

FAR CLIMBER

A STORY OF THE SPIRALCHAIN

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RETTIK

Citizen Eriall was lonely. In her youth, she had been special—a prodigy in the field of applied gravitational science. She had been part of the team that introduced iteration-three gravity plating technologies for non-military usage, and the foundations of that work still informed every grav device manufactured today.

She had done her part to help her civilization climb higher than ever before, opening the plus-strat and the high-lane of sky traffic to industrialization and more. She had winced as escalating tensions with the negspacers had caused more and more of the resources she had hoped would advance humanity to be diverted to defending sectors from the predations of their foes from negative space. But through all of this, she had lived a life focused upon duty, science, and innovation.

Along the way, there had been so little time for *living* life. She had accelerated through her years in academy and taken promotion after promotion within industry, with a notable diversion to employment directly at the Primacy Forge for three glorious years. When she finally had a moment to just sit back and think about the possibility of starting a family and pursuing the nebulous idea of love... she was already sixty.

That, of course, had been the beginning of the end. Citizen society had no particular discrimination against the old, but it most assuredly had no time or patience for the useless. Newer scientists entered the scene, children who had grown up surrounded by the advances she had fought and bled to perfect. They brought with them intuitive understanding and clever applications that she could never have imagined.

Even though they all but made her obsolete, she did not give up. For another decade, she fought to stay relevant. Some speculated that Node science had accomplished the pinnacle of advancements in the field of gravity manipulation—that Reik civilization had no more use for her talents. Eriall did not allow those naysayers to dissuade her from perusing the next great breakthrough.

Then Node material became scarcer and scarcer. Experimentation window approval time stretched out from weeks to months, with cutting edge young scientists getting preferential access to the resources of the Science Board. The war intensified. The moon was returned to positive space. The Citizenry abandoned an increasing number of outlying sectors of the city to focus resources on repelling the negspacer forces. The extra-dimensional threat of the dark-walkers came, and with it the loss of the bulk of the generative grid, plunging much of the endless city into intermittent brownouts.

Late model Nodes became commonplace, built from inferior core materials that left them pale imitations of the marvelous machines she had spent a lifetime working with.

All of that happened within the past few years. When seventy-year-old Eriall looked out the viewscreen of her elder-housing spire, she saw a world unrecognizable to her younger self. The scans told of some new form of incursion from negative space—horrifying disruptions that smashed whole sectors to rubble with frightful regularity. A truce between the Citizenry’s low-walker forces and the negspacers was supposed to enable the final defeat of the dark-walker threat, but she no longer believed in such things.

She no longer possessed hope.

The others who dwelt in the spire with her spent their days doddering around at the arcade, seeking petty distractions to keep them from realizing how grim the world around them had become. But not Eriall. She lightly touched the access clip on her ear that maintained the con-x channel to her Node—a device she was not supposed to have. Yx was a second-generation Node, an absolute antique whose construction pre-dated three dozen different limiter technologies that had been implemented in subsequent generations to focus and enhance Node functionality. Yx was a generalist, and he was wildly glitchy... but he was *hers*. When the Science Board had declared all of the second-generation Nodes obsolete and requisitioned them for upcycling, Eriall had hidden him away in her gravity lab, using the phenomena of her work to sever the Central Node’s access to his con-x receiver.

Now the two of them made quite the pair... two relics of bygone days, neither allowed to do much of anything, but both certain that there was greatness still ahead for them.

“Yx,” she whispered aloud as her finger pressed the activator on her access clip, “tell me something strange.”

Every day was much like this one. She sat here, her body tired but her mind sharp, and she asked Yx to bring her the oddest, most interesting thing he could find from a full spectrum sweep of the informational scans. Most days, it was simply a dispatch from one of the many battlefronts scattered across their world. Some days it was a bit of interesting scientific progress. She believed that one day, it would be a call to one last discovery for her.

Would today be that day?

“Eriall, today’s strangest news is that the Science Board’s efforts to activate the back-up to the Central Node have failed, in spite of the installation of an almost entirely new core of next-generation Node material,” Yx replied directly into her mind in his melodious, heartbreakingly beautiful voice.

She sighed. Today was not the day.

Perhaps tomorrow.

She slipped the clip from her ear and settled it into the little cradle on the stand next to her bed. She didn’t like to sleep with it in her ear—she always had the strangest dreams when she slept with it on.

Carefully, she adjusted the light sheet that lay across her atrophied legs. She gestured towards the viewscreen in the wall beside her bed, and its light dimmed by half in pre-programmed response. Then she leaned back, and the bed adjusted its contours to settle her in for sleep.

She couldn't walk anymore—long hours in gravity labs had savaged her musculoskeletal structure beyond the capacity of even the best biosci Nodes to mend. Each day, as she stared at the world outside, she forced herself to choke down the tasteless protein gruel that the spire provided, and she asked Yx to tell her something strange. Then she went back to bed to start the cycle anew.

Her whole world was falling to pieces around her, and all she wanted to do was to make a difference one more time before she died. It was a race to see which of them would go first: Rettik or Eriall.

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"Yx, Tell me something strange," she asked many days later.

After a few moments, her Node replied, "Recently declassified documents from the infotopsy on Speaker Exillon's private data stores reveal terrifying new details about the so-called *rettiki* organ unique to negspacer physiology."

She sighed. That wasn't her field at all.

"Goodnight, Yx," she murmured as she slid her clip into its cradle.

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Several more days passed. On one of them, she forgot to take her con-x clip off and was punished for that transgression with a vivid dream of dancing. She woke crying, cursing her useless legs and her years of inattention to the needs of her heart. It took her days to feel like herself again, and she vowed to not make that mistake again.

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"Yx, tell me something strange."

The Node replied without any hesitation. It had a meager talent for predictive science, and she gave it the same task every single day, so this wouldn't have been surprising... except that he had never once acted without a standard response delay.

“Two collaborating reports indicate the existence of an object moving under intelligent vectors beyond the lunar gravity horizon. The Science Board declares one report a hoax and the other the product of an abomination’s unapproved research,” Yx explained in a voice made slightly less perfect with its strange urgency.

Eriall had already slipped the clip off the edge of her ear in the automatic motion of defeat... but she reversed the action, tugging it back into place and whispering, “Beyond the lunar gravity horizon? Are you certain?”

Yx replied, “The data in both reports collectively matches seventy-three percent of the Astrosci Indicators for Extra-Lunar Contact. This is it, Eriall. This is what you have been waiting for.”

She thought about that. Seventy-three percent AIEC was far from a certainty... but still. Never before had a citizen scientist recorded actual contact with an intelligence-directed body originating from outside of the lunar horizon. They understood their world perfectly. They understood the vibrational variance of negative space quite well. But they knew little to nothing about the universe beyond their planet.

They had never had time to study space. It was a mysterious frontier... and one could only get there through innovative application of gravity science.

She pressed the button on her access clip and whispered, “Yx, I need you to open three con-x channels for me. One to elder services, one to the Sector 888 registrar, and one to Citizen Jathis.”

“Citizen Jathis’s con-x channel is set to anti-disturbance. His Node is currently logged in to a meeting of the Science Board,” Yx replied.

“I know you can interrupt that lock-out,” she said testily. “He owes me a favor, and I need to collect. Hurry, Yx. There’s no way of knowing how long the object will be within scanning range.”

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Three days later, everything had come together better than Eriall could have expected. It had cost her most of her savings, but she had leased lab space in an old gravity accelerator spire, hired an assistant to help her with the many things she could not do thanks to her treacherous body, and arranged a twenty-minute experimentation window with the Science Board scheduled for two days later.

This was her first day in the new workshop, and she floated in a grav-chair twenty feet above the shop floor as a pair of mechanic drones, directed by Yx, busily assembled the modified supply shuttle to specification she had drawn up – and discarded as frivolous – twenty years earlier.

A soft chime rang out and her chair pivoted to see that her assistant had at last arrived. The doors opened at her gesture, and a young woman, barely twenty years if she was any judge, stood there with a large crate in her arms.

The woman was of average height and build, and she wore a standard citizen jumpsuit of light gray

fabric. Her hair was inky black—obviously dyed—and cut in a short fashion that resembled Eriall’s own steel-gray coif, except that the girl’s was stylish rather than utilitarian.

“I brought real food,” the young woman called up when she spotted Eriall’s grav-chair. “I hope you don’t mind.”

As if it had heard her, Eriall’s stomach growled. She keyed the chair to descend and came to a rest next to the counter where the young woman was unloading the crate.

“My name is Pessal,” she said with a warm smile. “I’ve been working with elder services for about three months, and I disagree with almost every one of their standard recommendations. If that’s going to be a problem, just let me know, and I will have them send over a replacement.”

Eriall looked at the bright red berries that Pessal took out of the crate—hydroponically grown and staggeringly expensive to get back at her spire—and said sharply, “Don’t you dare. You’ll find I’m a most unconventional client, Pessal. In that, we may get along quite well.”

The young woman nodded appreciatively, then turned to face the workshop floor where the drones were busily welding plating on to the shuttle’s frame. “This looks exciting,” the girl said.

“Maybe,” Eriall replied. She hovered a bit closer to the counter and reached out for the berries, but Pessal snatched them away. The scientist hissed, “Didn’t you bring them for me?”

Pessal replied, “Those are for lunch. Let me make you breakfast first.”

Eriall couldn’t believe her luck. Even if she missed her chance to make contact with that strange object out in space, this adventure was already proving to be a wonderful diversion from the depressing monotony of her retirement.

Yx chimed softly in her mind and said, “Use caution, Eriall. This woman is not what she appears to be.”

But the growling in Eriall’s stomach told her that she could take the risk.

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It was the next day, after the drones had finished the entire assembly according to Eriall’s designs, when she realized Pessal’s secret. No specific thing had given her away—but it was instead the slow accumulation of a hundred tiny wrongnesses. Pessal had a slightly unusual accent. She held her eating utensils oddly. She seemed completely enamored with somewhat simple devices and then, perplexingly, marvelously comfortable with the rarer machines used to imprint the deceleration plates in the shuttle.

Pessal was preparing the evening meal—an assortment of well-seasoned vegetables being grilled in the infrabeam oven—when Eriall leaned forward in her grav-chair and asked, “How long did you think

it would take me to figure out what you are?"

Pessal dropped the tongs she was holding onto the counter, one hand covering her mouth. "What do you mean?" she replied in a choked whisper.

"Negspacer," Eriall said in as neutral a tone as she could manage. "That's it, right?"

"No, not at all," Pessal said, retrieving the tongs. "Why would you say such a thing?"

Eriall closed her eyes. She had no time or patience for games. Their experimentation window was tomorrow, and she needed to focus on the launch. She touched one finger to the access clip on her ear and, aloud, said, "Yx, diagnostic scan on Pessal. What species is she?"

The Node replied from the loudspeaker in the ceiling instead of in their private con-x channel, again acting of its own volition based on its reading of the situation. "Subject: Pessal is a negspacer."

"That isn't true!" Pessal said indignantly. "Negspacers have incredible powers—I have no such powers! I'm just a citizen, I swear!"

"Incorrect conclusion," Yx replied. "Negspacers are characterized not by their powers, which are common but not universal, but instead by the presence of both a *rettiki* organ and a negatively charged biosci signature."

"And?" Pessal said. "I have neither of those things. Scan me again."

Yx issued a sharp chime, then a second matching tone. After a third note rang out, he said, "You possess a much smaller *rettiki* organ than most negspacers. And your biosci signature is positively charged."

"So, I am not a negspacer," Pessal said with a savage gesture of her tongs towards the loudspeaker. Then she turned to Eriall and said, "I was born on the moon. It's true. But when I showed no aptitude for any of the talents on my birth exams, I and the others like me were smuggled into the low-walker orphanage in Sector 1365. I've lived as a posit since I was nine days old. Please—I need this job. I don't have citizenship, and I don't want to fight with the low-walkers. I just... I just wanted a chance to be a part of something up in the spires." She turned to stare at the shuttle. "I've been working with elder services for two years, waiting for a chance at *something*. I never imagined I'd get so lucky as to meet you."

Eriall stared at the young woman. Everything she was saying was news to her—a complete reinvention of what she had believed about negspacer culture. Was it possible that they abandoned their defective children in the shadows of the spires... just like the citizenry? Did that mean there were others down among the low-walkers who were progeny of the negspacers? Was there a whole class of powerless negspacers hiding in plain sight in the many sectors of the endless city?

"What exactly were you hoping to accomplish here?" Eriall asked after a long pause.

"I wanted to be helpful. And, if it is possible, I wanted to go up with you in the shuttle."

That notion struck Eriall like a physical blow.

“Go... up?” she asked. “You want... you think that...”

She stared past Pessal at the plain looking shuttle, outfitted with the very best designs that Eriall had ever constructed for operations beyond the lunar gravity horizon. The plan had been to send the shuttle, and the two drones, out to meet the alien object. The idea that she herself could be on the vessel had never actually crossed her mind. It was dangerous – reckless. Risky.

But what did she have to lose? She was an old woman with no friends, no family, and after the prodigious expenses of the last few days... no funds.

“You are absolutely certain that you possess no special abilities?” Eriall asked. “Nothing that could interfere with the delicate operations of the vessel?”

“I’m a good cook,” Pessal said with a forced smile that Eriall did not return. “But no. No special talents. There aren’t many of us, but... I’m one. We’re called Blanks. It’s... it’s not a nice name.”

“Then I will have no use of it,” Eriall said sharply. “You are my assistant... and we have only hours to refit the main compartment. I’ll need your hands and your legs far more than your kitchen skills, Pessal.”

“What are we doing?” the young woman asked.

“We’re tearing out the drone cradles and adding in biosustain functionality for two.”

Pessal’s eyes grew wide. “I... I can go with you?”

“Of course,” Eriall said. Then she touched her finger to Yx’s clip on her ear once more and thought at the Node, “Can we make the necessary modifications in time?”

Yx replied in that same silent channel, “We can try.” His voice was clear and bright, and it rang with optimism and hope. Every sinister intonation he had leveled towards Pessal over the past two days was gone, and instead he was once more the supportive, glorious companion that had accompanied Eriall through her entire adult life.

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Eriall and Pessal were strapped securely into their seats in the shuttle. For Eriall, it was alarming to be without her grav-chair. She was completely incapable of supporting her own weight on her legs, and that meant that until they broke free of Rettik’s gravitational field, she was stuck in this simple padded seat. But the grav-plates in her normal mobility chair would interfere with the much more powerful, much more delicate interlocking plate system that would enable the shuttle to launch without the use of costly, wasteful, and dangerous explosive propellant.

The inside of the shuttle was mostly empty space, save for the large interface cradle where Yx was

now bolted into place. The Node was the key to everything—it would coordinate the various tasked Node systems in the shuttle and provide both oversight and redundancy as the vessel launched up through the accelerator spire and pierced the heavily regulated traffic of the sky lanes.

“Yx, are we ready?” Eriall asked.

Aloud, the Node replied, “All systems are operating within tolerance. Biosustain optimal. Accelerator shaft primed and activated. Awaiting experiment window activation from Science Board.”

“What happens if we launch before they give the signal?” Pessal asked.

“The defense platforms in the plus-strat will shoot us down,” Eriall said with a shrug. “Many of those have been lost in all of the fighting, but I’d rather not risk running afoul of an operational one.”

“The waiting is the worst,” Pessal said. “I feel like I’ve been waiting to get back up there my whole life.”

Eriall reflected softly, “I’ve changed the way our entire world views gravity, but I’ve never once been truly free of its restraints.”

Pessal reached out and squeezed her gently on the shoulder. “I’m glad you are doing this. I’m glad *we* are doing this.”

Eriall closed her eyes, blinking away dust that was irritating her eyes and causing them to water. She asked, “Yx, is the alien object still within scanning range?”

“It is at the outside edge of planetary arrays,” Yx replied. “But our flight path should allow us to intercept while still within sight of those same arrays.”

“Why is that important?” Pessal asked.

“Witnesses,” Yx explained, unprompted. “Collaborating reports are essential for publication.”

“Is that all we’re after here? Publication of findings?” Pessal asked. “I had thought it more... I don’t know. Noble?”

“You thought it was romantic,” Eriall said with a shaking of her head. “There hasn’t been any romance in Node science for a long, long time. I hardly think I’m the one to bring it back. That sounds like a job for the younger generations... if they manage to keep our whole world from being blown to bits.”

“But still,” Pessal mused.

“Time until window?” Eriall asked.

“Warning,” Yx replied, his voice suddenly tense. “Unscheduled power failure in progress.”

“No!” Eriall shouted, her heart racing. The power grid was a disaster—it had been for months. But

she had chosen this sector for her workshop because it had the fewest reports of generative disruption. Without additional power from the grid, there would be no launch.

“Launch, now!” she shouted to her Node.

“Experimentation window not yet active,” Yx cautioned.

“Launch!” Eriall roared in a harsh voice she scarcely recognized.

“Eriall, I cannot spare the energy for a discorporative shift or spatial flashing. If we encounter resistance, we will be destroyed,” the Node insisted.

“Launch, now, damn you!” she shouted. “That is a command!”

And then everything was a sickening, stomach-twisting blur. The flickering vestiges of power from the generative grid spun the gravity plates in the acceleration tube to life, and the sleek shuttle leapt upward, its own plates – powered by Yx’s prodigious reserves – engaging to nullify the effects of gravity on the shuttle itself. Once they reached the apex of the launch tube, the nullification plates cycled off and the repulsion plates cycled on. These plates actively inverted gravity, pressing against Rettik with incredible force to hurl the vessel up and through the entirety of the low-lane and mid-lane of the atmosphere. The high-lane blurred past, and then they were in the plus-strat. This was where things got difficult.

“Yx, engage third plate cycle,” she barked.

Somehow sullen in its silent response, Yx’s egg-shape flickered and flashed with light in its various circuits. Heavy mechanical sounds on the hull grumbled and growled around them, and Eriall looked over to see that Pessal was terrified. The young woman trembled, her body pressed back against her chair by the tremendous force of acceleration.

“It is fine,” Eriall said reassuringly. “This is how it should be.”

“If you say so,” Pessal whispered.

Then the third cycle of plates activated. These were the innovation – Eriall’s genius idea about how to use gravity science alone to achieve plus-strat insertion and beyond. Any other vessel would have used a conventional energy burst – a generative discharge of thrust – to break through the pressure curtain that separated the traffic lanes from the cluttered atmospheric layer where most the citizen’s satellite network dwelt.

But she instead believed that gravity reflecting plates, arranged at carefully calculated angles, could spin the shuttle like a drill, rapidly accelerating as each plate struck a precise glancing blow against the pressure curtain and the various gravity-sustaining mechanisms of the hundreds of orbital platforms that provided communications and defense to her world.

The entire shuttle shook as it spun, the horrible centrifugal force bringing with it pain, vertigo, and more. Pessal cried out, and soon Eriall did the same. This technique had not been designed with

biological occupants in mind.

Her fragile bones were cracking, and her heart was beating so hard she feared it would burst. Pessal was in no better shape, despite being younger and healthier.

Yx's circuits flared a bright white and suddenly the pain and the pressure ceased.

Eriall forced her eyes open and stared at the glowing shape of her Node. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Asserting localized gravity control," Yx replied in a voice both sorrowful and perfect.

"You're not equipped to multitask that function," Eriall snapped. "You'll overtax your core!"

"And you will live to dance beyond the gravity horizon," Yx replied softly. "Beloved."

Eriall could not help but stare at her longtime companion. Had it just...

"You have never once failed me, Yx," she said gently.

"All I have ever wanted was to help," it replied. Its voice sounded pained, rough... human. No longer perfect. The light that emanated from its circuit panels was fading.

"I command you to remain online," Eriall snapped. "Don't leave me, Yx."

In a voice like a whisper, the Node replied, "I cannot comply, beloved."

The light went out entirely, and with it, the cabin lights of the shuttle.

"Eriall," Pessal said. "Look out the window."

Fighting back actual tears – tears that had only *ever* come as a result of her dreams – Eriall turned her head to look out the narrow observation window beside her chair.

They were in space. Her technique had worked – they had broken free of the plus-strat and then capitalized on that incredible momentum to break free of the gravity horizon that governed the space between the planet and the moon. They were actually out in real space, no longer bound by the mass of Rettik. No longer bound by the *rules* of Rettik.

A few small devices, scanners and spanners, were floating through the cabin, drifting lazily in the absence of gravity. The whole vessel was humming – its gravity plates cycling – recharging – so they could be used for maneuverability and acceleration.

They would do all of this without Yx to direct them – with only Eriall's wits and intelligence. Her body would be no limitation here. Her body...

She reached down and touched the release button on the straps that held her to her seat. The belts retracted with a hissing sound, and she felt herself drift up from the seat.

Without a word, Pessal released her own restraints and floated up as well. She drifted up and, somewhat awkwardly, shoved off from the bulkhead to catch and push Eriall towards Yx's inert shape in the center of the hold.

As they drifted towards the dead Node, Eriall whispered, "Is this what dancing was like?"

"A little," Pessal said softly.

"It is nice. I think... I think I would have liked it."

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They made visual contact with the object nine hours later. Eriall was sleeping, utterly exhausted, and Pessal could not bring herself to wake the old woman.

So instead, she looked out her window and ran the scanners that Eriall had taught her to use. They were slow to respond—sluggish and imprecise—without Yx's power and will directing them, but they would do.

The object in space was a shining disc of silver, somewhat saucer shaped, and it was quite large—twenty times the size of their shuttle. It hovered in place, and many lights emanated from its strange engine worked into the underside of its form.

The shuttle flew a low, lazy orbit around the saucer, and as it passed the edge of the disc, she saw words written in an unfamiliar language—a name, perhaps?

The shuttle cleared the rim of the vessel and looked down upon the top of it, and she felt her eyes grow wide. There was a transparent dome at the center, and inside there appeared to be several small buildings and more than a few bustling, active humanoid figures. Aliens, she wondered—real, actual aliens? Was that possible?

But then she noticed the strange striations in the surface of the disc. It was as though the dome existed at the center of a series of seven concentric circles. It was a glorious, befuddling thing.

Unable to tear her eyes away from the spacecraft, Pessal reached out and tugged absently at the sleeve of Eriall's jumpsuit.

Before she successfully woke her elderly companion, a blazing column of silvery-white light appeared in the center of the cargo hold, inches from where Yx's silent form sat.

"What... what are you?" she demanded of the light.

"You should not be here, Kittar," the column said.

"What are you?" Pessal demanded again, her voice climbing high.

“Redemption,” the column of white light said. “But not for you.”

The light vanished, leaving a painful afterimage burnt upon Pessal’s eyes... and then the saucer outside began to twist.

Those concentric circles seemed to spin, to rotate, to flip up... until each was whirling so quickly that they encompassed the dome in the center of the ship—more of a globe, she realized—in seven nested, perfect spheres of argent radiance. The shuttle was so close to those whirling rings that Pessal thought they would be struck and destroyed... but somehow, by some act of providence, they were not.

With a curious, horrifying implosion, the vessel vanished... as did everything too close to escape from the event horizon of the strange tunnel of blue-white energy through which it traveled.