

# Grasp in the Dark

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From set *Edge of Eternities*  
23. 06. 2025

Fragments of Kavaron That Is crumble away constantly. Bits of the ruined half of the Kav homeworld drift off into space. The Kav Memorial Navy tracks and maps every part of the collapsing sections, being charged with the imperative to protect and retrieve the remains of their world. But there is only so much they can recover at once.

The piece which Harkener Sergeant Farakatolar and her small squad have been sent to investigate broke off decades ago and was marked as a possible memorial vault, one of the precious preserves of Kav artifacts. The KMN, unable to investigate at the time, continued tracking it; a piece of their world which slipped away, tumbling out toward the Wurmwall, a ring of comets and ice at the very edge of the Sothera system. Only now, as it floats so far from home, do they have the resources to dispatch a mission to investigate.



Art by: Javier Charro

On the long journey out, Farakatolar and her squad pass directly by Kavaron That Is, and as Farakatolar watches the glowing red and orange of their broken world drifting outside the ship, a new understanding hums in her belly. Here, in this incandescent catastrophe, is the reason for all her missions. This is why she and all Kav must hold on so tightly to every resource and every artifact; their people are balancing on the edge of this destruction.

Even her boisterous squad is quiet. She normally has trouble getting them to shut up, but normally they're doing endless shifts ferrying packaged artifacts off world to the diadem stations, not watching the ongoing devastation of their planet fly past.

Then, they clear the gravity well and the ship accelerates into black space.

They don't talk about their planet again until they've nearly arrived at their destination, but Farakatolar knows them well enough to tell they're still thinking about that glowing ruin of Kavaron That Is. She is, too.

It's Rakoro who brings it up again. "There's plenty to be done at home. Who'd we annoy to get sent off so far, Sarge?"

"We're investigating a memorial vault," Farakatolar says. "It's an honor, not a punishment." She herself doesn't mind where they're sent, if their mission serves the KMN and she can keep her squad safe. Together. Successful.

Rakoro doesn't seem satisfied. "In that time beyond the Long Now, when we claim a new planet, when we reclaim Kavaron Tomorrow, I'm there."

Takoluk lets a grunt of agreement slip between his oversized teeth, and Dornnuk gives a full-body nod, his green scales glinting.

"The Eumidians are like wildcat thieves," Dornnuk says. "When their terrasympiosis is complete, I'm there, too."

From the pilot's chair, Haronar disagrees. "Better to start a new Kav world, not pick at alien leftovers."

"But all Sothera should be—"

Farakatolar cuts them off. "Approaching target."

The ship slows and the white edge of a structure emerges from the darkness. Slowly, it resolves into a clear shape, a construction nearly twenty kilometers across, yes, the size of a memorial vault, but completely unlike anything Farakatolar has ever seen. Not exactly a cube and not exactly a sphere, the structure consists of endless smooth white arcs, etched through with what looks like a single, dark, unbroken line.

"Image it," she orders.

Haronar stabs his claws into the controls, forming the same pattern twice. "Makes no sense."

"What?"

"Our scope's just returning white noise. It can't resolve an image of the installation. Like it's blind to what we're seeing."

Farakatolar's belly fills with dread. She feels herself in the Long Now on the edge of one of the deepest mining pits on Kavaron That Is, smelling rust and looking down and down into the far darkness.

"Fine," she says, keeping her voice even. Her squad is counting on her. The Kavaron Memorial Navy is counting on her. Her people are counting on her. "We'd better get in and out before any wildcat teams detect this. Haronar, set us down."

Haronar glides the ship to an outcropping on the structure, the apex of one of its arcs, and lands gracefully. Once they're completely stable, Farakatolar orders the drill to be activated. Like most of KMN's ships, this was once a mining vessel and can still extract resources if needed. The massive drill

extends easily from the front of the ship. With a flick of Haronar's claw, glowing yellow energy dances out, spiraling around the drill as it extends toward the nearest wall.

The moment it breaks through, Farakatolar straightens up, the longest horns of her crown nearly scraping the ceiling of the little ship. She hadn't realized how hunched she'd been, how intently she'd been watching the drill. The eeriness of the structure had her wondering, for just a moment, if they wouldn't be able to breach it.

But by the time they've powered off the ship, geared up, stuck their rebreathers in, and clomped their gravboots down, it all feels like a normal mission.

Well, not exactly *normal*. The area they step into beyond the drilled hole is a spacious, curved room with semi-opaque white walls. They can see through the walls enough to make out dim blue lights coming from deeper in the structure. There are rooms similar to this one all chained together like cells.

All the buildings and stations Farakatolar has ever known are made of straight lines and dark, solid metal. This structure is unnatural.

Farakatolar crouches to the ground and places her belly flat against the floor. Through the vibrations, she can feel something in the next cell over. There's an object at its center. An artifact of some kind, it must be. This place is clearly no memorial vault, but there's the chance that it might hold even greater treasures.

She stands. "Rakoro, use your beam axe on that wall."

Ever eager, Rakoro slips her axe free and takes a swing down into the wall. The bright yellow blade of energy penetrates the material easily, and in three strokes, she's opened a hole for them. The wall, though, doesn't crumble beneath Rakoro's blade. It peels back and curls up like skin.

Farakatolar ignores the strange material and leads them into the next room. There it is: the object she felt. An orb glowing and swirling bright blue electric light, resting atop a thin white pedestal. The orb is not large. Farakatolar figures that she could probably pick it up on her own. But it hums with a strange power. Unusual. Unique. Powerful. The sort of artifact that would make this long trip worth it.

Takoluk taps his scanner with a claw and growls.

"No clear read?" Farakatolar asks.

"The density of information in this thing is ... dense." He gives her a grin behind his thick fangs. "But that's all I got."

"Let's take it to the ship. We'll need—"

"Uh, Sarge," Rakoro interrupts. "Didn't I just put a hole here?"

Farakatolar looks back to the wall they just stepped through. There's still a charred line where Rakoro's axe hacked it open, but the hole itself is gone.

"Cut another one."

Takoluk tries to scan the wall while Rakoro chops through it again, but Farakatolar orders him to back off and let her work. It doesn't matter how or why the wall resealed itself, only that they can get it open again and return to the ship with the artifact.

Rakoro clenches her broad jaw and has to lean hard into the axe with each blow, but eventually, the wall splits open wide enough again, curling back.

"Haronar through first. Prepare the ship."

Once he's on his way, Farakatolar turns to the others. "Rakoro, watch that this wall doesn't close again. Takoluk and Dornnuk, carry the artifact together."

But there is no artifact.

No swirling blue orb. No anything. The room is perfectly empty.

"Where is it?" Farakatolar demands. But it's clearly gone, not even a mark where the pedestal was. Utterly, impossibly gone.

Farakatolar feels the dread welling in her belly again. There must be some explanation.

They stand in silence for a moment before a radio hiss jars them from their astonishment.

"Weird ... no control ... drill ... wall ..." Haronar's voice comes through, warped and fluctuating, like someone trying to shout over a chaos of background noise.

Farakatolar spins around when he says "wall," hoping she can stop it from sealing again, but it's already too late. Not only has the wall resealed, but even the charred line is gone.

Rakoro immediately tries to chop through it again, but this time, she can't even get the energy of her blade to pierce the surface.

Farakatolar orders her to stop trying. "Someone must have ..." She pauses, trying to make sense of the senseless disappearance. "A wildcat team. A wildcat team must have found a way to transport the artifact away. We need to—"

Without warning, the walls change their composition. What had been nearly transparent pale white coloring snaps into opaque opalescence, illuminating the whole curved room with a pulsing light. Glossy black beads like eyes emerge from a corner of the ceiling. But when Farakatolar looks at the spot again, they're gone, and she can't be sure they weren't just an illusion caused by the strange new light.

What the new illumination does certainly reveal is two arches in the walls, places where the opalescence turns a dull blue. Doorways.

Movement. Movement from the corner of her eye. But it's just Dornnuk slipping bottles from his belt. In the space of a single, deep breath, he drinks down a full set of bright green combat stimulants, as he's been trained to do before a battle.

Farakatolar gestures for them to stick together and approach one of the arches. As she hoped, this part of the wall slides open, allowing them to pass. On the other side is a long corridor with many doorways along it and one at the end.

Haronar might be able to guide them if he can get a lock on their armor. But when Farakatolar tries the radio again, there's only an unusual oscillating static and a couple choppy words.

"Limit ... can't ..."

She gives up on the radio and leads them down the corridor to the doorway at its end.

The wall slides open, and she feels the bulky shape of Dornnuk jump behind her, overexcited and ready to fight. There is a creature in the next room; definitely not part of any wildcat team. She holds up a hand for her squad to stay in formation.

The creature appears almost like a manu, with thin arms and legs and a crownless head. But the head doesn't have the weird white eyes of a manu or its tiny nose and mouth; it's a featureless oval. The

body is too stretched out, and its skin isn't right. Other than the protruding arms and legs and head, it is just a lanky blob of oily substance, appearing to drip up into a puddle on the ceiling.

Rakoro has her beam axe out, Takoluk has put his scanner away and extended his own short energy blades, and Dornnuk's eyes are practically glowing green with the power of his combat stimulants and his readiness to tear apart anyone in their way. Battle postures.

But Farakatolar keeps her hand held up in restraint. The creature is not attacking them. It doesn't even seem to notice the presence of four mighty Kav warriors. Maybe it's not a creature at all, just part of this strange structure.

Keeping her hand raised, she takes a step closer to the thing. It shows no reaction. Cautiously, she approaches until she is close enough to poke it with a claw. She does not poke it with a claw. But she does gesture to her squad to follow as she moves past it, toward the closest doorway.

Farakatolar's already through the doorway into another corridor, trying to guess their next direction, when Takoluk shouts. She turns just in time to see one arm of the thing distended, oozing like a tentacle near Takoluk.

"It *touched* me!" Takoluk's big teeth are set in a fierce growl, and he holds his blades high even as the oily appendage is withdrawing.

He looks ready to lunge at the creature, but Farakatolar orders a sharp, "Out. Out of the room now."

Once the door has slid shut and Takoluk has confirmed he was not wounded or even stained by the touch, Farakatolar fixes them all with a glare, tilting her head forward so the horns of her crown are practically in their faces. "We find the artifact. We get out of here."

They're all still jumpy, unnerved by this horrible place. Farakatolar can feel the jumpiness in her own belly, along with the deep desire to find a way back to the ship and simply fly away from here, all the long way back home. But even if they knew how to leave, they absolutely cannot leave empty handed. Not when there's clearly an object worth bringing home.

She is their sergeant. She needs to keep them focused. However strange things get.

"Find the artifact. That's it. Then we go. Understood?" When she's certain they're all back with her, she returns her attention to the corridor before them, wondering which doorway to take. A cluster of glossy black beads hang above one of the doors. Eyes.

Haronar's choppy voice echoes through the radio. "Movi ... I can't ... repea ... appears to be ... moving ..."  
"Repeat."

Farakatolar meets the alarmed expressions of her squad.

"Repeat, Haronar. The structure's moving?"

But the radio remains silent.

She looks back to the corridor. The black beady eyes are not there.

Takoluk is closest to her and she turns to him to verify the eyes weren't a trick of her mind. But something is very wrong with Takoluk.

There's a white streak down his face. A jagged line down from his crown to his teeth. For a long, baffled moment, Farakatolar can't make any sense of it.

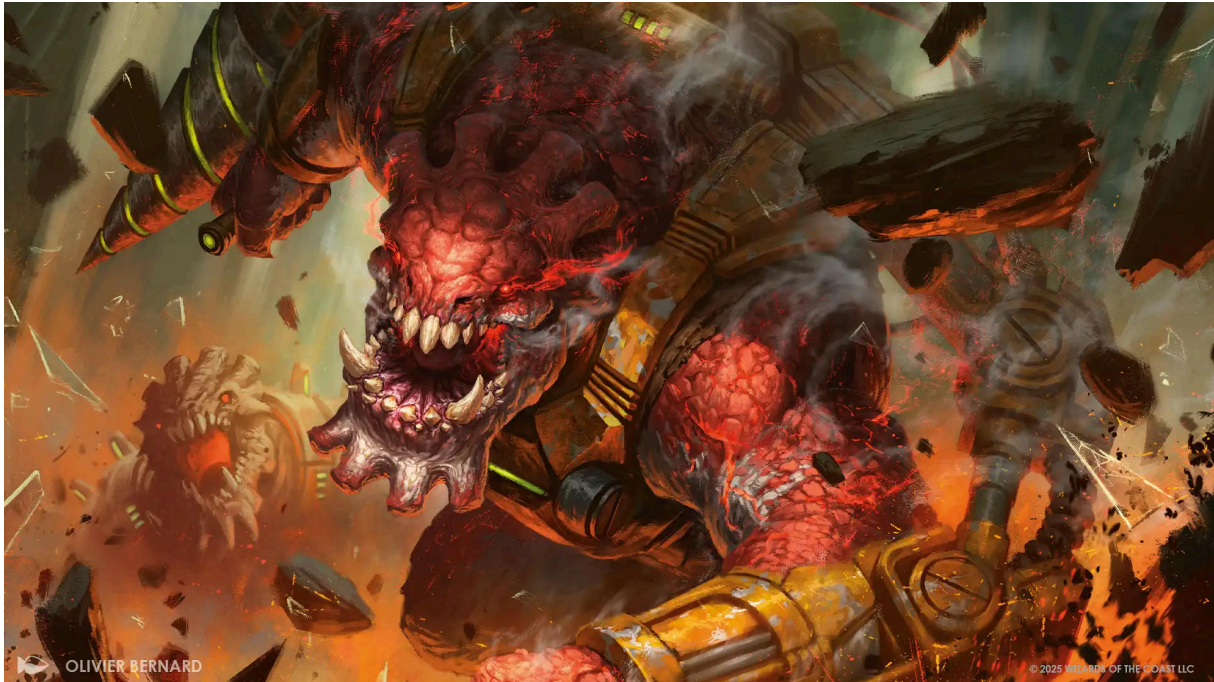
Beside the white, a green fluid appears, swells. Blood.

The white is bone. The bone of his skull.

“No.” He is right beside her. Nothing came close to him. The small rectangle of his rebreather still covers both his nostrils, unbroken. His armor is impeccable. But his skull has been smashed in. Broken apart.

He’s gone. He’s dead. She lost one of her squad. Impossible.

Dornnuk and Rakoro both gape, and Rakoro looks like she’s going to speak or scream. But then there’s a vibration almost like a voice, making a sound almost like a word, but the sound isn’t coming from the radio or the air. It’s inside Farakatolar’s head, and she can see from the wincing that the others hear it, too.



Art by: Olivier Bernard

“Come fight!” Rakoro screams at the hallway. “Coward! Come out and fight!”

“Stop!” Farakatolar orders.

Rakoro stops screaming, but she keeps her axe high, rage burning, still scanning the empty corridors for someone to kill.

The vibration makes another sound—not quite a word—then warps and rises and collapses into an abrupt, painful silence.

Farakatolar tries the radio again. She’s never lost someone under her command before and never dreamed it would be like this. So sudden. So senseless. Protocol tries to assert itself. She needs to report the casualty, have the body retrieved.

More than that, she needs some idea of what could possibly have killed him, where the danger is, where the artifact is, and how the rest of them can get out of here alive.

The radio is silent.

Motion catches Farakatolar’s eye, but it’s only Dornnuk twitching. Maybe he took too many of his combat potions and without a battle, all that energy has nowhere to go.

But a dull growl rumbles in his throat and he’s moving too much, twisting about like he’s on fire.

"Are you hurt?" She imagines Dornnuk's skull suddenly cracking like Takoluk's.

"Rgh. No." Dornnuk twists awkwardly. "I need to shed."

Rakoro gives him an exasperated look.

"Do it when we get back to the ship," Farakatolar says. "That's not important now."

"No. Right." Dornnuk says, still writhing.

Farakatolar carefully taps the beacon on Takoluk's armor in the hope that they might be able to return and claim his body. His gravboots will keep him locked to this spot. Now, the rest of them need to move forward.

"We'll go this way." Farakatolar puts authority into her voice. As if confidence can override the sudden, senseless death that might lurk behind any or all of these doors. As if she's not just picking a door at random. They need a direction. More than anything, they need her to be a leader. "If we come to another corridor, we'll keep ... What are you doing?"

Dornnuk is clawing at himself, panting. "I need ... I need to ..."

"What?"

"I need to shed!" The gash he tears in his armor is deep and wide. The full power of his potions glows through him.

Deaf to Farakatolar's orders to stop, Dornnuk scratches and scrapes at his bared violet scales until they seep with green blood. Scratches them more. Tears them off.

Rakoro grabs his arm, tries to hold him down, but he struggles from her grasp, shredding the remains of his armor with his bare claws.

Farakatolar lunges for him, but he steps aside, juiced up and too quick. He claws at his face, grabs one of his fangs, and snaps it off, then he screams and runs down the corridor, scraps of armor and skin flying.

Farakatolar and Rakoro run after him. But with the stimulants pumping through him, his speed is incredible. They're not going to catch him, but they keep on him. Even after he's too far ahead, down too many different doors in this horrible maze, they can follow him easily. A trail of torn-off bits floats in the air ahead of them. Scales. Blood. Bone. There won't be anything left of him, even if they ever catch up.

Endless corridors, doors and corridors. They run. They go through one door just like the rest, then: a vast open space.

They both stumble to a clanging halt.

They're standing on metal scaffolding out over an enormous open area. An area that looks too big to be contained, even within the massive structure they landed on. It's beautiful, lit by swirling light, curving up and down and around in all directions. Spherical, like the inside of an enormous orb.

And there, so far away, Farakatolar can barely make it out, on a small floating platform at the center of the massive space: the artifact.

"How could it ha—" Farakatolar starts, but her gaze is caught by movement beyond the artifact, on the far side of the spherical space. The distance is so great that it has its own texture, but she can see a colored swirl spreading across the curved wall in the distance. A rising electric blue flood of motion.



The swirl expands, growing and growing, curving around the outer edge of the space, until it covers the entire hemisphere ahead of them and is coming toward them from all sides.

“What is that?” Rakoro asks, but by the time the words leave her mouth, they can already tell that it is not just one thing.

It is millions of things. Millions and millions of tiny insect-like twitches of motion coming at them. Mechans or living creatures. They can’t tell. It doesn’t matter. It’s an unstoppable tide flooding toward them from all directions.

Rakoro tries to run back through the door, but it won’t open. She shouts and claws at it and takes her axe to it, hacking and hacking and hacking.

Farakatolar turns back to the orb at the center and jumps from the railing toward it. An impulse. A desperate choice. But suddenly, impossibly, she is right there. As if there had never been any real distance between her and the platform with the artifact.

She looks back to Rakoro, hoping she has time to order her to jump, to follow. But there is no time. Rakoro swings her axe uselessly, covered and drowning in the tiny things. They crash over her again and again, swirling to envelop and cocoon her. Then they keep rolling, wrapping over each other in waves, compressing and condensing tighter and tighter down until the whole impossible mass of them is only a single point.

Then, gone.

For a long time, Farakatolar can’t look away. There’s nothing where Rakoro should be. Gone. Again. So suddenly. So senselessly. She always thought there would be a moment when she could save them, always thought she could keep them together. On mission. Safe. Alive. She feels her own failure as acutely as if she’s been impaled on an energy blade. This was her fault. This was her mission, and she failed.

She lost her squad.

No. Haronar is alive. Maybe. She tries the radio again.

There’s a doorway on the far side of the orb. She can just see it through the distance. Maybe she could jump again and reach it. But the artifact is here, on its little pedestal on this platform with her. She can’t flee without it. They have the ship and the artifact. The mission can still succeed.

The radio hisses. She can hear Haronar’s voice but no words.

“Haronar. I found the artifact. I need extraction.”

She can hear him speaking. But he isn’t responding to her. He’s mumbling a rhythmic phrase she can’t make out.

“Repeat. I have the artifact. I need extraction.”

The rhythmic phrase repeats again, and only after the connection crackles out does she recognize the pattern of the phrases; it’s the desperate mumblings of a prayer.

She lets the radio fade.

The artifact. That’s all she can care about now. She’ll just have to grab it and head for the far doorway, find her way to an outer wall of the structure and reconnect with Haronar once there’s a clearer signal. That’s what she’ll do. That’s all she can do.



She reaches for the orb. Her hand goes through the blue swirls, and she stumbles, off balance. In the open space above her, something huge moves when she reaches through the orb, but when she looks up, there is nothing.

The sound that's almost like a voice buzzes in her head again, wordlessly. The image of the white bone of Takoluk's skull rises in her mind, clear and immediate. The sound buzzes again. Her own skull feels like it could crack open so easily.

The pressure reaches pain, but the vibration trembles and changes, congeals from chaotic sound into words spoken in an expressionless voice.

*Escape is incorrect.*

The voice seems to come from inside Farakatolar's own body, but she stares at the artifact.

*Escape is incorrect. Escape leads to chaos. Chaos is incorrect. Chaos must be corrected. From the many, there must be one. One Vaar. Inevitable-24. Correct.*

Farakatolar hears only her own breath, quick and shallow, in the silence that follows.

The Vaar. It is an old myth. It is the myth of a myth: the Vaar. The Vaar who ran from the Eldrazi. The Vaar who fled into their virtual world, the Hylderhigh. A virtual world so disconnected from this one that only a few spots of it remain in reality.

Nodes. Solid, physical spaces connected to the vastness of the Vaar's ancient knowledge. A billion times rarer than moxite.



Art by: Daniel Ljunggren

An artifact worthy of all their sacrifices.

The crack in Takoluk's skull. Dornnuk tearing himself apart. The swarm encasing Rakoro. This would make their mission worth even those horrors. The answer to Haronar's prayers. Farakatolar can't look away from the orb, the node. If she can contain it, put it somehow in the Kav's power ...

She reaches out for the orb again, letting her hands slip through what must be the outer protection, and reaches blindly for the core inside.

Her body is pierced.

It feels only like pressure for a moment, accompanied by the sound of her armor breaking. But when the pain comes, the agony is pure and total and overwhelms all else. She jerks her hand out of the orb. Green blood. Her claws are covered in green blood.

Dazed with pain, she pushes a single claw beyond the swirling blue surface of the orb. Above her appears a blood-covered claw, massive and monstrous. She jerks her hand away, and the hideous thing vanishes. She's in the orb already. Already inside the node.

Green blood floats through the space around her in drops and ribbons.

This is the core, the node. In this orb with her. Spots like burned metal appear across her vision, widening. She's losing too much blood to think straight.

The voice speaks again, but the words are only vibrations. Insects. Specks of blood floating around her head. She needs to focus. She needs the orb. The Kav *need* the orb. They need every advantage; they are balancing on the edge of destruction.

She stumbles forward and reaches through the orb again. There's something small inside. She's weak and dizzy, but nothing else matters except the artifact. She grasps at the thing inside, grabs it. Won't let it get away.

She can feel herself being crushed, can hear her bones crunching, can taste the bitterness of her blood. But she won't let go. She holds on, keeps holding on, harder and harder, keeps closing her fist tighter and tighter and tighter.

Until there's nothing left.