

Episode 1

Seth Dickinson

From set *Edge of Eternities*
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Act One

Revision 0

I lie in the clay until the sun explodes and shatters me.

End of failed timeline.

>Start over. (go to Revision 1)

Revision 1

I create you.

Who is 'you'?

You are the person who imagines I am me.

That doesn't mean anything.

You were already a person. I didn't create you. But now you're a person who imagines that I'm me.

You don't exist?

I exist. But I'm not a *me* . At least not until you imagine me.

Here. Let me help. Imagine me as a switch in a very complicated railyard, where trains split and merge and sometimes rush down into pits.

All the rails eventually go to the same place. Even the pits go there. But you can take many paths to reach that place.

I need you to think of me this way so that you can operate me.

So that you can make choices.

Because the truth is that I'm lost. I'm a long way from the railyard. And I need to get back to work.

Could you choose to have someone find me, please?

>Yes. (go to Revision 2 (Sothera))

>No. (go to Revision 0)

Revision 2 (Sothera)

It was the century when the sun exploded.



Art by: Dominik Mayer

The name of the sun was Sothera. She was a grandmother.

Billions of years ago, Sothera gave birth to five children. Five worlds to stay warm by her hearth. Today, they are Susur Secundi (formerly Anuki), Adagia (formerly Adawa), Kavaron, Evendo, and giant Uthros.

(There are other children, too, many of them strange. But I will steer you away from them for now.)

Not *quite* as many billions of years later, Kavaron gave birth to grandchildren: the Kav.

And, as children do, the Kav broke their mothers' hearts.

They delved so deep into Kavaron, they tore it open—blasted an abscess into their homeworld. Entire continents rose and slumped into the cavity or never came down at all. Kavaron was torn in two; today, they call one half Kavaron That Is and the other Kavaron Before. The gore of their folly made a ring around it, which falls on them to this day. They call it Duranuw, the Mordraine Ring, because it is the stone rain left by murder.

So, the Kav killed their mother. But it was a small death compared to the death coming for Sothera herself.

Sothera grew too bright. Sothera grew too big. Sothera's light turned strange.

Sothera had strayed into the jungle—a cloud of interstellar aether. And she was eating the jungle, eating it hungrily. Eating it to death.

Look up into the night sky, from any world in Sothera, and you will see the savage watercolors of cosmic gas. The nebula has crowded into Sothera itself, circling the star, forming a thick cloud of mystery the Kav call the Garden. No wonder they tore their world open! They evolved under a sky full of star-blood. They had the scent.

In less than two hundred years, Sothera would go nova. The blast would strip the atmosphere from all its worlds and puff the Garden away into space.

You might begin to think, now, that Sothera is cursed. Maybe great evil dwells here. Maybe Sothera was meant to die and save the cosmos from its secrets.

But an imminent supernova is a monumental catastrophe. And monuments, especially strange monuments, always draw admirers.

So, Pinnacle came to Sothera.

>What's Pinnacle? (go to What's Pinnacle?)

>Can we just get started with the real story? (go to Revision 4)

What's Pinnacle?

Pinnacle is here to help.

There is no star travel without Pinnacle, and no Pinnacle without the Drix.

Do you know the Drix?

I thought not. No one does.

Not so long ago—at least years as I reckon—the Drix gave the secret of the eternity columns to Pinnacle. The columns are what you climb to travel between stars.



Art by: Rovina Cai

In exchange, the Drix (who can weftwalk between stars without a column or a ship) received a promise from Pinnacle.

Whenever a star within Pinnacle's reach was about to die, Pinnacle would visit. They would build an eternity column and save what they could. They would help the Drix search the dying system.

What the Drix search for is hard to say. Some socients claim they take things away. Others say they bury things deep.

What the Drix do not say is: "the young may rule the future, but for the sake of the future, the old must guard the past."

After Pinnacle opened Sothera to interstellar flight, the hopefuls flooded in.

They didn't hope for money. Pinnacle does not use money, because Pinnacle was created by treaty with the Drix, and the Drix, who can weftwalk away from any arrangement they dislike, do not recognize any economy based on bondage, compulsion, hierarchy, or constraint.

But the Drix take the rights of the traveler and the duties of the host very seriously. They call this duty mallowmass. Its emblem is a purple flower.

The hopefuls who came to Sothera were looking for mallow—for the reputation you gain doing good work. In a civilization without coin, only the coin matters.

And in doomed Sothera, some work of noble note might yet be done, helping the Kav to evacuate, or studying the imminent supernova, or searching for knowledge that might be lost to the fire. The kind of work whose mallow gets you noticed, and trusted, and sought out for opportunity in the halls of power, from the Cosmograns of the Celestial Palatinate to the high bands of the Illvoi Cyclonics to the whispering galleries of the Monasteriat at Point Prime.

Thus, against all sense except the best sense (the sense of the hospice, of transcribing the books in a burning library), Sothera began to fill up and thrive in its last centuries.

The Illvoi came to search the depths of Uthros. (You will remember, later, that Mirri disappeared from a dock near Uthros.) The Kav were here already and needed to leave. There were wurms in the Wurmwall out at the edge of Sothera and strange entities in the cosmic aether of the Garden.

Pinnacle's first survey even found the trace gases of Eumidian terrasymbiosis in Evendo's atmosphere. Eons ago, a Eumidian seedship planted a brood here, on this frozen paradise, jungle crushed beneath ice. The Eumidians set out to change it and to change themselves to suit it. Once the Eumidians have chosen a home, they don't leave. They'll work to garden Evendo until it burns. And maybe there will be Eumidians who crawl back out onto the dark cinder afterward to try again.

Do you know the Eumidians? You must. They're so often taken as the default form of life between the Chaos Wall and Quiet Wall—the ones who by sheer number define the ordinary. Quick, versatile, curious, born in many shapes, eager to learn, hungry to meet new worlds, and to change to meet them.

Last of all came the humans.

Do you know the humans?

They are a curious case of specialization. Long legs, white eyes, they love to run and throw. Something killed them all—pushed them nearly to the edge of extinction—and they regrew from the survivors. They are now so alike that in some parts of their history, they have identified a single cognotype as the norm and treated all the rest as alien.

Since they have no morphs or clades to give them options against a changing universe, humans have developed a culture instead, a pool of knowledge passed down from generation to generation.

Humans, you see, are obligate mimics. As infants, the only thing they know how to do is *copy*. If they do not copy, they cannot survive. The inbred humans cannot get adaptive variety from their genes.

Some socients, the Kav especially, find this fascinating. You can't tell much about a human by looking at or smelling them, the way you can look at a Eumidian and say, you are a vanguard morph, you are a mulchmorph. You have to learn what *culture* the human has learned to copy. And that culture makes all the difference to them. It decides what they choose, what they believe, even what they perceive.

This makes the humans excellent recruits for the great faiths.

Two of those faiths went to war over Sothera.

First came the Monoists, worshippers of *The Theorem Unending and Final*, evangelists of *The Plummet Record*. They were not all humans—the Monoists, despite their name, are a cosmopolitan bunch who worship a single truth. They settled on Anuki, the innermost world of Sothera, and found that the Faller had prepared it for them, investing it with labyrinths and sacred tides. Oh, how they would amplify those tides, like song swelling up from the deep!



Art by: Alix Branwyn

So, they named it Susur Secundi, in praise of their home and tomb and whispering cathedral, Susur.

And they turned their instruments and their doxologies upon the swollen grandmother star above, asking the one question no one else had dared voice:

What if these were *not* the last days of Sothera?

What if, instead of erupting in a cataclysmic fusion hiccup, Sothera could be pushed in on itself—and promoted (neatly, silently, suddenly) into a dark door god?

What if they killed Sothera into a supervoid?

>Well? What would happen? (go to Revision 4)

>You didn't tell us about the second great faith. (go to Anathalmanac)

Revision 4

I want to tell you this story.
linebreak
linebreak
But before we can begin, I need you to make two choices for me.

Think of it as flipping two switches: *arm story* and *launch story*.
linebreak
linebreak
The first regards an Illvoi named Mm'menon.

Do you know the Illvoi? They are jellyfish from the place where air turns to metal. If you meet Illvoi in Sothera, they are likely with the Uthros Combine, which settled on the storm giant Uthros to do

what they do best: go where no one else can survive, to find what no one else will believe.
I need you to fascinate Mm'menon with omens. This will, unavoidably, cause their permanent exile from the Uthros Combine and the company of their peers.

I am not asking you to make a moral choice. This is not a story about you or your qualms. I am asking you to make the choice that will allow this story to *continue*.

Imagine what I can show you if you do.

>Make Mm'menon's life interesting. (go to Revision 5)

>Don't. (go to Refuse [first])

Revision 5

Thank you. I can't do this without you. Someone must make the choice.

The second and final thing I need, before we can begin, concerns a human called the Metalman.

The Metalman is not from around here. He does not obey all the ordinary rules of the railyard—you remember the railyard, of course, where I help the trains decide which track to take?

Mm'menon will alert the Metalman that I am here.

I need you to prevent the Metalman from retrieving me. Specifically, I want you to deprive him of the services of certain specialists in acquiring and containing things like me.

Will you prevent that for me, please?

>Prevent the Metalman from finding you. (go to Revision 6)

>Allow it. (go to Refuse [second])

Refuse

The rest of the story you have chosen is terribly tedious. I am dug up, carefully inspected, locked away in stasis, and ultimately delivered to the Drix.

But you are the one who chooses. Will you choose differently, or is this the end?

>Go back. (go to Revision 4)

>End of failed timeline. Start over. (go to Revision 0)

Refuse

The story will end here. Capture by the Metalman leaves me trapped in his control.

But you are the one who chooses.

Will you choose differently? Or is this the end?

>Go back. (go to Revision 5)

>End of failed timeline. Start over. (go to Revision 0)

Revision 6

Now we're ready. Now we can begin!

Close your eyes. Listen carefully. Do you hear that?

That's the mewl of a cat named Mirri.

Mirri was the very best of cats. Her human is—well, not the best of humans. But they do love their cat.

Like all ordinary cats, Mirri can weftwalk. Most cats will do this if you step on their tail, or drop a pan on the stove, or seem likely to put them in a carrier and abduct them to the vet.

One day something startled Mirri, and she weftwalked away from the human.

But she didn't weftwalk to her favorite hiding spot in the *Seriema*'s galley. She didn't even weftwalk to the pod where the human trained her to go if she couldn't breathe.

Mirri weftwalked—and vanished.

Maybe she went to another planet. Maybe she went straight through the Walls. But wherever she has gone, the human is going to find her.



Art by: Zara Alfonso

The human's name is Sami. Pinnacle brought them to Sothera, and they are not going to leave until they find their cat.

>Look for the cat. (go to Revision 10)

>Wait, go back and tell me about Pinnacle and Sothera. (go to Pinnacle)

Anathalmanac



Art by: Edgar Sánchez Hidalgo

MORTAL IMPERATIVE! SET THY HAND AFLAME!

ALL THOSE KNIGHTS PRESENT, ALL IN UNISON: linebreak linebreak TEAR OPEN A ONE-LITER STOUP OF PURE WATER (299K).

PLUNGE THY BURNING HAND WITHIN.

WHEN THE WATER BOILS AWAY, MARK A TALLY ON THE STOUP, OPEN A NEW LITER OF WATER, AND BEGIN AGAIN. linebreak linebreak DO NOT DEVIATE IN THIS, EVEN AS YOU READ!

This is holy writ, writ in holy blood. Defy it at thy peril. Now listen!

YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES ARE APPALLING.

If you have broken the seal on this anathalmanac entry, then you are in possession of a certain Object and in the jaws of direst danger.

Syr knight, it is now thy deadly burden and awesome doom to deliver this Object to your coronal for dispensation by the agents of the Regent Maximum. Set aside all other duties, even should their payoff exceed ten million lives.

IS THY HAND STILL BURNING?

CONSEQUENCES OF ERROR .

If you fail, worse than death awaits thee. You will be replaced by a self that is not yourself. It will take utter possession of all thy knowledge and deeds. It will walk as you, and no one shall ever know it is not you and of you nothing shall remain, not even the part that should pass into warm eternity. Prefer annihilation, syr knight—for though it extinguishes you, annihilation does not mock you.

Yet take heart. You know the danger. Now you may guard against it.

IS THY HAND STILL BURNING?

SANCTIFICATION AND RECTIFICATION.

So, heed:

Speak the “Litany of Dawn” calmly, with all your heart, knowing that this may be the last time it is done by thy own authentic will.

Look up into the sky. Locate the closest star reborn by a horizon javelin. (If you do not know the distance to the closest star reborn by javelin, then perish.)linebreak

Take the distance in light years, divide by your own age in minutes, and take the one digit of the result.

Let this digit be your seed and guide.

Consult the corresponding protocol in this tabula and proceed accordingly.linebreak linebreak
DO NOT DEVIATE FROM THE INSTRUCTION IN EVEN THE SMALLEST PARTICULAR. DO NOT CHOOSE A MORE CONVENIENT OR ACCESSIBLE PROTOCOL. THE SOULS OF YOUR COMRADES DEPEND ON YOUR BEHAVIOR MATCHING THAT OF ANY OTHER KNIGHT PLACED IN THE SAME SITUATION. BETRAY THE INTERCHANGEABILITY OF THIS WRIT AND YOU BETRAY THEM ALL.

IS THY HAND STILL BURNING?

1. Chain of correlated skeletons. Ignite the calcium in your bones, casting light to the left hand and the right. By the left hand, entangle your bones with those of your comrades. By the right hand, entangle yourself with the Object. Travel calmly to the nearest coronal and say unto them, “Coronal, our bodies are concatenated with the dark, now save me from INEVITA.” (Recorded successes: none)
2. Pendulum, encoding faith. Fashion from gleanings a triple-jointed pendulum. Dangle it from thy armor. Every second, glean its velocity vector, use it to select a scripture from the Faith Space. Broadcast the selected scripture to the nearest secure router of the faithful to be repeated in prayer every day for the next thousand years. Travel calmly to the nearest coronal and say unto them, “Coronal, the avalanche of things moved by liturgy protects me. Now save me from INEVITA.” (Recorded successes: none)

IS THY HAND STILL BURNING?

3. Entropy blossom, with social characteristics. Change society irreversibly. Transmit a potlatch order to the nearest Pinnacle clearinghouse: a gift from the coffers of Dynasty Taman, selected by the unique digits of your birth time, presented to every being in this system that shares your birth date on the calendar. Travel calmly to the nearest coronal and say unto them, “Coronal, I am armored in gifts, now save me from INEVITA.” (Recorded successes: none)
4. The random assassins. Transmit a packet to the nearest secure repeater of the faith. Encode in it the unique digits of your birth time. This number will choose luminaries and officers of great powers. Assassins shall be set against them. Travel calmly to the nearest coronal and say unto them, “Coronal, arbitrary evil has safely seen me to you, so absolve me and save me from INEVITA” (Recorded successes: one)

IS THY HAND STILL BURNING?

5. Hole. Dig a hole deeply toward the center of the nearest gravitating mass. Place the Object in the hole; let it drop. Travel calmly to the nearest coronal and say unto them, “Coronal, I have vouchsafed the dark thing to gravity, now save me from INEVITA.” (Recorded successes: ambiguous)

6. Comet. By means of introspective scintillation, measure the flow of dark matter through your body. Using whatsoever means available, set the velocity of the Object to match, though it be flung into deepest sea or space. Travel calmly to the nearest coronal and say unto them, “Coronal, I have set the dark thing in the sky to stream with the soot of creation. Now save me from INEVITA.” (Recorded successes: ambiguous)

IS THY HAND STILL BURNING?

7. Radiant resignation. Destroy yourself, all those about you, and the Object, by the most immediate and violent means available. Disregard all your oaths and vows against harm to the uninvolved. Nihilists force you to it. The blame is theirs, not yours. (Recorded successes: one)

MORTAL IMPERATIVE. Should an avowed enemy of the Summist faith, in particular a nihilist, contact the anathema, proceed without deviation to the seventh protocol.

TALLY OF THE BURNING HAND. linebreak linebreak After choosing your protocol, but before enacting it, measure the temperature of your surroundings and the quantity of water vapor in the air.

Subtract a liter of vapor from the tally for each knight present, multiplied by the tally of refills on their stoup. linebreak linebreak The remainder of vapor, divided by the tally of refills, measures the number of knights who have already been redacted by the artifact. They are so utterly gone that you will believe they never were. You will not know to mourn them, except by the vapor they left.

Whatsoever remains of them will be found and commemorated, should your task be complete. If you fail, they will be lost to all memory, and we will not know to fear their anstruth double.

Go now. Worlds turn on you. So’s the dusk delayed.

NOTE FOR THE CORONAL IN RECEIPT : linebreak The precept of the faith that requires coronals to multiply has prepared you for this moment. Be thy children thy armor!

>Back to the story. (go to Revision 4)

Revision 10 (Look for the Cat)

Way out in the dark, there is a little light.

Turn your telescope—look. Read the rainbow of its fire. It’s a fusion flame, which should be violet edged with blue. But this one’s dirty. There’s a little copper green and sooty red in there. Fuel impurities and drops of liner grease burning up in the torch.

So it is not a clean light. It is not a pure light.

It is a tired, broken-down light that really needs an overhaul.

But it is still a good light. Maybe the best light.

Because the name of that light is *ship* .

The message repeater says *thwomp* .

Tannuk, who set the message repeater to *thwomp* because his big ears like bass, punches it. “Hey. Pinnacle rejected our flight plan.”

“I can’t believe it,” Sami says. “They didn’t fall for my transparent fabrication! Sixty seconds to meco. Check your switchology. Switch-o-loggy. Have I been saying that wrong?”

“I wouldn’t know the right.”



Art by: Raymond Swanland

The little big Kav—little for a Kav but big compared to Sami—bumps switches by his left knee. Pretty much everything in the *Seriema*’s cockpit is at knee height for Tannuk. “Feels good for meco,” he says. Not *looks good*, because if you spent millennia reading the earth with your belly, you’d trust touch, too. “Do you really mean that?”

“That I was saying it wrong?”

“That the flight plan was a fabrication.”

Sami, who knows Tannuk well, still blinks and laughs: Sami’s human, and humans find alien misunderstandings funny, even when the aliens do it on purpose. “Tan, we’re ransacking a ghost colony on behalf of the rudest man alive. I’m not going to put that in the flight plan.”

“But you said we were looking for Mirri. In the flight plan.”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, that part’s true.”

Everything Sami does is genuinely about finding Mirri. This is why, one by one, all of Sami’s crew have quit. Spending your whole life searching for a missing cat turns out to be a bad way to run a criminal venture.

“We’re *always* looking for Mirri. Stand by for meco.”

Meco is main engine cutoff—turning off the fusion drive. You’d think it would be easier than mest—turning *on* the fusion drive. But if mest fails, nothing happens. If meco fails, you have a rolling nuclear fusion explosion in your ass and you can’t make it stop.

“Flying without a flight plan is pretty risky. Especially in a war zone,” Tannuk says.

“We’re way outside the war zone.”

“Still. Sunstar might board us for an inspection. Maybe we should turn around and go back.”

Sami is grateful for Tannuk’s banter. Sami thinks that if they focus on anything they’re good at, they will suddenly be bad at it. “We’d run out of propellant halfway through the burn.” An exaggerated

shake of the head, mime-heavy like all of Sami's gestures, trained for cross-species clarity. "Tan, Tan, still thinking like a MemNav pilot. You run out of fuel around Kavaron, they'll zap you enough power to fly home. But we aren't catching rocks anymore." And you're not home: but Sami doesn't need to say that.

"I do miss the Kavaron boost lasers," Tan says. "I'll be happy to see them again. From a distance. Besides, if we wanted to turn around, we'd have to file a new flight plan."

"True, true."

"And by the time they approved it, we'd already be where we're pretending we aren't going. Meco in five ..."

"And ... three ... and ... now."

The flight computer stills the main engine.

Sudden silence. The Kav and the human drift forward in their seats. Without thrust, they are, as the pulp adventure novels always put it, on the float: plunging toward nothing at tens of kilometers a second.

They were plunging toward nothing *before* the last main engine burn.

Now they are plunging toward a planet.

"Clean meco," Tannuk says. "Go for entry interface maneuver."

"Set it up. I'm gonna check for trouble."

"Copy. Preparing for entry interface."

For Kav, saying things is not a very important part of doing them, but for humans, it is, and Tan is a great copilot. So Tan always says what he's doing so Sami can hear.

Sami does the hands dance: flip the chunky switch protector up, click the switch down, snap the protector back in place, twist the knob until it clicks, depress the button to the stop, pull the lever to ease the tension and hold. Everything is physical, no touchscreens, no holograms, no colloidal interfaces, but only because Sami can't obtain them. (Colloidal would be wonderful, screens like living beads you can plunge your hands into and grip.) Sami loves anything you touch to make it work, make it happen, make the ship change and sing.

Right now, the ship must change, very quickly, or it will slam into a planet and explode.

Their flight plan—so recently rejected by Pinnacle's Infinite Guideline headquartered in Sothera—is a fast cruise from the storm giant Uthros, inward to the Kav homeworld Kavaron. Along the way, they will pass the dwarf world Sigma and the unpopulated colony of Sigma's Reach. It was supposed to be a mine for moxite, but no one ever arrived to start work: after all, the sun was about to explode. Sami suspects the whole endeavor was potlatch fraud—conspicuously spending resources to create opportunities for others as to raise your own mallow.
On the flight plan, Sami mentioned Sigma's Reach as a place they could shelter if the ship started falling apart.

But the ship is *already* falling apart. The *Seriema* (beloved name, awful bird, lovely ship, an anagram of "ere's Sami," almost) is not just short on crew. It is rancid with neutron rot and brittle with metal fatigue. The fission reactor is at the end of its life. The fusion engine is on the verge of corroding right through its housing and bouncing around on its feeds like a marble. It needs a teardown and a rebuild, a keel-up mechanical massage, and no one will offer Sami the kind of favors to oblige that kind of work.

Sami has blown all their favors looking for Mirri.

Sami is running out of fuel, out of time, out of choices, and will not think about it now, because they are trapped by the one irreversible choice they made: to find Mirri no matter what.

“It’s noble how you go after her,” said Arata, who left last. “But Sami ... she’s just a cat.”

Nothing is *just* anything.

“Sami, would you spend all your life and favors looking for a little dish of amoebas you lost?”

If it were Sami’s dish, if those amoebas had been entrusted wholly to Sami’s care, if Sami had complete control over their destiny—and then lost them?

Yes. Yes. Nothing deserves to be abandoned. *Nothing*.

Not Mirri. And not Sigma’s Reach, either.

So, to save it from abandonment, they are going to land at the deserted colony and take it for all it’s worth.



Art by: Sergey Glushakov

Out in the void, the *Seriema* is a muscular, bladed torch, a double-ended crab-claw of magnetic nozzle and cargo space clasped around a flight deck and reactor housing like a silver discus. Three glorious radiator-wings glow bright orange when the torch fires.

But as they come down out of the dead sunset, braking through Sigma’s upper atmosphere to shed their interplanetary hustle, the ship transforms.

First the *Seriema* pulls in her wings. Then she casts a sail of aurora—a purple disk of plasma, generated by the same magnets as her fusion drive, that serves as heat shield and brake.

Things go from fast and very cold to fast and very hot.

Tan hates using the fusion engine as an aerobrake. “I gotta unstrap,” he insists, and despite Sami’s halfhearted protests, he presses his belly to the bulkheads to feel for bad vibrations.

He's still doing this when Sami's search for trouble squawks an alarm.

"Uh-oh," Sami says. "I've got a palestar."

The *Seriema*'s inspectoral telescope locks on to a light. It's a blue-violet star, shimmering like a morning mirage through Sigma's thin atmosphere. It should be *pure* violet: fusion flame. But this light is streaked with angry green. That's water dumped into the fusion torch as an afterburner. That is not a clean light. It is not a pure light. It is a warship.

A palestar. A patrol ship for the Free Company, the Sunstar long-termists who've set up on Adagia and gone to war against—well, Sothera itself.

They are descending from a *dead* sunset, after all.

Tan slouches against the wall. Kav tend to relax right before danger hits. "Is it coming after us?"

It would be very bad if the palestar came after them. It carries a wing of Hopelight warmakers that can outspurt the *Seriema*. Its Nuncio lasers could snip away the ship's engine and leave them falling like a bad wish. And if the Sunstar knight commanding that ship decides they're thieves—

But no. The palestar's taking off toward the other side of Sigma, chasing something else.

"Whatever they're persecuting," Sami decides, "it's not two good-hearted pillagers doing a favor for the Metalman."

Though, talking to the Metalman, Sami gets the strong feeling that he comes from a place outside Pinnacle, where the economy does *not* run on gifts and favors. And then Sami is not sure that this was really a favor at all.

Maybe this is a *job*.

Ah, well. Nothing for it but to do it! Sami throws their head back, clasps their hands, and stretches. "Luck of the beautiful," they say, with no one there to admire them. "How are the wings?"

"Stiff, busted up, and wishing for better days," Tan says. "But I'd fly them down to Kavaron, through the Mordraine Ring and all."

"Then let's get our wings out and go loot a ghost colony."

Sami begins redeploying the radiators. It's always jarring when the *Seriema* flips from her engine-down spaceflight configuration into her belly-down aeroflight layout. But it's a good jarring, like doing a handspring.

Loot a ghost colony. And find whatever it is the Metalman thinks will change Sami's fortunes.

What did he call the device he sent Sami to find? A component? A tool?

No. He said *artifact*.

Finally, the *Seriema* is slow and low enough to spread its wings, catch the thin air, and soar down on the colony from the east.

"Nothing," Tan reports, checking the ESM block. Its job is to tell them when anyone looks their way. "No radar. No beacon. No autoland. Just like he said. They built the colony but no one came."

"Tan," Sami starts, reaching for the inspectral controls, "do you see light?"

Tan glares at the sunset on the rear camera. “I don’t know. Do I? Is it light, really? Is that even a sunset? What do you call it when a black hole sets in the east?”

Sothera *was* going to go nova. It was set to blast away its children’s atmospheres and cook them with radiation, murder its own family in an eruption of aetheric gluttony. That imminent disaster is why Sami is here. It’s why *anyone* is here other than the Kav and the Eumidians (whose seedship found this star by chance). Pinnacle built an eternity column and opened Sothera to starflight because Sothera was going to *die*.

Everyone waited for the Drix to give the final word: the announcement that Sothera would die *soon*. The Drix always come to dying stars, weftwalking across their twilight worlds on a mysterious final inspection.

But the Drix gave no sign.

Sothera became a kind of end-of-days boomtown. There was mallow to be earned here—helping to evacuate, helping to catalog, exploring what would be destroyed. There were even rich clays full of moxite, like the deposits on Kavaron and Sigma.

But then the Monoists arrived. They dug into Anuki, the world of spirals, the black growler in the sky. Sothera’s closest child.

And one day, by (Sami assumes) the same means they have used nine hundred and ninety-nine times before, they gave Sothera sekhar.

They had foreseen a different fate for this star. It would be the thousandth link in their chain, a millennial testament to HIM WHO PLUMMETS and a herald of the Next Eternity (as explained to Sami, once, by a suitor with perfect black skin and white Monoist tattoos and strong shoulder blades you could hook your fingers under).

So, they killed the star.

This is why the *Seriema* descends on Sigma’s Reach from a dead sunset—an unset.

Sothera is now a supervoid, a black hole sun.

It isn’t *very* black. All the infalling gas that Sothera was working up into a supernova has been captured into an eerie violet ring of light, excited by its devouring into a glowing cosmic torc. That collar is still bright enough to warm these inner worlds—to feed Kavaron’s glasshouse crops, glitter off Adagia’s mirrors, and melt a trickle from Evendo’s glacier.

For now, the worlds turn as they turned. But the Monoists are feeding Sothera, growing their dark towering child. Its hunger is increasing.

And sometimes, when Sami looks at it, they see a bottomless well. A hole into which they, and Tan, and the *Seriema*, and Sigma’s Reach, and Mirri are all falling. Not the good kind of fall, which starfarers call an orbit. The kind that ends.

The Monoists say that one day this hole will lead to the same place as all their other sacred voids. And on that day, they will glimpse the Faller, HE WHO PLUMMETS, transmitting his secrets from the edge of the final dark—

Lights. They were saying something about lights.

“Tan! Look forward!”

“Right,” says Tan in no hurry. “Do I see light? I see—”

The reason Kav relax when surprised is that they evolved to be tossed around by larger beasts (and by each other).

Tan doesn't go limp. But he definitely sags a bit.

"Lights," he says. "The whole colony's lit up."

Lights in windows. Lights by the runway.

Lights on a sign that reads, in Psimer, WELCOME TO SIGMA'S REACH—POPULATION 13,879 PLUS FRIENDS AND FAMILY—"LET'S DIG BIG!"

"The Metalman said there was no one here," Tan insists. "I remember it distinctly."

"Tan, I think, and try not to lose your grip here, that the Metalman may have lied."

"But it's empty. I imaged it on the way down." Tan was confident of this in the way a being with a stable attention stack is always confident, because there is no leaky gap between short- and long-term memory, just a very long now.

"Run it again," Sami says. "Maybe everyone was indoors last time."

Tan fires off the lidar, the millimeter-wave radar, the whole rest of the ship's inspectral circus.

"It's hot," he reports. "Hotter than the rest of the tethys." Sigma's Reach was built on the continental shelf of a long-dry seabed, which Pinnacle calls *tethys*. "Hot like—about twenty thousand bodies, plus power and atmosphere. There's an active fission plant."

"Air?"

"Elevated carbon dioxide. Consistent with about ... twenty thousand oxygen-breathing inhabitants."

"Housing?"

"You know already."

"But are there *people*?"

No. Not one living thing.

What comes back makes no sense.

"I've got an awful feeling about this," Tan says.

But Tan does not ask Sami to abort the landing.

Tan has a peculiar phobia of choice. Maybe this is why Tan stays on the *Seriema* with Sami, when everyone else makes better choices and leaves. Sami prefers to think Tan just really likes them.

"There wasn't supposed to be anyone here," Sami mutters. "They built a colony to mine the clay, but the sun was going to explode. So no one ever came."

They stare at the front camera. Then the back camera. Front: the empty colony with all its lights on. Back: the empty sun with its ring of light.

They leap, nimbly, to the right question:

"The sun *didn't* explode. So why didn't anyone ever come here? Why didn't they start working?"

Tan scratches his belly. "I need to get my stomach on the ground. Then I'll tell you if there's anyone here. I can always feel human footsteps."

"All right." Sami takes up the yoke, clicks the thrusters over to stabilized manual. "Let's take a look. And then decide how much we can steal."

"We're not stealing," Tan says. "We're gifting them some extra space."

>Let's take a look. (go to Episode 2)

>Can I review that flight plan? (go to The Flight Plan)

The Flight Plan

>I changed my mind, this looks tedious, go back! (go to Revision 10)

RECEIPT OF MESSAGE (TYPE FP/IPI)
PINNACLE TACTICAL CORPS FLIGHT PLAN FORMULATE
SOTHERA SHRIEVALTY // INFINITE GUIDELINE CENTROME
VESSEL FILING: IPVN Seriema (E7B590CE9DF500)
 MAIN DRIVE TYPE: K-torch with inertial mass desist
 MANEUVERING DRIVE TYPE: Arc jets, radiator foils
 TERTIARY DRIVE TYPE: Puller sail, laser capable, rated one megaton
(currently on maintenance)
 COLLATERAL AGAINST WAKE CRIME: Hull, possessions of crew, freedom of crew
FILING TIME: Day 78, Blue Season, Beam Year (mod eons) 2,989
ORIGINATING REPEATER: Uthros leading liberatory VORSPIN
FLIGHT REGIME: Interplanetary constant accel/brachistochrone
WAKE-EXCLUSION ZONE: Type-two lethal, fast neutron, ten megameters
PURPOSE OF FLIGHT: Search for escaped pet/companion (domestic cat, orange and brown, weftwalked when startled, unusual range of weftwalk reflex; last seen 2,985; answers to Mirri-sometimes)
POINT OF IGNITION: Uthros departure perigee
 POI FLIGHT AUTHORITY: ILVTRAC
POINT OF TURNOVER: Brachistochrone midpoint, Uthros à Kavaron (free space)
POINT OF MECO: Kavaron landing insertion
 POM FLIGHT AUTHORITY: KMNTRAC
PEAK HAZARDS TO PERSONS, ENTITIES, OR INFRASTRUCTURES: Grazing pass by unpopulated industrial colony Sigma's Reach on dwarf planet Sigma. Periapse 1,500,000 kilometers. No encounter anticipated.
WEATHER CONDITIONS: See SPECIAL METAR-I BULLETIN AND SIGNOFF at end of form
DRIVE-SPECTRUM HASH: [ERROR: CERTIFICATE OUT OF DATE]
RADIATOR-SPECTRUM HASH: [ERROR: FILE FORMAT CORRUPT]
ACTIVE TRACKING REQUIRED?: Declined, transponder in working order
DIVERT PLAN 1: Sigma's Reach landing and distress call
DIVERT PLAN 2: Ballistic abort, distress call to Sunstar Free Company patrol
SURVIVAL EQUIPMENT: Habitable and near-habitable environs only
STATUS WITH RESPECT TO ONGOING DISPUTES: No past or present affiliation with either Sunstar Free Company, the Celestial Palatinate, or the Monoist faith, except for brief personal liaisons (affidavit available on request). Last contract: orbital deconfliction over Kavaron. The PIC/OAS hereby affirms and avows neutrality and noncombatant status in the ongoing dispute over the status of the Sothera primary.
REACTOR-FISSIONABLE SUPPLY: 9,999 [ERROR: NO UNIT SPECIFIED]
DRIVE-FUSIONABLE SUPPLY: 9,999 [ERROR: NO UNIT SPECIFIED]
PROPELLANT TANKAGE: "Plenty" [ERROR: INVALID STRING]
LIFE-SUPPORT ENDURANCE: Two weeks consumables, one season closed-cycle atmosphere
TIME TO THERMAL RUNAWAY: Twenty-five seconds to power failure, two hours to life support failure
EMERGENCY HEATSINK: Open-cycle coolant
PILOT IN COMMAND: Sami [mononym]

FLIGHT ENGINEER: Tannuk [mononym]
OTHER CREW: Twelve, vitals attached [ERROR: One or more listed crew are also listed on other flight plans at this time.]
DECLARED CARGO: None
REMARKS: It's us again, we're still at it – S
FILED BY: Sami [mononym], PIC, OAS
SPECIAL METAR-I BULLETIN SIGNOFF:

I, pilot in command, it, agnosubjective entitative bundle in command, or we, legal plurality acting as commander of ship, hereby affirm and acknowledge that I/it/we have fully read and comprehended, to the best of my/its/our semiotic ability, the following regularly updated METAR.

SPECIAL NAVIGATIONAL CONDITIONS ALERT

METAR PSOTSIG VALID2900CENT CONDEVOKE NASCSUPVOID CONDITIONS IN EFFECT:
WIND+1221KPS@3.5MK390PPM3 FIELD BT3BX0.5BY0.45BZ2 HIGHVAR CME0.0NOSIG MT74KK MD13PPM3
RESCON BLUE RAMOK ==

REASON FOR CENTCONDEVOKE SNC ALERT: Monoist massdynamic intervention has averted the supernova of the Sothera primary. After induced quiet collapse ("sekhar") the resulting supervoid is young and volatile, with a photon collar emissions spectrum brighter and bluer than Sothera's hospice spectrum. The end of the stellar dynamo inside Sothera, and the nascent supervoid's rotating charge, has complicated the stellar magnetic field, leading to major disruption in plasma flow throughout the system and a chaos of propagating ion shock fronts expected to continue for several thousand to tens of thousands of years. The supervoid is gradually accreting a disk out of infall. Strategic Corps advisory indicates the Monoist nihilicians are feeding the nascent supervoid to expand its gravitational range and tidal force, but no short-term effects are expected outside the circumnihil ZOA. Plasmadyne/sail-type spacecraft should consider the entire system an extreme navigational risk. Further developments appended here by gossip protocol.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS

Induced Currents – Sudden changes in the system magnetic field due to domain realignment may cause high transient currents.

Orbiters – Satellite orientation irregularities and drag overranges will occur stochastically as the interstellar medium and mascon mapping settles out.

Sails – The impoverished spectrum of the photon collar and the massive stochastic changes in plasma flow will negatively impact sail operation in both the photon and plasmadyne flight regimes.

Drumships – No effect on drumship operation anticipated beyond normal sanctions against unauthorized drumship use.

Radio – Long-range/HF propagation will be disrupted by chaotic EMI events associated with accretion disk growth.

Aurora – Bodies with magnetic fields should expect bright aurorae across multiple visual spectra. Orbital operators should expect rapid volatile K-index changes. Consult your VORSPIN.

FILING STATUS: Automatically rejected [second infraction]

FOLLOW-UP: Flag the ship and crew for complementary inspection and workup at Infinite Guideline.

>I can't believe Pinnacle rejected this, it's perfect. (go to Revision 10)

>Nobody would ever believe this transparent fabrication. (go to Revision 10)

>I didn't actually want to read an entire flight plan. (go to Revision 10)