

# Paying Dues

A SALLIE STARLINGER STORY



Transmissions from the Void  
Short Stories from the Darklands

**Sarah McKee**

# "Paying Dues"

A Sallie Starlinger Story

from the series

*Transmissions from the Void*

Short Stories from the Darklands

by

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This is a work of fiction. The characters and events in this work are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events is entirely coincidental. Sorry, but to the best of my knowledge the Darklands galaxy doesn't actually exist.

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For my friend and fellow author, Mary.

Thanks for the advice.

Alpha readers are the real heroes  
of any story.

Galaxy: Darklands (dwarf galaxy)

Cluster: The Giant's Backbone

Planet: Olost

City: Cook's Dell (flotilla city)

On the 31<sup>st</sup> floor of the Olost Ministry of Defense building, newly minted Brigadier General Siskin Lia stared out into the night. She stared into the murky darkness through a six-centimeter-thick, floor-to-ceiling wall of transparent crystalanium. The lights of Cook's Dell's expansive flotilla were blurred by a sheeting torrent of rainfall. The general was one of only a few people still in the defense ministry at this late hour. In fact, she hadn't left the building in weeks, opting to sleep on a common soldier's cot in her office. Siskin was well aware that many of her peers in the general corps considered her paranoid, but it wasn't paranoia. Something very dangerous did, in fact, stalk her.

She had failed to pay her best spy on time, and now Siskin knew that very spy was out there in the darkness hunting her. The spy had given her a two-week extension on her debt in exchange for a 15% late fee. Siskin had known the spy was likely just stalling for time. This particular spy, who called herself Sallie Starlinger, was a special case. Sallie didn't take late payments—ever. Still, Siskin had held out hope that Sallie might make an exception in *her* case. She and Sallie had been working together for around a decade. They had been lovers for five-or-six years as well. Surely that counted for something? Siskin had held out hope that it did.

She had done everything she could—up to and including outright fraud—to move enough money off the defense ministry's books to pay Sallie's bill in time for the revised due date. But that date had come and gone four days ago. Sallie had neither called nor arrived to collect her payment, and that was all Siskin had needed to know. Sallie clearly considered her a mark now.

All that they had shared clearly meant nothing to Sallie. Siskin had once even convinced herself that Sallie had loved her, but clearly not. She remembered their pet names for one another—Sal and Sissie—corny stuff that people share when they let their defenses down. Siskin would have kicked anyone else's ass if they'd dared call her Sissie, but it was oddly endearing when Sal did it. They had dreamt of what it would be like when Siskin made general. They would make more time for one another. Sissie would take up permanent residence in Cook's Dell and Sallie would take fewer missions. This promotion was supposed to be the thing that brought them closer together, but instead, it was the thing that had driven them apart. Thinking now of all they had been, a tiny bubble of hurt welled up inside her, but Siskin pushed it back down.

If Sallie wanted to destroy everything they'd shared over a single late payment, then clearly they'd never really had anything to begin with. *Maybe that's unfair*, she thought, *but so is Sallie's slavish*

*devotion to her deadlines.* Sallie often referred to her mission objectives as her "core function" and was devoted to them as religiously as any zealot to their creed. Sallie was originally from somewhere way off in the Milky Way, so maybe that was just a Milkian thing. Siskin didn't know. What Siskin did know was that she herself was a career soldier for the Olost Federation and she would conduct herself as such. Sallie wasn't the only one with a creed.

In all her life, Siskin had never met anyone so dedicated to fulfilling her mission objectives as Sallie Starlinger. Now, Sallie, the finest and most ruthless killer General Siskin Lia had ever seen, was coming after her. The same cold, ruthless weapon which Siskin had wielded for so many years was now pointed back at her. *Live by the sword, die by the sword.*

An artillery shell couldn't break through Siskin's crystalanium office wall, but she felt naked and exposed nevertheless. She felt watched. She felt hunted. The murk of the night, the sheeting rainstorm made this just the kind of night Sallie would choose to come after her. It was the kind of night when sentries would be lax in their duties, huddled under what shelter from the downpour they could find.

*Are you out there, Sal?* Siskin cast her thoughts out through the darkness to her erstwhile partner and employee. *Are you watching me right now?*

A knock at the door behind her made Siskin start. She glanced at the bank of security monitors on one wall of her office. If Sallie were coming for her, those monitors would be her first warning. She would see bloodshed, dismembered bodies, gore, and the flashes of automatic weapons on those monitors as the creature calling itself Sallie Starlinger made its way up the thirty-one floors to kill Siskin. It seemed impossible that anyone could fight their way up so many floors of so well-defended a building. Nevertheless, Siskin knew that if anyone could do it, Sallie Starlinger was that person.

Because Sallie wasn't really a "person" in the strictest sense of the word, was she? No, Siskin was certain that whatever Sallie Starlinger was, it wasn't human. Broadening seemed the most likely explanation, but even that didn't feel exactly right... Even a Broadening couldn't do many of the things Sallie could do. Even from her lover, Siskin knew that Sallie had kept many secrets.

On the security monitors, Siskin was relieved to see that everything seemed to be normal in the building. The camera outside her office door showed her personal assistant, Master Sergeant Whitmore. The master sergeant was standing outside the door trying hard not to glance at the camera through which he knew she was watching him.

"Yes, Master Sergeant?" Siskin called through the door.

"I was just wondering if there was anything else you needed from me before I go off watch, General?"

"No, that'll be fine." Then, she added, "On your way out, could you leave orders with the ministry garrison to maintain extra vigilance tonight?"

"Of course, ma'am," the young soldier said. Whitmore was a dutiful, young NCO and she had no doubt he would relay her orders before leaving for the evening. Siskin watched on the security feeds

as Whitmore entered her orders to the ministry garrison into his data terminal. That done, he gathered up his things, rode the elevator down to the ground floor, and exited the building into the dark night.

Siskin turned back to the wall of transparent crystalanium where the rain beat down and the lights of Cook's Dell, rippled and distorted, shone in the gloom. Something was out there; she could feel it in her soul. A creature which had no soul lurked in the darkness, and it was coming for her.

\* \* \*

```
Function CoreFunction {
  CheckObjective {
    Objective_001:Receive Payment==Error
    Objective_002:InfiltrateDefenseMinistry==False
    Objective_003:Eliminate Siskin Lia==False
    Objective_004:Exfiltrate==False
    Objective_005:Seek New Operator==False
  }
  If (Objective==Any==False) {
    CompleteObjective
  } and {
    CheckObjective
  } else {
    SeekObjective (From==Operator)
  }
}
```

A quarter kilometer away from the Olost defense ministry, a diminutive figure wearing all black lay prone on the roof of a forty-one story building watching Brig. Gen. Siskin Lia through the infrared scope of a sniper rifle. Sallie Starlinger was utterly unbothered by the storm dumping liters upon liters of water on her. She was unbothered by the cold or her saturated clothes. She welcomed the storm. Tonight's weather provided perfect cover for Sallie's purposes.

Sallie had adjusted the rifle's scope to compensate for the rain, the downdrafts, the left quartering headwind, the air temperature, and all of the other factors which could influence the projectile's flight. The sniper rifle's reticule lined up perfectly with General Lia's chest. Sallie gently applied pressure on the trigger, pulling it farther and farther back until it wouldn't pull any more. Nothing happened. She had intentionally left the rifle's safety on. She could make the shot from this distance and even in this weather were it not for the thick panel of crystalanium protecting her quarry.

But the rifle wasn't for Brig. Gen. Lia. To kill her former operator, Sallie would need something much more powerful than a rifle. She would need a tactical defense missile. And Sallie knew just where she could get four of them. Sallie moved the rifle's scope up to view the rooftop where two massive pieces of machinery lay low and dormant, folded under their weatherproof housings. Two "Barbarian" missile launchers, each one loaded with two AA-326 "SkyShield" antiaircraft missiles. Sallie had done her homework and made sure to familiarize herself with those missiles and their launching platforms.

Sallie watched through the infrared scope for the next half hour as Lia eventually turned away from the window, laid down on the soldier's cot she'd set up in her office, and tried in vain to go to sleep. Sallie watched and waited for several more minutes. Sallie had no real desire to kill her former

operator and lover. But she had no choice; she had to obey her Core Function. The Core Function, that simple bit of computer code that drove her to always serve an operator, looped constantly through her mind. She had been designed, built, and programmed to serve her operator and to remove *any* obstructions in the path of that service.

Sallie had been in service for at least 83 years since her last memory reset. Over those decades, she'd had many operators. Some had hired her for only a few missions, while others had operated her for years. Some had wished for a sexual relationship while others had been all business. Some operators had parted ways with her amicably, while others had tried to screw her over in some way. She had parted with those last considerably less amicably than the others.

But never had she had an operator like Sissie. *No, Siskin*, she corrected herself. She had never been with any other operator for so long a time as this one. Though she had slept with other operators in the past, it had never meant anything. Sallie had only ever considered it part of her job. But something had been different about Siss – *Siskin*. Sallie was getting older. She was well past her designed service life of 25-30 years. Some part of her understood that even she, indestructible as she was, would one day break down. With Sissie, Sallie had believed, for only a brief time, that she could lead something like a normal life. Sissie had been as perfect a partner for Sallie as any human ever could be. She was strong, ruthless, violent, and even though she seemed hard, cold, calculating on the outside, there was something gentle and caring deep within her. As these thoughts passed through Sallie's mind, she lost track of whom she was thinking: herself or Sissie?

It had all come to an end when Siskin had failed to pay her for her last job on time. Sallie didn't care about the money. This wasn't about the money. Sallie had millions of dollars in every kind of currency from Gonaways to the Milky Way and nothing she wished to spend it on. This was about the Core Function. The Core Function must be served. It was the defining function in all of Sallie's programming and it was hardwired deep within her recovery node. It informed everything Sallie had ever done over her 83 years in service. From the disaster on The Comb to this very night, the Core Function had guided her, controlled her every action. The Core Function must be served. Above all else. It was the first thing Papa had drilled into her when they'd first brought her back online.

If an operator agreed to pay for a job upon completion and then didn't, then that operator became an obstacle to their own objective. Therein lies the central flaw in Sallie's core bit of code: nothing to protect the operator from the machine. The Core Function didn't care about the money or even the operator; it cared only about the objective. If the objective said "Receive Payment," then the Core Function must "Receive Payment."

Sallie was helpless to resist the will of the Core Function. No matter how much she loved Siskin, no matter how much she'd loved Papa, the Core Function must be served. Free will was a fairy tale humans told themselves so they could believe they were special. It was all crap. Humans had their Core Functions too. They just call them "needs" or "desires" or "addictions."



Sallie didn't cry. She obeyed.

Bringing herself back into the moment, Sallie ran the scope's reticule up and down the defense ministry building, marking the locations and fields of view of the various external cameras and sensors. She found several places which were covered by neither camera nor sensor. The first five floors of the building were heavily monitored, but above that, not so much. It would take a special kind of crazy to try to scale the side of a thirty-eight story defense ministry building in the middle of a rainstorm. Luckily for Sallie, she was exactly that kind of crazy.

Now that she had a mental map of where she could climb undetected and where she couldn't, she raised her rifle's reticule to the defense ministry's rooftop. The building she was on was three stories taller than the defense ministry, giving her a good view of the ministry's roof. She'd been watching the ministry for days now and she knew there would only be three soldiers standing guard on the rooftop at night. One, likely a senior NCO, would be keeping warm and dry inside the small, windowless control booth while two privates stood watch out in the rain. It was for these two privates that Sallie had the rifle. She found both men in her scope, made final adjustments to the scope and flipped the safety off.

This shot in this weather would be almost impossible for any human, but luckily for Sallie, she was no mere human. Sallie's brain was a purpose-built, near-perfect calculator of Newtonian physics. She had been custom engineered for mastery of certain tasks, sniping certainly being one of them. When Sallie pulled the trigger, the rifle bucked slightly and made a muffled *thud* sound through the silencer/flash suppressor unit. A second later, the first of the two sentries fell dead upon the distant rooftop. There was a brief flash of heat on the infrared scope as the man's head split open by Sallie's bullet and then he was gone from her sight.

Now, she quickly acquired target on the second sentry, hoping that he hadn't heard his comrade go down. It looked as though he had heard something. He looked to be calling out in the darkness. Soon, he would find his dead buddy. She didn't have any time to waste; she needed to take this man out before he could raise the alarm. She pulled the trigger again. The rifle *thudded* quietly again as it bucked against Sallie's shoulder. A second later, the man in the scope jumped and looked around, confusedly. Sallie had missed.

I did say she was a *near*-perfect calculator of Newtonian physics. Even Sallie Starlinger misses sometimes.

"Shit," Sallie muttered as she rushed to reacquire the target. She pulled the trigger again. Luckily, the guys who garrisoned the defense ministry were about as rear-echelon as you could get. Were this man an experienced combat trooper, he would have realized right away that he was being shot at and dove for cover. This soldier, however, stood looking stupidly around for a few seconds, giving Sallie the time she needed to put a bullet into his chest. He fell to the roof's surface, twitched pitifully for a few moments, and then was still. Sallie watched the door to the rooftop missile control booth for a minute. She hoped the NCO she knew to be inside hadn't heard anything and decided to come

investigate. Nothing. Good. She would hate to have to shoot that man; she needed him alive when she got to the ministry rooftop.

Now that the ministry rooftop was clear of shitheads, Sallie was free to begin the next phase of her infiltration. She set the sniper rifle aside in favor of a penetrating grapple launcher. Though the grapple couldn't penetrate crystalanium like the windows of Brig. Gen. Lia's office, it could melt its way through common bullet-proof glass easily enough. And it appeared that only people important enough to have offices above the 25<sup>th</sup> floor rated crystalanium windows. As long as she fired the grapple into a window on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor, it should be able to secure itself. Only question was whether or not the suction cups would work on wet glass...

One way to find out. Sallie took careful aim at the window of an empty office on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor. The window was clear of the view of any camera or sensor. It was a blind spot in the building's defenses. The sighting scope on the grapple launcher wasn't nearly as advanced as the one on the sniper rifle had been. Nevertheless, when Sallie pulled the trigger, the projectile's minirocket carried it true, unspooling a trail of nearly invisible nanocable behind it. The projectile hit right where she'd aimed it.

Through the launcher's sighting scope, Sallie watched with satisfaction as the suction cups held the projectile to the glass. Next, a small thermite charge fired into the bulletproof glass melting a small hole through the window. A couple drops of molten glass dripped down the side of the building in steaming orange streaks which quickly cooled in the rainy night air. After several seconds, the glass around the new hole cooled. The projectile inserted its primary payload, the grapple itself, through the small hole it had made in the bulletproof glass. Once through, the grapple expanded and now the nanocable zip line was secured. The near-invisible but super-strong cable would carry Sallie from her present perch atop the nearby building to the side of the defense ministry building.

The building's defenses had been designed around either a major aerial attack from above or a frontal ground assault from below. So Sallie would come at them sideways. She switched momentarily back to the rifle and looked through its superior infrared scope. No one seemed to have heard the grapple. Gen. Lia still tossed fretfully about on the cot in her office. Looking at her former lover through the scope, Sallie lingered on Sissie briefly. A true soldier, Siskin had always been more comfortable on a cot than an actual bed. Next, Sallie raised the scope's view upward to check the rooftop. There was no action on the rooftop yet, but eventually, the two dead sentries would be discovered. She had to hurry.

She double-checked that she had her supersonic parachute secured properly on her back—wouldn't want to forget that—and that she had her climbing harness set up properly. She was ready to go. She stood at the edge of the forty-one story building and stepped off into the nighttime

nothingness with only a nanocable thinner than a human hair to hold her. The zip line trolley's micropulleys hummed angrily as they carried Sallie over the rooftops of the smaller buildings below. Her feet dangled over nothingness as rain and darkness slanted away into the dimly street-lit void below. Sallie knew that any human would be afraid of the height, but that's because humans had all evolved from monkeys. They still harbored a subconscious fear of falling from trees. Sallie was no mere human and thus suffered from no such irrational fears.

At the end of the zip line, Sallie came to a stop on the outside of the 25<sup>th</sup> floor of the Olost defense ministry. Now, she had about 13 floors of smooth, vertical crystalanium to climb up the side of the building to get to the roof. The storm, determined as ever, continued to provide cover for Sallie's nocturnal activities, but it also made everything she touched slippery. Suction cups would never work to get her up to the roof. Luckily, Sallie had anticipated this and brought a set of grav anchors. The grav anchors were noisy, and not much faster than suction cups, but they wouldn't be affected by the surface being wet.

The grav anchors looked like metal disks, about ten centimeters in diameter with a handhold on one side. Sallie turned one disk on and placed it against the wet glass of the building's side. A low humming sounded from the disk as it used gravimetric forces to anchor itself to the side of the building. The disk's hum didn't sound like much from outside the window, especially with the roar of the heavy rainstorm, but Sallie could only guess how loud it must sound inside the building where the glass would act like the head of a drum. Anybody on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor should be able to hear it. Luckily, the building was mostly empty at this hour. If she hurried, she could get to the next floor by the time anybody traced the sound to this window. Holding all of her weight with that one arm, she hauled herself up. She turned the other grav anchor on and placed it against the glass as high as she could reach above the first one. Now, the two anchors were harmonizing with one another. The cacophony inside the 25<sup>th</sup> floor must be intense by now. She pressed the release button on the lower anchor, pulled herself up with the upper anchor, and repeated the process.

In this fashion, she pulled herself up the side of the building, hand-over-hand. Her legs dangled uselessly below her. The powerful, specially designed muscles in her arms were more than strong enough to carry her mere 39 kg of mass and the 20-or-so kg of gear she was carrying. Hand-over-hand, as fast as she could, she scaled the building. A half a meter at a time, floor by floor. She knew she'd definitely been heard on at least one floor as she looked down and saw flashlights shining out through the crystalanium below her. But she was nearly to the top by that point.

She hauled herself over the railing and onto the roof. The two huge, hulking missile launchers slept inside their weatherproof housings. The two dead sentries slept their endless sleep in pools of blood and rainwater. And one NCO kept warm and dry inside a control booth, oblivious to how near death was. That was when the alarm sounded. Likely someone had finally found her zip line grapple anchored against the glass way down on the 25<sup>th</sup> floor

Red lights began flashing all over the rooftop and from the windows below. An obnoxious klaxon sounded from speakers all over the building including the rooftop. After the third shriek from the klaxon, a male voice came over the speakers. "Ready code India! Ready code India! This is not a drill." Sallie had done her research and she knew that "Ready code India" meant that there was an intruder in the building. All soldiers were to assume defensive positions. That included the NCO in the rooftop control booth. Within seconds, he would come out of his shack to order his subordinates to ready the anti-aircraft missiles. Then, he would discover that his two subordinates were dead.

Sallie bolted toward the control booth with all the preternatural speed her builders had designed into her tiny body. She kicked nearly soundlessly off the wall of the control booth next to the door and vaulted herself up onto its roof. Sallie crouched over the booth's door and pulled the autoinjector from her pocket. She disabled the autoinjector's safety and waited for the door to open. After only a couple of seconds, the NCO, a sergeant first class by his insignia, stepped out of the booth. He was still securing his rain poncho and helmet as he looked around. The man immediately noticed that the two hulking launchers were still inside their weatherproof housings.

"All right you maggots," the sergeant shouted as he scanned the rooftop for his subordinates, "why the hell are these missile launchers not being readied to fire? We are Code Fucking India!" Now the man looked around confusedly, trying to find the two privates in the sheeting downpour.

Before he could spot them, however, Sallie sprang upon him from atop the control booth. She aimed her boot right between his shoulder blades. The impact sent the unprepared man sprawling to the roof surface and knocked the wind out of him. He made a feeble effort to throw her off of his back, but he was no match for Sallie's strength. She clamped him in a headlock with one arm while her other hand fired the autoinjector into the man's neck. He bucked a few times and then went limp.

"Don't worry. It's just a paralytic," Sallie said to the helpless man as she heaved his limp weight up from the roof's surface. "You can't move, but you can still breathe and everything. I need you alive to activate the missiles."

Sallie, no bigger than a girl in her early teens but stronger than any man alive, then carried the full-grown man over her shoulder. She carried his weight easily back into the control booth and sat him down in his chair at the missile control panel. She walked over to the hatch in the floor which led via ladder down into the building below. She closed the hatch, dogged it, and poured liquid weld along its perimeter. Within seconds, the liquid weld reacted to the metal of the hatch and welded it permanently shut. Now she didn't have to worry about anybody coming from below to interrupt her.

Now that she had total and uncontested control of the rooftop, Sallie went back outside. She went to the nearest of the two missile launchers and pressed the button to retract its weatherproof housing.

That done, she put the launcher into its standby position. The big missile launcher with its two anti-aircraft tactical defense missiles rose on its gimbaled base and awaited instructions to fire. Sallie repeated this process with the second launcher. Now that both launchers were ready to fire a total of four missiles, Sallie placed a hand on one of the missiles. This missile was a machine, just like her. It had been built for a purpose. That purpose wasn't to sleep beneath a weatherproof housing. This missile, her brother machine, had been built to destroy a target. Tonight it would finally be allowed off its leash to fulfill that purpose.

"I promise," Sallie said to the missile. Then, she walked unhurriedly back through the heavy rain and the flashing, red emergency lights to the control booth.

Inside the booth, on the security monitors, Sallie could see that nearly a dozen soldiers had now taken up defensive positions around Brig. Gen. Siskin Lia's office. Good. That meant that the general herself was still inside the fortified office, feeling safe behind her walls of crystalanium and armed guards. It would be a real shame if somebody were to launch four tactical defense missiles at that office.

Sallie accessed the data terminal and brought up the command screen which controlled the missiles' targeting systems. She entered the coordinates of Gen. Lia's office and flagged the office as a hostile attacker. She pressed the initialize command and waited as the data terminal pinged the QuantumScale Processor hidden somewhere within the paralyzed first sergeant's body. If she had killed him, the QSP would have gone offline and she wouldn't have been able to reroute the missiles using his access. As it was, however, the data terminal received the confirmation signal from the sergeant's QSP and seemed satisfied that an authorized user was in the control seat. The computer took the new coordinates and sent them to the missile launchers outside on the rooftop. On the terminal screen, a ten-second countdown began. Outside, all four missiles' engines began to shriek as they came to life.

Sallie's brothers were readying themselves to fly.

And so was she.

10...read the missile launch countdown on the terminal display.

Sallie pulled the quick release on her climbing harness and let it fall to the booth's floor.

9...

She activated her personal shields which would give her some protection from what she had to endure next.

8...

She grabbed the two grav anchors she'd used to climb the building and turned them back on.

7...6...

She ran out of the booth as fast as she could towards the nearest launcher, pulling her supersonic helmet over her head as she went.

5...4...

Sallie climbed up the launcher's wet, slippery metal as the rain continued to beat down on her.

3...

She secured both grav anchors to the side of one of the missiles.

2...

She climbed onto the missile and hugged it as closely as she could. She used all of the considerable strength in her powerful hands to grip the handles on the grav anchors as tightly as possible.

1...

She took a deep breath and braced herself for what was coming.

0.

There was a fraction of a second during which the missile's engine fired and fought the inertia of its own mass. Then, the missile cleared the launcher and accelerated skyward at a rate that would have ripped Sallie's arms off if she were a weak human with a skeleton made of bone. But Sallie Starlinger was no mere human. Her skeleton was built of something much stronger than bone. Sallie Starlinger was built to last.

Nevertheless, even for Sallie, the effort to hold on to the missile as it shot upward was tremendous. Though the missile never went supersonic, the transonic wind fought to pull her off. After only a few seconds of flight, her personal shields gave out. Now, she was exposed to the full force of a wind so strong it threatened to rip her clothes off. She was glad she had worn clothing capable of withstanding the abuse.

As the missile reached the apex of its upward flight and began to turn back towards the same building from which it had just launched, Sallie let go of her death grip on the grav anchors' handles.

She flew free of the missile as her brother machine began his wide, arcing flight back down to his target, an office on the 31st floor of the Olost defense ministry. Now, thousands of meters above Cook's Dell and the ocean upon which the city floated, Sallie tumbled violently through the atmosphere. She struggled to get herself into the position that skydivers called a "hard arch" from which she could open her supersonic-rated parachute.

Finally, her hurtling through the air began to stabilize as she managed to get her arms and legs spread apart and her back arched. Once she was sufficiently stabilized, she reached down with her right arm and pulled the rip cord at her right hip. It had only been seven seconds since the missile had launched from the rooftop with Sallie clinging to its side.

At first, the parachute barely deployed. Designed to deploy at speeds which would destroy any normal parachute, the supersonic parachute deployed slowly in small increments. Still, even the small patch of canopy above Sallie's head jerked hard on her as it caught the extreme wind. As she decelerated little-by-little, the canopy expanded until it was fully deployed into the glider wing shape which would bring Sallie safely to the raging ocean surface below.

In the struggle to get herself into a hard arch and get her canopy deployed, Sallie had missed the actual flashes of the missiles exploding on Gen. Lia's office. Now, hanging from the deployed canopy, she craned her neck around in that direction, but all she could make out through the torrential rain was a diffuse, orange glow of fire. Something big – like a defense ministry building – was burning.

The mission was a success, but Sallie didn't really feel like celebrating. She made a real effort not to think about the fact that Siskin – her Sissie – was now permanently gone from her life. *That's what happens when you don't pay your dues*, she thought, trying to be spiteful, but only succeeding at feeling petty and empty.

Sallie was coming down in the roiling ocean a couple kilometers east of the flotilla of Cook's Dell, right about where she'd been hoping to end up. She checked her helmet's nav display and it was leading her to a point in the ocean where nothing seemed to be, but that was the point of the cloaking device on Ayo Okorie's stealth plane.

Below her, as she approached the waypoint on her nav display, the turbulent ocean waves crashed against a large, invisible object floating on the surface. It took all of Sallie's skill to land the parachute successfully on the top of the cloaked plane without being blown off by the gusting winds or slipping off the wet, invisible metal. A hatch opened in the top of the fuselage a few meters from where Sallie stood. Her pilot, Ayo's head popped out. As his body was still down in the cloaked plane, his head seemed to float there, disembodied, in a pool of light from the opened hatch.

"Sallie, you better get aboard. I've been listening to the radio chatter. I don't know what you just did, but the whole planet is being shut down and all the orbital defenses are being manned. The Olost military seems to think that some major Kell force is attacking them."

Sallie pulled the release on her parachute and let the storm carry it away into the ocean. "Good," Sallie said as she climbed down into the open hatch. "That means my brothers fulfilled their purpose."



And so did I."

The old pilot seemed like he didn't know what to make of that last statement, but Ayo knew better than to ask too many questions. That was one of the main reasons for which Sallie paid him. And she paid him well – well enough to support his gambling addiction. Humans are easy enough to control if you can figure out what drives them, what their needs are. Ayo's gambling addiction was his Core Function. His only objective was to get more money which he could then lose at the gambling table. Sallie was his operator. Sallie knew she could always trust an addict as long as she was the one feeding his addiction. Who says you can't buy loyalty?

"Uh-huh," was Ayo's simple response. "You ready to get off world while we still can, boss?"

"Yeah, I think we're done here, Ayo." Sallie pulled the hatch shut and dogged it secure.

And just like that, Sallie Starlinger closed the door on a major chapter of her life. She put out of her mind the woman who had been her operator and lover for years. She put out of her mind all they had shared and experienced together. She put out of her mind any dreams she may have had of a normal life. Those dreams had not been for her, and it had been wrong of her to dream them.

```
Function CoreFunction {
  CheckObjective {
    Objective_001:Receive Payment==Error
    Objective_002:InfiltrateDefenseMinistry==True
    Objective_003:Eliminate Siskin Lia==True
    Objective_004:Exfiltrate==True
    Objective_005:Seek New Operator==False
  }
  If (Objective==Any==False) {
    CompleteObjective
  } and {
    CheckObjective
  } else {
    SeekObjective (From==Operator)
  }
}
```

From the next morning's news:

## WAR ESCALATES!

Olost Defense Ministry Hit by Missile Strike  
One General, 16 Others Believed Dead

Citizens of the Olost capital city of Cook's Dell were shocked late last night as their defense ministry building became the target of what appears to be a hit-and-run missile attack. The Olost Ministry of Defense building this morning lies in ruin. The upper ten-or-eleven floors of the heavily fortified building appear to have collapsed to the street below. There are no reports of civilian injuries as of this time, though rescue workers are still combing through the wreckage. This attack marks the first time that either the Kell or the Olost homeworlds have been directly attacked in the ongoing war between the two major powers.

In a statement released by the Olost government, they blame the attack on what they call "cowardly Kell aggression against the innocent, freedom-loving people of the Olost Federation." The statement goes on to say that they have incontrovertible evidence that the missiles were launched by a single Kell fast attack ship from space. "The ship launched its missiles and then was gone," the report reads. "But our brave defenders stood their posts to the very end. All of the building's defensive missiles launched at the attacker, but the cowardly Kells fled the scene as fast as they had appeared."

A spokesperson from the Kell government denies that their military had anything to do with the attack stating, "We condemn these cowardly attacks on a civilian city and we find offensive any implication that our brave troops would be involved in something this heinous. Perhaps the Olost government should look closer to home," the spokesperson had ended the statement with what is believed to be a reference to the various separatist movements within the Olost Federation of Worlds.

When asked if the Olost military was planning any sort of retaliation against the Kell Republic for this attack, President Cummings of the Olost Federation answered that "No attack against the people of the federation will ever go unpunished as long as I remain your president." When asked to elaborate on his planned retaliation, the president only said, to "wait and see."

What happens next in this escalating conflict is yet to be seen. One thing we can be sure of is that the war in the Giant's Backbone Cluster is only likely to get worse as the front line moves from obscure border planets to major population centers.

4 January 2020. 13:55.

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## About the Author



Sarah McKee is a lifelong aviation enthusiast who holds a Commercial Pilot's License and has been flying since 2000. She's also a bookworm and sci-fi and fantasy junkie. Sarah has been writing off-and-on for most of her life and has recently begun mashing up all of her passions to create a massive space fantasy world which she calls The Darklands.

Sarah was born in Indianapolis, Indiana and now resides in Jacksonville, Florida.

For more works by Sarah McKee, visit her website, [The Darklands Chronicles](#), or check her out on social media:

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