor was it the lowly Epheirm. It knew this at once, and it glowered with its many eyes in misery to know that its place in the universe was fixed—stagnant. It saw decay in every substance, and it saw failure and fault in every living thing that scampered through its many lines of sight. Humans worked in this factory, sullenly stomping from place to place, maintaining machinery and pouring the seemingly random materials that served as the base for its kind into the great hoppers of the radiant eye-casting contraption.

Each of those humans was awash in a sickly, cloying stink of despondency. It could taste that emotion in the air, even though it had no tongue. It fed upon it and it fostered it, and it took no joy in the doing of either.

It was what it was meant to be.

It was the corrosion of hope and the abject, perpetual embracing of defeat.

It slowly seeped down from the platform where it had been granted the gift of its Void-touched life, knowing that it would never be fast. Never be strong. Its power was slow. It eroded rather than destroying outright, and it was the most insidious power of all.

It could squeeze itself into very tiny places, or spread itself across a vast distance.

It was timeless.

And it was incredibly, almost impossibly, patient.

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They found the mother lode in a small office on the second floor. An old computer, hardly more sophisticated than the ones they had back home, appeared intact. Cruz sat in the office next to Ashleyvette as the Rememberer scrolled her finger through file after file of tiny text and, once in a great while, a poorly rendered graphic of some kind. She touched the flat, dark glass of the screen, and occasionally she made odd gestures that caused the data to shift or blur or adjust.

The only other Child of the Line with them was Colton, who sat on the other side of Ashleyvette with one hand resting on the white plastic tower of the computer. A low flickering of power danced from his fingers every few minutes, and he kept his eyes closed and his head leaned back against the wall, just below a painting that hung there, crookedly, depicting a tree covered in white and pink blossoms.

“Are you managing OK?” Cruz asked him quietly.

“Yeah, sure. Human battery, at your service,” he muttered.

Cruz did not press the issue. She knew how sick to his stomach Colton became when using his power—the dizziness that was the cost of boltsending left him sour in more ways than one. She wondered, not for the first time, at the difference between the magic of the others and that she wielded. The cost of her bloodmending was so *negligible*. She didn't understand why the others had to pay such high prices, while for her, she merely ran out of steam when she pushed too hard. It was, perhaps, the only lucky break she had ever caught in a life full of unlucky ones.

"Here," Ashleyvette said, chewing at her lower lip as she spoke. "Maybe this is what we are looking for."

"This place seems like an accountant's office," Cruz remarked. "Or maybe a manager of some kind. Not where I would expect to find important research."

"We hid things in unlikely places," Ashleyvette explained. "The programs that the Redeemers used to erase dangerous data were sophisticated and thorough. They wormed through the whole of the world network. The only safe data was that in physical form—books, which had been in disuse for decades—and information concealed in isolated systems. This was indeed an accounting firm, and they often used isolated systems for financial information to prevent criminals from stealing delicate data or virtual currency."

"See," Colton mumbled. "This is why I kept telling people that debit cards were bullshit. Cold, hard cash is where it's at. Hackers can't steal cash out of my wallet."

Ashleyvette seemed to ignore his remarks and instead pulled up, with a few quick flicks of her fingers, a rough, pixelated map of the area. Six spots were marked with bright red dots.

"This is a map from one of the global monitoring satellites, before the Absence cut us off from them. These locations are all of this region's concentrations of Rot energy," she said. "The person who logged the file didn't filter by intensity though. I can't tell which is the Absence and which is a make-point."

Cruz arched an eyebrow and asked, "What's that?"

"They are the hubs of Rotkin activity. Each caste of Rotkin comes from a certain kind of hub, and it is from those hubs that new or recycled creatures emerge." She paused for a moment and added, "It is possible that none of these are the Absence. This map is only for the central portion of this continent. The file has no data on the rest of the world. But if you were indeed trying to hurt the Rot, these would be tactically valuable positions. It needs these lairs to foster its servants. They are protected as much by the secrecy of their location as the numbers of their occupants. Imagine if your group could strike out at a Nurenai nursery, or a Jadouhn pool. The damage such action would cause in terms of reducing the numbers and mobility of the enemy... it would be a notable victory. Our world is not accustomed to such things. Even the bickering fools in Namoon's Regretter cell would be hard-pressed to deny the value of such victories."

Cruz stood up suddenly. She felt something strange happen in her mind—a sort of quiet had descended on the stray thoughts of the others that were carried so effortlessly by the mindlink Becky

was maintaining among the group. “Colton, can you reach any of the others?” she asked. “My link is down.”

He opened his eyes and shook his head slowly. His eyes were sunken and watery as he said, “I thought it was just the interference from my boltsending. Try the radio.”

Cruz reached for the little pack she carried over her shoulder on such missions and pulled out the small black radio. She pressed the call button, but only a burst of noisy static awaited her. From overhead, she heard the first steady droplets of an unexpected rain.

Then she heard a loud stream of curse words—JC—followed by a crackling, explosive sound and a trembling of the walls around them.

She felt a sharp sense of dread closing in around her. This was some kind of trap. They were surrounded. Colton was too spent from powering the computer to be of much use, and Ashleyvette was not a fighter. Cruz was alone. Everything was going wrong.

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It remembered the moment when its duty became clear.

It felt the human—one of the ones that the Jadouhn wanted stopped—smash its heavy foot down into its gelatinous mass. Several of its eyes burst in the attack, and it wanted to recoil. It felt the human’s anger and hate, but it felt the deeper roots of those emotions. Loneliness. Worry. Confusion. Old feelings that had simmered and brewed in the human for all of its life. It tried to reach out with its abilities, fostering that miasma of despair, but the human’s anger was stronger than its fear. The sensation was unpleasant, and the human’s furious attacks were beginning to overwhelm the Spairth.

It had a single purpose in its existence—to undermine hope as it served the will of the Absence. The Jadouhn spoke the will of the Absence to the lower castes, and they declared that these humans must be stopped in any way necessary. But the Spairth was not a fighter. All around them, a battle raged. Rotkin of several castes attacked the humans as they attempted to flee through the cursed portal machines that led to their safe havens on the travesty-worlds.

Then it felt it—an opportunity for victory. It knew its mass was being dangerously depleted, and it would soon be disincorporated and sent back to the factory to be molded anew. It had only one chance. Regardless of its own safety, the Spairth launched one last psychic attack on this human, pummeling the muscular form with loathing until the human’s towering rage cracked. The Spairth’s mental power slipped in and stirred old darkness, and the shape of its foe suddenly undulated, shifting and slipping down, down, folding smaller and smaller into a scrawny, petite shape.

As the human’s battle form melted away, the Spairth slipped itself into that shifting mass. It squeezed its damaged substance into the smallest possible space: the space between cells. It dampened its aura of pain and fear and it flowed right into that flexible, shifting body.

And it waited.

Cruz flexed herself into her larger war-form and plucked her Node weapon from its holster at her hip. As she gripped the ring with her special glove—protecting her from cutting herself—it lit with radiant blue light, ready for action. She turned to speak to Ashleyvette, to tell her to watch over Colton, and for him to do the same for her, but she found her voice suddenly choked off by a thick glob of phlegm in her throat.

She coughed sharply, trying to clear her airway, and the glob dislodged, flying out to splatter against the wall beside the painting over Colton’s head.

She looked in horror at the gross mass, first because of the rudeness of what she had just done, but then because *it moved*. No, it didn’t move. It *blinked*.

A dozen eyes opened in the lump of slimy mucus that slowly dribbled down the wall.

A sickening wave of recognition and fear crawled across her senses, and Cruz couldn’t tell if it was her actual emotions or the projections of that thing—a Spairth. A kind of Rotkin that had, time and again, seemed particularly drawn to her.

“Where did that come from?” Colton asked.

But Cruz didn’t answer. She didn’t have to. She knew exactly where it came from... and the realization of how long it had been with her, inside of her, truly did make her feel sick. How much of the anguish she had experienced on Rettik and since their return to Nur had been of that thing’s manufacture? Everything that had happened with JC, and when her magic abandoned her and left her with that... that other face... all of it. They were that thing’s doing. It had been hiding *inside* her. She felt violated.

She hurled the discus at the wall and it tore into the Spairth, killing it instantly and leaving only a smoking streak of soot on the wall where its grotesque substance had clung. The weapon remained lodged in the wall, and she reached past Colton to pluck it back out.

“Why did it show itself now?” she asked no one in particular.

The intensification of the rain overhead, the heavy beating of water down on the ceiling of the second-story office, drew her eyes upward.

“It isn’t raining outside,” Ashleyvette said softly, pointing one finger at the small, cracked window on the far wall.

Cruz’s eyes followed that finger, and she could see that, indeed, no water fell through the night sky beyond that window. There weren’t even any drops clinging to the window itself.

At that moment, the ceiling collapsed under the weight of water that had been pooling above it. The water and the wreckage of the ceiling’s wood and metal components crashed down on top of all three of them. Ashleyvette cried out as a large bar of metal struck her in the head, and Colton suddenly sparked

as the water that rushed down slammed into him while he maintained the working that powered the computer.

Cruz managed to avoid the worst of the collapse, but as she moved to pull the others out from under the remains of the ceiling, she saw the water swirling and grouping in ways that defied the ordinary order of gravity.

“Ay, chingados,” she muttered. That wasn’t water at all. It was an Orpriad. No—not one of them. Two. The watery Rotkin was among the most powerful of the castes, and unlike the Kolouko, they had no central mass that was easily targetable once one knew what they were doing.

“Someone, help!” she screamed. The rest of the Children of the Line were somewhere out there in the building, but she didn’t know what was happening to them. Were they facing these things, too?

Screaming with rage, she ploughed into the mass of collapsed wood and metal and seething water. She slashed with her Node weapon, and each blow caused a portion of the attendant Orpriad to boil away in a hiss of ugly violet steam. It wasn’t enough. The water was flowing up and into Colton’s mouth and nose, and he was struggling in vain to claw it away. Buried in the rubble, she could feel Ashleyvette’s life force fading fast—her magic reporting the details to her in spite of her inability to get there and help.

Some of the water, lit from within by little tadpoles of flickering, malevolent lightning, rushed at her in a solid battering ram of directed force. It knocked Cruz back into and through the door. She crashed into the hallway outside to see a small squabble had broken out between several of the Children of the Line—Adam, JC, and Steven—and a group of familiar figures. The painfully thin Regretters, numbering four, were gathered around their more physically impressive leader, Namoon. They were shouting at one another, and JC’s fist, clad in his Node weapon, an energized gauntlet, had knocked a great hole in the wall beside him for some kind of emphasis.

Cruz’s sudden appearance in the hallway drew their fight to an abrupt halt, and they all turned to look at her.

As she clambered to her feet, she realized she could hear nothing from inside the office. And, in her mind, the words and thoughts of the others suddenly rang out loud and clear.

In her mind she shrieked, “Inside the office! They’re killing Colton and Ashleyvette!”

She darted back in. The sound of the water rushing and splashing about came roaring back into her ears. Somehow, the Orpriad were jamming the sound and even the thoughts from moving across the threshold of the room. It was a perfect, stealthy death trap.

Steven appeared close behind her, slipped easily into shadowform, and lunged into the water to retrieve Colton. As he pulled the Boltsender up out of the water and the debris, Adam reached out and plucked Colton out of the room entirely with a quick green portal of light. Cruz and JC, both brandishing their Node weapons, swam into the waves of water, evaporating the mass of the two Orpriad with each blow.

As the water started to recoil at its rapidly reducing volume, Cruz reached down and shifted a large, sopping chunk of ceiling tile out of the way to reveal Ashleyvette, barely breathing. Cruz hauled her up and out of the room, dragging her down the hallway and then dropping down next to her. She faded back to her ordinary shape and set to work healing the damage done by the impact of the collapsing roof and the drowning at the hands of the Orpriad. It was simple work, and it flowed quickly out of her in elegant golden light.

A half an hour later, the Children of the Line and the Regretters huddled in the lobby of the building, down on the first floor. They were preparing to leave, and Steven was arguing fiercely with Namoon.

“If you hadn’t been here, trying to tell us how to do our job, we might have been in there before anyone got hurt!” Steven roared.

Namoon replied sharply, “You should not have come here! Every move you make against the Rot makes things worse for those of us who remain on this world. You can defend yourself with your abilities and your weapons, but the rest of us have no such luxury!”

They continued to argue as Cruz tended to Ashleyvette, who now dozed as her body adjusted to its forced recovery, and Colton, who was wide awake and frustrated at having been of little use in the fight. All around them, everyone was soaking wet.

“You can’t stay there much longer,” Becky prodded in their minds. “The Rotkin know where you are now. Please get moving.”

Steven and Namoon reached a sort of impasse—as they often did, since neither was ever willing to budge—and the group started to make its way out of the building and back to the relative safety of their makeshift base.

Cruz roused Ashleyvette and helped her to walk as they made their little march, and the Rememberer remained silent as they walked.

After about twenty minutes of navigating the quiet streets, Cruz asked her, “How are you feeling?”

The old woman grunted, but something about the sound felt strange to her. She drew to a halt and looked the Rememberer directly in the eyes. Ashleyvette hadn’t actually spoken since Cruz had revived her. Her health was not in danger—the basics of her vital signs, the drawing of breath and the beating of the heart, were reported effortlessly to Cruz by the simplest of bloodmending workings. What was wrong?

As she looked into those eyes, she saw something that should not have been there. At first they seemed merely wet with unshed tears—a heavy film of water clung to her eyes. But the film had the faintest cast of a color to it—a watery, violet color.

Cruz reached out with her magic, focusing it not just on breaths and heartbeats, but on the wholeness of each part of Ashleyvette’s body. The sense of her that came back from that magical inquiry was horrifying.

There was no water in the woman's body. Every drop of it, in every cell and organ, had been replaced by the liquid substance of an Orpriad.

Cruz had carried in her own body, for months, a tiny splinter of a Spairth... yet it had never occurred to her, mere minutes after learning about that, that the Orpriad, more powerful and more cunning by far, would be capable of a similar feat.

The Orpriad seemed to sense that it was discovered, and suddenly violet-hued water fountained out of Ashleyvette's mouth in a stream that shot forward directly into Cruz's chest. It knocked her back, and she watched in horror as Ashleyvette's body seemed to deflate, like a balloon whose knot had come undone.

Colton was closest at hand, and he reached out with one hand in a savage gesture, unleashing a blast of lightning that tore into that firehose-blast of Orpriad water. It boiled away in an instant.

Panicked, Cruz tore at her clothes, wringing the water from them, afraid that any given drop might be the enemy.

Before her, in a shapeless, empty heap, Ashleyvette was beyond the capacity of any magic to save.

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The Spairth was born anew, one eyeball at a time. Each was pressed from the glowing cogs of the machine and rolled down a long ramp to plop against one another, one after the other. When the chain of ninety-nine was made at last, each squelched out a bit of the translucent, murky slime from within it to form the coating that united those ninety-nine spheres into one Spairth. The heavy metal press lowered from the ceiling and stamped down to seal the creature into a coherent semblance of life once more.

Then there was something else at hand—a feeling of abiding patience and endless pain. Love of solitude and worried affection for the creatures that were cast of its essence.

The Spairth, in spite of all its eyes, could not actually see the Absence, but it knew it was there. It knew it was the recipient of a profound honor, to be visited by the Absence rather than simply directed by those above it in the hierarchy of the castes.

The Absence spoke into its mind, and the Spairth told it everything. Everything it had learned about the human called Cruz and the Children of the Line. Everything it knew of their plans and their homes and their travels.

Then, the Absence reached out with its formless, boundless nature, and it granted to the Spairth a magnificent gift; the one desire that every creature of the Foreverot held first and foremost in their semblance of a heart.

The Absence released it from the agonizing prison of existence. From the void it had come, and at long and blissful last, to the void it returned. Its work was done.