

SKY RUNNER

A SHORT STORY OF THE SPIRALCHAIN

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RETTIK

Nearly one year had passed. The fighting had grown no less intense in that time, even if the Science Board's new Speaker professed to be open to the idea of peace talks.

Gallan felt the smooth grip of the thrusting throttle in her right hand and smiled. The triangular attack craft she piloted was new, one of Varris' designs coupled with Gallan's own innovations, and its top speed was faster than anything the citizens could match.

The gentle waves of the ocean spread out beneath her as far as either she or her sensors could see. The night sky was lit by unfamiliar stars and the pale glow of the moon. She tried to find even a trace of the constellations of her childhood, but all were gone now. The stars were a sign of Rettik's doom, but she tried not to think of that.

She was rocketing towards the new home of the Negspacer forces, stationed upon one of the Unsectored islands here on Rettik. There was no safe retreat back to the moon for the Negspacers anymore, not since Gallan had made the grave mistake of bringing the moon into positive space. So she worked hard to make it up to them, and one of the ways she could still help was as a spy.

Gallan's reputation as a scientist was a shambles, but in some of the outer Sectors, farthest from the information-hub that was the Tower of Science, she was not yet known to be associating with the Negspacers. The endless war that had only intensified since both sides occupied the same vibrational space had made communication with the outer Sectors irregular, and Gallan used this to her advantage.

She adjusted her course slightly and tapped the green button on the console that woke her Node, Re. Gallan's was one of the only vessels in the Negspacer fleet that operated by Node science, and every day she felt more guilty about that. The Node was built from the stolen biological tissue of a dead dragon, and it was the harvesting of that material that was the root cause of the war that they now fought.

After a pleasant chime, Re said in Gallan's mind, through the small metal clip affixed to her ear, "Good evening, Gallan. How may I be of assistance?"

Gallan replied, "The con-x download we pulled from Sector 698. Are we in range to broadcast it to one of the scanning arrays yet?"

"Unfortunately, no. This area is currently being blanketed in a generative frequency blanket," Re supplied cheerfully.

“What?” Gallan shouted. She looked around her, through the transparent wrap-around cockpit of her small fighter craft, but she could see no enemy vessels. It was uncommon for citizen forces to engage over the water.

“Can you run a predictive screening?” Gallan asked. “Likelihood of low-walker attack before arrival at base.”

The lights on the dashboard of the vessel flashed frantically for a few moments before Re’s voice replied, “Ninety-seven percent likelihood.”

Gallan pulled back on the throttle, accelerating to the ship’s upper velocity threshold. If she got close enough to the island, the defensive batteries would be able to come to her aid. Her ship had no significant weaponry – it was built for speed and for stealth. She *had* to get back safely. She had uncovered proof that the Board of Science had found a way to re-blank Node material. This would change the face of the war considerably and, she hoped, possibly even bring about those peace talks that the Speaker had so often alluded to in his weekly addresses.

Suddenly all of the illumination in the cockpit turned red. Overhead, a low-walker troop transport, rectangular and bulky, appeared in a flash of light.

Re started to explain what was happening, but Gallan dismissed her. She banked hard to the right, attempting to coax a little more speed from her engines. She could outrun a transport all day long, but she had no way of knowing if that one had enough energy to implement another flash jump. She herself could not – not to a distance that would be helpful. As she wove back and forth, dropping low enough to the water that her wake sent erratic waves spraying all around, she saw the transport slowly falling behind and she grinned. Koesir would hate this, but she found she was really starting to enjoy the thrill of it all.

The transport lowered to Gallan’s elevation and lined up behind her. She braced for a shot. The low-walkers on board were all surely armed with energy rifles and a few of them would probably hit her before she had widened the distance between them beyond their range. The shielding on the vessel would take a few such shots without incident, so instead of dodging she stayed the course, allowing her speed to slowly accelerate beyond the transport’s ability to match.

When the first shot rang out from the transport, it was not an energy blast. With a horrifying thud, something struck the rear of Gallan’s ship and her ship suddenly decelerated, straining to move forward. She turned over her shoulder to see that a long chain of some kind was now tethering her ship to theirs.

Gallan pulled back on the throttle as hard as she could, but the strength of her engines was not sufficient to propel her ship and pull the dragging weight of the transport. She didn’t know what to do. She kept looking back frantically, and the third time she peered over her shoulder, she saw a pair of low-walkers, in their heavy armor and with their anti-gravity packs strapped tightly to their backs, climbing the tether towards her ship.

In a physical fight, Gallan was no match for low-walkers. She was a tiny scientist and they were tall, strong soldiers.

Gallan had low-walker allies – Laikon and his squad of low-walkers had defected to join the Negspacer army under General Pian’s command. Low-walkers could be reasoned with! She pressed a few buttons, pivoting the con-x dish atop her ship to face behind her. Re established a connection with the low-walker closest to her ship – now half-way up the tether – and Gallan shouted to the soldier, “You don’t want to do this! I’m trying to bring an end to the fighting!”

There was no response from the soldier, and Gallan feared that the generative frequency blanket was blocking even this short-range con-x channel. It was also possible the low-walker simply didn't care what she was saying. While Laikon and his people had proven very reasonable, many other low-walkers were not.

She looked at the screen in front of her and magnified the image of the approaching low-walker. If she was going to die out here, she wanted to at least look her killer in the eyes.

The low-walker's armored helmet was covered by a visor that had variable opacity, and Gallan was pleased that it was set to transparency. It allowed her to see the square jaw and patchy beard of the man. But as the image resolved, she also saw his eyes, and she felt her blood run cold.

The man's eyes were pitch black, and they were shot through with intermittent flickers of electricity. Lightning. She remembered her visitors from last year, who had gone through horrible events just to gain the ability to defeat such a creature.

There was an Obliviate on Rettik. She didn't understand how or why, but that was what she was seeing. She panned the image, sweeping up to the other low-walker, and sure enough, his eyes also betrayed that alien nature.

"Re, scan transport for cognitive signal discrepancy," Gallan whispered. Re had helped her build the Obliviator, the device that had been taken to Core to prevent Obliviates from entering their world. While they did not understand what exactly an Obliviate was, Gallan and her Node did know exactly how to detect one.

"Signal discrepancy found," Re said melodiously.

"How many?" Gallan asked.

"Forty," Re replied.

Gallan froze. Forty. The entire squad aboard that transport was possessed by the things. How was this possible?

"Gallan!" a voice shouted in her mind.

"Koesir!" she replied, relieved and startled. "How did you get through?"

"One of the General's people noticed the signal blanket. Sherek took a team up into atmo and blew up the jamming device. Laikon is on his way to you right now. Hold on," Koesir said firmly. "We'll get you home safely."

Gallan smiled. Koesir was a terrible liar, but she could tell that he was not lying now. Help was on the way. She would be safe.

But they had new problems now.

Rettik was a world adrift—a mistake many years ago had damaged the universal system that kept it pinned to its place in the Spiral of Worlds. That drift was accelerating, and Gallan could not help but think that the presence of these Obliviates was but one more sign of the approaching end for them all.