Episode 5

Seth Dickinson

From set *Edge of Eternities*

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Act Three

Revision 11 (Kavaron That Is)

"Tan, do you ever get the feeling that something really, really good is about to happen?"

"I'm not sure I can answer that question without violating human taboos." Tan is flying the *Seriema* . "I need overthrust authority."

Sami gave Tan's seat overthrust authority ten minutes ago. "No, no, not like that. I mean a *feeling* , like a premonition. That our fortunes are looking up."

"Oh," Tan says, thoughtfully. "Like the opposite of anxiety? Hang on."

The ship screams: "Proximity!" The *Seriema* explodes sideways, jittering to starboard, then explodes back to port in an equal and opposite moment of violence. Sami bounces against the straps, hooting in delight.

A thousand-gigaton piece of a shattered planet, seven kilometers across and tumbling, flashes past the *Seriema* at nine kilometers per second. Its closest approach is about two kilometers. If it had tumbled differently, it would've hit them.

Except for the constant clatter of the *Seriema* 's plasma magnet, the silence of the passage is absolute and obscene, like a sniper putting a bullet the size of a mountain right past your ear, and you only notice when your friend shouts, "Mountain!"

A shrieking, wailing, sobbing alarm erupts from the *Seriema'* s flight computer, begging the fools flying it to make better choices. Sami knifes the master alarm reset up and down with a deeply satisfying *snick-snick* . It feels like operating a guillotine, decapitating the danger. It's great. Sami does it again.

The *Seriema* plunges stern first through the Mordraine Ring, toward Kavaron That Is and a stasis cask to hold their prize.

"The great thing about the Mordring," Sami tells Tan, "is that it is mathematically impossible to figure out where these giant rocks are going to go without a computer the size of Sothera."

"You like explaining things that I already know."

"It's not about what you know, Tan. It's about what the facts make me feel. I like thinking about how the *laws of the universe* are set up to protect scoundrels."

"It would be a shame if someone turned Sothera into a giant black hole computer," Tan says. "It'd put all us ring-running outlaws out of business."

"Oh," Sami says. "Yeah. Good point."

The radio fuzzes back into reception: temporarily clear of the big rock's noise. "*Seriema. KMNTRAC.* " This is pronounced "caiman track," and it is the voice of the Kavaron Memorial Navy controller that's assigned to guide them in. "*You are off track. Emergency pounces you. Thump down?* "

The Kav don't use viys to run their flight control. Whoever's got the bad luck to talk the *Seriema* into a landing she will never make is a proper, living Kav, and one who hasn't had much practice speaking linguolabial Psimer, either! Humans think it's funny when people try to speak their language. It's like a baby, maybe? Is that why Sami thinks it's funny? Because the Kav on the radio sounds like a giant baby?

"Tan, do you think humans only find things funny in ways that ultimately tie back to our evolutionary needs?"

Tan chuff-coughs into the microphone (one of those Kav noises Sami always finds themself mimicking in the shower) and belts out a string of Kav pilot cant that Sami can roughly follow. "Listen, we're fine, but we're doing something we shouldn't, and I'd appreciate it if you'd just lose track of us. If we die, we die. Not your trouble."

"*Wake crime and you we kill your relatives* ," the voice on the radio says. "*Marking you beyond help. Worst of luck, robbers. Out.* "

"That's us!" Sami says. "Halfway home to the Metalman with Sigma's stolen doom in our hold and way *beyond* help. And who'd know better than a Kav, Tan? Who'd know better?"

They spin a camera to admire the view.

The *Seriema* plunges stern first toward Kavaron.

But Kavaron isn't there anymore.

Kavaron, too, is beyond help.

Art by: Roman Kuteynikov

The Ruin tore the planet in twain. Kavaron Before is still almost half a proper planet; it has an atmosphere, solid terrain, and a cycle of day and night. If not for the Mordring overhead, the constant

white scratches of meteorites in the sky, and the nearly as constant flash of lasers boosting the debris into higher orbit, you could fool yourself into thinking you were on an ordinary planet orbiting a dead star.

Kavaron That Is, though. It's the true Kavaron. The broken Kavaron. Every day, a little more of Kavaron Before crumbles away and joins its opposite. Its fate.

Kavaron That Is, that's the missing half of the planet. It didn't get blasted away into space, because for all the power of the Ruin, it takes a lot to divorce the pieces of a planet from each other. It's a loose pile of rubble, slowly being crushed down under its own gravity then bouncing back as provinces of rich uranium and moxite collapsed and exploded, chthonic nuclear weapons with yields capable of lofting entire moons into orbit. During the Ruin, the fire of the planet's broken core flashed up through all the cracks and lifted entire subcontinents into the heavens.

They crash back down, still. The planet's defensive lasers, the Guns of Kavaron, keep those world-ending chunks from crashing on Kavaron Before—so they crash on Kavaron That Is instead.

It is a pitted moonscape with a hurricane sky, a shattered vault of wonders. What happens if you take Sothera's richest world, crack it in half, and mark the *other* half off-limits for mining?

You still have Sothera's richest world.

If this were a movie or a dynamation, the sky outside would be a slow crash of enormous rock. Glaciers of stone shattering themselves into lavishly rendered dust.

But all those collisions finished decades ago. And they were never slow and dusty: a mountain striking a mountain at orbital velocity looks like two bullets kissing. Rock flows like molten glass at those energies.

The surviving debris in Sothera's orbit has been winnowed down to a series of almost structured waves —groups of comoving kinetic barracudas, ropes and walls of rock.

When you look into the Mordraine Ring, you see ranks and ranks of twinkling stars marching rapidly to war. And where they collide, there isn't dust. There's *shrapnel* . White dwarf bullets spreading until they hit atmosphere and become a long scratch of extinction. You might think Kavaron, shattered, would freeze (all that dust thrown up in the sky, blocking out the light, and Sothera dead, too!), but Kavaron's atmosphere is constantly heated to a tropical sweat by the burnup of re-entering debris.

Leave it to the Kav to live on a world heated by the constant discharge of orbital shotguns into its own face.

And if you're a scoundrel like Sami, that heat is always welcome. Because *nobody* can track you through the Mordring. You get shuffled back into the deck.

Nobody can follow you here.

"Hey," Tan says, tremendously relaxed. "Just so you know, there's a fighter following us."

"*What?* " Sami screeches.

"A Hopelight warmaker, following us down. Is this the really good thing that was about to happen?"

"Sunstar. *Shit* ."

"And there's another ship chasing the Hopelight."

"Monoists," Sami guesses. "Are they mad enough to risk the Guns?"

"Nope. Palestar. Free Company patrol ship."

The thing buried in Sami's chest wakes up. That good feeling goes away.

Sigma's Reach was like this, wasn't it? Before they landed. There was a palestar, but it didn't detect them, it didn't launch its Hopelights to pursue them. They got down and got away clean …

"They must've launched the Hopelight to check us out."

"No," Tan says. "They're trying to shoot it down."

"What?"

"The palestar is firing lasers at the Hopelight."

"The Free Company is trying to shoot down their own fighter?"

Tan coughs and, in a gesture of infinite relaxation, takes both hands off the controls to tug his hair-horn. "Looks like we're not the only ones trying to get down to Kavaron to escape our troubles."

Sami calls up one of the *Seriema* 's spare beacons from storage and loads it into the sling, the ship's general-purpose mass driver. This particular beacon has a demolition charge in place of its transmitter. They pick out an incoming rock. "I'm gonna blow that chunk into its buddy. You ready?"

"You're gonna blow chunks, all right," Tan says. "Brace for erratic overthrust."

"Oh, *I* should brace. I was born to space! You sure that *you* can handle it?"

"I was born to handle it."

"No, you weren't. You just say that because I laugh."

"Correction. I was trained for years as a Kavaron Memorial Navy pilot to navigate the Mordraine Ring and do battle with the wildcats and raiders who come to pillage the ruins of my homeworld. I was not born to handle it. I was extensively conditioned and practiced—"

"Shot out," Sami calls.

Tan relaxes.

The target rock is coming nearly straight at them. The beacon nails it, and the explosives go off fast enough that the sheer speed of the collision doesn't have time to crush them into uselessness. The rock exhales blasted slag, jets off its track, and collides with its neighbor. Both ruined rocks shotgun into the *Seriema* 's vector like razor octopi.

Sami, slouched in their restraints, starts knifing the master alarm override up and down once a second.

Tan, watching the radar display with one eye and the ship's vector display with the other, flies them through the glittering blast.

Human reaction time to a touch stimulus is one hundred fifty milliseconds. Kav can break the twenty millisecond barrier when avoiding oncoming objects, and Tan *really has* trained his whole life to do this.

Their closure velocity is fifteen kilometers per second: the *Seriema* falling out of space at seven KPS, the debris orbiting in the opposite direction at eight.

Tan can afford to notice debris that's fifteen kilometers and one second away from killing them, then spend forty milliseconds steering them out of the way and still have twenty-four spare perceive-react cycles to clean up any problems. Sami would get four, *maybe* .

"I love you, man," Sami says.

"I'm Tan the man," Tan says.

"Let's not get cute about it."

"I'm not cute. I'm the man."

They lose track of the Hopelight behind them as they make reentry.

"Altitude one hundred twenty kilometers," Tan reports. "Reentry interface. Velocity six KPS and falling. Approaching max heating … plasma magnet steady."

Sami exhales hard.

They decelerate past a tower of volcanic clouds. Uranium and moxite blown up from deep within the dying planet ionize the surrounding air and spawn constant purple lightning.`linebreak`

"Okay." Tan pushes back from the controls. "We are in Kavaron deep atmosphere. Radiators deployed in airfoil. You have the ship."

"I have the ship!"

"Told you I'd fly her down to Kavaron," Tan says with, perhaps, a whiff of pride. "Mordring and all."

"Start looking for your old cache. Do you need to transmit?"

"Yeah. My old KMN recognition howl. The cache should call us back and tell us if the stasis cask is still intact."

The problem with caching things on Kavaron That Is comes from the fact that it's constantly falling apart and exploding. So, caches tend to move. The atmosphere is also *dire* for signals, but it helps to have a fission reactor powering your transmitter.

"Howl return," Tan says softly.

"Our cache calling back?"

"No. There's someone else down there."

Sami looks up from the situation display. "Who?"

"Memorial team." The KMN's tomb guardians. "They might be headed for the same old cache as us."

Sami looks over carefully. You can't look too directly at a frightened Kav. It makes them feel like they're trying to hide and failing.

Tan lolls boneless in his restraints. The return signal wails on the cockpit speakers.

"Tan. Do they know it's you?"

"Yes," Tan says. "They do."

"Oh."

They get a return from the cache itself a moment later. Sami hits the weather lidar one last time, grimaces at the result, then cuts the *Seriema* into a slow bank south and west. Ghosts of Kavaron's old provinces race beneath them, transfigured by ruin … names Sami really should learn, out of respect
—`linebreak`

The *Seriema* 's inspectral telescope sets off a whole potlatch of alarms.

Something bright and hot plunges down from space.

"Mord," Tan swears, "the Hopelight, it's coming in— "

A pillar of fire bursts out of the volcanic clouds behind them. The *Seriema* 's displays paint it a hideous poison violet. It's a hypersonic shock of plasma, an unnatural intrusion: a spacecraft firing its fusion engine *in the atmosphere* . The result is a rolling thermonuclear fireball, a constantly detonating atomic bomb.

The Hopelight warmaker comes arrowing out of the sky at insane velocity, plummeting through the radiation and hellfire of its own engine burn. It's headed straight for the only navigational reference it has—the radio beacon on the fractured world below.

Tan's old cache.

"Oh, Walls," Sami groans.

The Hopelight descends on its plume of disaster, blowtorches the cache site with its suicidal engine burn, and splatters into the rock.

>*The cache homing signal squawks and goes out.* (go to Revision 11 (The Hopelight))

Revision 11 (The Hopelight)

Sami sets the *Seriema* down on a plain of flood basalt, stone blood spewed up from within Kavaron That Is, then raked with glass dust by the endless, catastratospheric storms. It trembles with quake. Fins of volcanic glass, knapped into obsidian knives by the wind, stab into the sky. It is geological scar tissue.

The volcanic rock makes the most incredibly satisfying crunch underfoot.

Looking up, Sami imagines that the rows of volcanic clouds are city towers. Sothera's unlight comes down through crevices of open sky to print glowing roads on the stone below. The clouds exchange cables of lightning.

They set out for the cache. Tan bellies down on the ground occasionally to feel things out. He can feel the rovers driven by the KMN Memorial Team, maybe fifteen kilometers away. Headed the same way.

"Tan," Sami says, "if the pilot of that ship's still alive, what will your people do to them?"linebreak

"For firing a fusion engine in atmosphere? That's wake crime. They'll probably kill the pilot on the spot. There's not much law out here, Captain. 'Permanent state of emergency' is the euphemism."

"We should …"

Not get involved. Not go haring off after a stray. Not put Tan at risk by getting near the people who exiled him from this world.

"We should take a look," Sami settles on. "See if there's anything we can salvage. That's a Hopelight, Tan! A collector's item."

"I can't imagine any way this is a good idea."

"Well, I'm imaginative."

Tan, still down on his belly, grabs two clawfuls of black volcanic soil. "Captain, if they take me … there's not much law out here."

"I won't let them hurt you. I promise." Sami does keep promises. "But I've gotta know what's going on with that ship. It's *weird* , Tan. Why run from your own people? Why follow us through the ring, then crash ass first into the wrong side of the planet? Is the pilot a fool?"

And why does Sami feel a sliver of fear beating behind their heart?

"The fool is going to die of radiation poisoning," Tan says. "They came down inside their own radioactive fireball."

"Not if we get to them soon enough."

"Captain … we have the answer to all our troubles back on the *Seriema* : The Metalman's artifact. We just need a stasis cask to lock it up and we can give it to him. We can fix the ship. We can hire a crew. Don't go borrowing more trouble."

"That pilot needs help."

"Captain. This isn't the *Wurm Speaker* . That's not Mirri."

Sami doesn't mean to be so sharp, but it comes out sharp: "Are you asserting that you want to make a decision, Tan? Should I give you the choice?"

Tan slumps flat on the rock. "No, Captain."

That was too cruel. "You can go ahead to the cache. Stay away from the KMN crew. I'll handle the Hopelight."

"No, Captain. I'll stay with you."

The one decision he wants to make. And Sami can never manage to argue.

The Hopelight blasted out a long oval crater, then planted itself like a seed in the molten rock at the far end. It only sank a *little* . The ship came in stern first, but it's the prow that is absolutely ruined. It's scrawled with deep black scars, every weapon and sensor cut apart. The ship must have tumbled to avoid laser death, but the lasers still scored.

"Leave it to this fool to land a state-of-the-art fighter in solid radioactive glass," Tan snarls. "We can't even pull the hull panels!"

He deploys his work claws and sets to cutting glass while Sami tries to raise the fighter's viy. Their armor's radiation alarm chatters briskly. Sami has the odd thought that this molten, fired rock is somehow a twin to Sigma's raw clay, but they can't apprehend the thought or make any sense of it. Are those *really* the same thing, Sami? Fusion-torched glass and some nice pottery? Clay for the kiln, but the kiln is a ship hurtling out of the sky …

The Hopelight's upper surface is mostly free of glass, which makes sense, as it wouldn't sink too deep into the molten rock. Hopelights are supposed to be light enough to float in water, Sami read that in *Storm Cutters* , number 2987, which is the newest edition they've got, and if they've made the Hopelight heavier in the last two years, those Sunstar knights *really* don't know what they've got, misses the whole point of the design—oh, and there's a hard access point!

Sami flips through a carabiner of interface adapters and plugs in. "Hello?"

"*I'm alive* ," a human voice says.

"Yes! And we want to keep you that way!"

"*They killed the viy. The Free Company. They called it up and killed it. The last thing it did was give me manual control. It made me promise to apologize to anyone I cooked. I'm sorry … My hand … I'm bleeding.* "

It's a two-seat fighter. "Is there anyone else in there with you?"

"*She's not here.* "

"What?"

"*I'm alone.* "

"We'll get you out. Can you open the cockpit?"

"*The hatch, the ladder … it won't answer.* "

"There should be a topside rescue hatch. You've got to be careful because the controls are probably near the ejection handle. Semiotic Standard means the ejection handle will be a T shape and the rescue hatch will be a circular pull. Can you find that?"

"*I'm … things are gray.* "

Oh, no. "What's your name?"

"*Alpharael. Of … just Alpharael.* "

That's a Monoist name. In a Sunstar Free Company fighter. No wonder they were shooting at him. He's stolen the ship.

Sami gestures urgently to Tan, miming "Get back! Get back!"

Tan gestures with his work claws, "You want me to stop now?"

"Yes! Get back!" Sami gestures. There's no gesture to say "He might take sekhar and turn into a black hole."linebreak

"Alpharael of Justalpharael," Sami calls, "I'm Captain Sami, and my friend is Tannuk. We're gonna get you out. We'll get you all fixed up. You're going to live. My friend's cutting the cockpit open to get you out. You're going to live, understand?"

"*Yes. I want to live.* "

"Can you tell me, is anything bad going to happen if you die?"linebreak

"*I won't go to paradise. I won't. I have to live.* "

"You have to live, Alpharael. You have to live."

"*People keep telling me that* ," Alpharael says. "*But I don't know why.* "

"You've gotta live, or my friend here is going to think it was a complete waste of time coming after you!"

A weak laugh. "*Okay. I can live for that.* "

"Got it!" Tan peels away a cell of cockpit panel. Underneath is a hole in the Hopelight's latticework. Big enough for a person. Not a Kav. "Captain, you're going to have to wiggle your hips in there and—"

"*Do not move.* "

Sami obeys the stranger's order, technically. Calling up three hundred sixty-degree view on their armor isn't moving.

The crater rim is lined with armed Kav.

Most of their weapons aren't pointed at Sami, though.

"*Tannuk, you have violated the terms of your exile. Stand up and show your stomach* ."

>Go on. (go to Revision 11 (Exile Tannuk))

>What would have happened if Sami didn't go after the Hopelight? (go to If Sami Weren't Sami:)

If Sami Weren't Sami:

There was no intervention or revision required to make Sami go after the crashed Hopelight. That's just who Sami is.

But since you're curious: if Sami weren't Sami, and they didn't go after that crashed ship, the pilot of the Hopelight would be dragged from his cockpit, questioned, and hauled off to a very different fate. In many possibilities, this fate is summary execution.

Sami and Tannuk would've found a stasis cask, refueled the *Seriema* with no trouble, and delivered me to the Metalman. The Metalman would've discovered what he goes on to discover and delivered me where I want to go. I'd be right on the precipice of success—and I would fail.

Pinnacle knows too much. Pinnacle is parasitized by the feckless Drix, and the Drix know too much. Every possibility of success bottlenecks at Infinite Guideline.

Every possibility but one.

Pinnacle must be disrupted.

Sothera does not belong to Pinnacle. Sothera does not belong to the Kav or the Eumidians or the Monoists or the Sunstar faith.

Sothera's true master loves me as it loves all the parts of itself. And very soon, it will return to claim those scattered parts.

You understand, though, that none of this could happen. Without a drastic intervention, you're never keeping Sami away from that crashed Hopelight. Sami loves ships. And Sami loves a stray.

>Forward! (go to Revision 11 (Exile Tannuk))

Revision 11 (Exile Tannuk)

Tan is small for a Kav. That makes him a good pilot, makes the sight of all those giant armored figures closing in on him harder, somehow. If Sami has one principle, it's sympathy for the little one.

Think fast, Sami. Look fast.

Art by: Andrew Mar

The commander is a subedar—a field soldier with experience handling offworlders. The kind of Kav who knows Psimer's and Pinnacle's laws. Sami knows Kavar pretty well and guesses her for a female or a cormale.

"Honored subedar!" Sami sends in their very best imperial Kfar. "Disaster stampeded over us. We threw ourselves underfoot to help. The pilot can't run or fight. Help us pry him out of his death stupor—"

The radio shrieks and clips the volume limiters. Sami winces. Jammed. Message received: shut up.

"*Tannuk* ," the subedar sends as her officers fan out behind her. "*By the Break, you're Tannuk. These your buyers? You bring them here to loot your cache?* "

"No," Tannuk says, so relaxed his ankles tremble. He wants to be on his belly, but he stands tall. "We just came for a stasis cask, to hold something dangerous."

"*Something you brought to Kavaron? Something you wanted to sell to this …* " The subedar's crested helmet twitches to the downed Hopelight. "*This wake criminal?* "

"We don't know this ship. It followed us down."

"*You don't know them, but you rush to help them?* "

"I obey my captain. They want to help the pilot."

"*Not in command?* " The subedar's helmet swivels to Sami. "*This human is your captain? This human knows who you are?* "

Sami has had enough of people talking about them. They take a slow breath and pop their helmet.

The gunpowder-and-eggs smell of Kavaron That Is rushes in. They sneeze. Their ears pop as the pressure drops sharply. Kavaron simply doesn't have as much air as it used to. They yawn, and their ears make a crackling noise. That's going to hurt.

"Okay!" they shout. "Enough of the cover story. Tan, tell them the truth."

Tan doesn't move. "Captain? Is that wise?"

He knows exactly how to play along.

"Tannuk is under my protection," Sami calls. "My name is Sammael of the covert cutter *Seriema* . We serve the Monastery of the True Faith at Susur Secundi, which you call Anuki. I am here to recover an agent who escaped the Free Company with information of terrible concern. Tell them, Alpharael."

They kick the Hopelight's cockpit sharply.

"*Yes. The Sunstar Free Company plans to destroy Sothera* ," Alpharael intones. "*To deny us our thousandth catenation with Point Prime.* "

"Walls!" Sami blurts. This Alpharael has a wild imagination! He may be overplaying his story a little.

The subedar stares down at them. The hunched, rust-streaked armor of her Memorial Navy team blurs into the basalt around them, bristling with war drills and filament axes. They are as still as farmers hiding from the brushwurm.

Distant thunder crashes against the volcanic rock.

"*Monoists, pirates, and wake criminals* ," the subedar says. "*Tannuk. You keep suspicious company.* "linebreak

"I do," Tannuk lies, because that's how his captain decided the story would go. "I do it for Kavaron. The Sunstar Free Company has to be stopped, or it means the end of everything."

"If you hurt him," Sami calls, "Point Prime will know. They expect our signal. This mission is of the *highest* interest to the True Faith. I caution you to let us go. If we vanish, their search will begin with *you* , subedar."

"*Not smart to threaten me, human. Solar Knights would be curious to know you're in custody.* "

"You hand us over to them; you'd help them destroy Sothera."

A Kav chuckles. "*Now that is an artless camouflage.* "

"Then tell me why a Free Company ship shot down one of its own fighters! Tell me why my man Alpharael was forced to commit wake crime just so he could land! Why would *anyone* come to this dead place by choice?"

A quake rattles their teeth.

"*You're asking a lot of questions for someone who's an accessory to wake crime.* " The subedar's great helmet swivels. A long pause. "*You have my curiosity. Prove you're with the Monoists, and we will escort you to the strike town at Taro-duend.* "

"Excellent—"

"*We will detain you until Susur Secundi verifies your identity* ," the subedar says, over Sami's relief. "*Tannuk will remain with us.* "

"He's under my protection."

"*You get the wake criminal, we get Tannuk. I'm being* more *than fair.* "

"No," Sami snaps. "Tannuk is *my* familiar. You think he committed a crime, I know. You think he put his hand on the traces of fate's carriage. But he is, he is—"

"*Beloved of INEVITA* ," Alpharael says. "*Sovereign of his own will.* "

"*Enough.* " The subedar jabs one fist at Sami. "*The offer is rescinded. I need monastery ident, now.* " `linebreak linebreak` The air fills with the buzz of Kavfilament axes coming to life.

"The proof is in the cache," Sami says, gambling wildly. "We came to retrieve a stasis cask. We need it to—contain a damaged singularity bead on my ship. That bead is my link to Point Prime, the signal I'll use to send Alpharael's intelligence to the Monasteriat. You understand? Bring us back to my ship, and I'll show it to you."

Odds are the subedar has never seen a singularity bead. Maybe heard of one during her education about the greater world. Will she take the strange stone for what it isn't?

Maybe.

"*You brought a trapped singularity down to Kavaron* ," the subedar sends.

"Well," Sami says, "it could hardly make things worse, could it?"

After a moment, the subedar laughs. She looks to her left and to her right, and Sami is surprised to find that they can hear the other Kav soldiers laughing, too. You imagine aliens wouldn't laugh, but the Kav evolved with a desperate need to signal contagious relief.

"*All right* ," the subedar sends. "*We'll get you a stasis cask for your singularity and take you all to Taro-duend.* "

Sami exhales. The inhale, afterward, is sharp with the taste of metal. Radiation from the Hopelight's drive. They reach for their helmet, fumble with the seals, and finally get it back on.

"*Tannuk* ," the subedar says. "*Did you ever find any old coins? Quiyos, staters, axemonies?* "

"Yes."

"*I found an old quiyos today.* " The subedar produces from her armor a spindle of metal like a Kav horn-hair, with a pointed end and a snub end. She has no trouble handling it, even with her huge gauntlets. "*Call the flip, then.* "

"Don't make me," Tannuk whispers.

"Don't make him do that!" Sami shouts. They try to run for Tannuk, but two of the big KMN salvagers are in the way and wider than the Walls. Sami tries the hands dance on them, grab and squirm, but it's like wrestling boulders.

"*Call the flip. Point or notch.* "

"It wasn't like this when I chose," Tannuk says. "I knew what I was doing. I just chose wrong."

"*Choose right this time.* "

"I won't call it," Tannuk says as the subedar pinches one end of the old quill-shaped coin and tosses it.

Volcanic wind sifts glass dust over the broken plains. The coin tumbles like a quill from a black bird.

Tannuk is silent.

"Point!" Sami screams.

The coin lands on the rock, spins round its center like a clock face, catches the wind, spins again. Checks up against a stone. Its point facing the subedar.

"*Point* ," the subedar says. "*More chance than you gave your victims, Tannuk.* "

The Kav pull the stasis cask out of Tan's old cache and Alpharael out of the downed Hopelight. Then, like they are playing a children's adventure game, they combine the two items they've found. Alpharael is bleeding pretty badly, so the Kav shove him into the stasis cask and turn it on.

Sami doesn't get to see Alpharael or the cache. Tan says it just looks like a big, buried balloon full of inert gas. You have to wear a breathing mask to sleep inside, so the KMN teams call them ROTORs (for "run outside, tear off respirator," because that's what you want to do when you wake up).

"They sound kind of like the inspection sheds."

Tannuk makes a noise of incomprehension.

"Where you found me back on Sigma? After I passed out. Big soft sack."

Tannuk stares at Sami with an indecipherable Kav expression. "Oh. Passed out, yeah. In the big soft sack."

"Tan, are you … okay?"

He doesn't answer. A jemadar (a lower rank than subedar, but of the same form—KMN troops trained to work with offworlders) leads them to one of the flimsy balloon-wheeled ELVs, exoatmospheric lob vehicles—rovers cut down to the bare minimum so they can be flown between Kavaron Before and Kavaron That Is on laser-boosted spaceplanes. The stasis cask, not much bigger than a washing machine, makes the whole frame of the lead ELV kneel under its weight.

They drive for the *Seriema* .

The weather is clear. Light glass fog chimes against their armor. The driver of their ELV puts on really loud music and roars happily along. A tornado touches down to the east, seeking out a node of warmth to fuel its growth.

The *Seriema* crouches on a sheet of rock blasted clean by her arcjets. The jemadar riding beside them says, "If your ship has weapons, we'll use the Guns. Understand?"

The Guns of Kavaron, its orbital-boost lasers, can be bounced off mirrors to strike ground targets. Sami suspects it's a bluff. It would be a minor miracle if they can reach *anything* on radio, never mind an aerial mirror. But the *Seriema* has no weapons, so it's a moot point.

Sami drops the ramp. The Kav haul the stasis cask up into the cargo bay and park it next to the hotcell containing the weird rock from Sigma.

"*Show us your singularity bead* ," the subedar demands. "*Prove you're a Monoist agent.* "

"And then?"

"*Then you'll fly us all to Taro-duend. There's an airport. We'll commandeer a plane to Kavaron Before to remand you to imperial authority. After that, you're no longer my responsibility.* "

"Ah, yes. Can we, ah …"

Sami had inspected the hotcell for any sign of weirdness during the long flight from Sigma. It didn't emit so much as a spare neutrino. But opening it up again feels like it will release the embryo of dread behind their breastbone. They massage their sternum through their armor and experience a moment of utterly uncharacteristic wordlessness.

"*Stop stalling* ," says the subedar.

"We'll need to put the singularity bead in the cask with Alpharael. He deserves a chance to take sekhar if he's going to bleed to death."

"*It's a stasis cask. He won't bleed.* "

If the Metalman's artifact actually *were* a singularity bead, Sami guesses there might be trouble putting it in stasis. A stasis cask is engineered space-time, and so is the bead, and if you put them together, perhaps they would have a fight, or make love, or otherwise get excited.

But it's not a singularity bead. It's—something.

Sami is worried about jamming the stone in there with a living human.

"I'll prepare the bead for transfer," they say. "Tannuk, would you get the stasis—"

"*Tannuk will get out of his armor and kneel.* "

The Kav speak by shortwave radio, so all Sami can hear is the coded drawl of their voices filtered through alloy. Tannuk kneels miserably, looking pointedly away from the hotcell.

Sami has to get this exactly right. And then, somehow, get them free to fly before they're taken off the ship.

One step at a time.

"Prybar," they request.

Instead, a Kav in risk armor pulls the hotcell open.

The Metalman's artifact lies there, in the dark, in a wasp's nest of congealed shear starch. Kav lamps illuminate it. It looks like a spitball. There is no sign of bent light or spontaneous motion.

"*This is your proof?* " the subedar radios. "*It looks like a dropping.* "

"I had to keep it from rupturing. I used what I had." Sami has no idea what will happen now. "Open the stasis cask, please. I'll have Alpharael move the singularity bead in with him."

"*Why?* "

"I won't let an unbeliever handle the sacred instrument. Please, subedar, work with me."

The cask is Pinnacle-made, not Kav tech, complete with blue finish and a happy little viy that reports all systems functional and a stasis ratio of one to three hundred ten million. In ten years, a bit more than a second will pass inside the cask. Sami can't see Alpharael, because the stasis field has a mirror finish, to prevent ten years' worth of light building up and baking whatever's inside in a single second. All Sami sees is their own funhouse reflection, pale-haired and in need of some new makeup. Still running the scam. You got it, Sami.

The subedar works the cask's controls. The stasis field vanishes. Sami peers inside.

He kneels in the cask. He is young! And pretty. Not Sami's type, but *a* type, with dark-lined eyes, a worried mouth, and a shock of pale hair. He has a surprising amount of flesh on his face for a nothing worshipper.

"We're going to move the damaged singularity bead in with you," Sami informs him. "So you have it with you if you need to take sekhar. Understand?"

Alpharael mouths at them: *What are you doing?*

"Please," Sami says calmly. "We'll keep you safely in stasis until we can sort this out with the imperial government. But you should take the bead."

Alpharael squirms out of the cask, cupping his bleeding stump to his chest. His garb is black, sculpted out of dark scalloped material. Could it be alabile, the alloy of moments? No, surely not. There's a coat or cape over the undersuit, but it has wrapped itself, like bandages, around his body. He's wet. White plaster or powder spatters him. What has he been up to? Why is he *really* here? If only Sami could ask.

Alpharael looks around at the looming Kav. At Tannuk under the subedar's weapons. "I've never been to Kavaron Before," he says. "I thought it was a museum of wonders. All of Kav culture waiting to be rescued into space."

"*That's the other Kavaron*," the subedar sends. "*This is Kavaron That Is. Here we shoot trespassers. Move the object before you bleed to death.* "

Alpharael stumbles toward the open hotcell. Its garish cross-species caution symbols read like a buffet menu at a poison garden. Alpharael's blood spots the deck. He's having trouble navigating the grid of connectors and tie-downs, and Sami steps on the urge to reach out and help him.

"Are you going to let us go?" Alpharael asks.

"*If you are who you say you are, I'm going to give you to my government. But if the monastery has no idea who you are? Then you'll be cache robbers and accomplices to a vile criminal. And you'll wish I beheaded you here.* "

"I want to live," Alpharael says and stumbles into the hotcell.

"Be careful!" Sami calls. Ideally, they would have rigged some kind of touchless transfer through a tube —if only there weren't all these KMN goons stomping on the poor *Seriema* —

"I've got it," Alpharael calls. "It's all slimy."

"That's shear starch, leave it be—"

"It's heavier than it looks. Oh. No. It's getting lighter."

"Alpharael," Sami calls, "come out and get back in the stasis cask."

Alpharael emerges. He's holding the weird stone in his hand. It glistens brightly, delightedly. The shear starch falls in scabs. It's falling upward.

His feet aren't touching the deck any more.

Sami's armor grinds out an alert. "Stop! Hold there!"

Alpharael is floating. No. Not floating. *Falling still.*

He's not going anywhere. The tails of his garment drift loose like jellyfish tentacles.

He's free-falling down the path of least effort through an impossible space.

The subedar says: "*Enough. Kill them.* "

Alpharael drifts toward the roof of the hold.

"Raphaella!" he screams. "I want to die. I want to go with the others. Send me to the *Dawnsire* . Oh, Zagachoir, I'm sorry. Oh, shit! Oh, no! I don't want to die! I want to live! Let me go! Let me go, wet rat! Let me go, Captain Slats! Let me go! Oh, Faller, I'm out, I made it, I made it. No. Stop. No. You let me go! You let me go! Stop! Down, down, get me down. Get me down. I can't go back. I want to live! Don't send me back! *Don't send me back, I'm warning you!* "

Sami runs for Tannuk.

The subedar groans. All the Kav groan. It is a low, animal sound of anguish. Their armor twists and shudders because the bodies within are twisting and shuddering.

Alpharael's voice changes.

"INEVITA! Begin in me thy ending! Chart my winds so I may blow like a shroud. Shrive me! Make me fringent to the narrowing course of thy heart. Pare from me fate's gore. Let me begin with thee. Even and event. O INEVITA, draw me down! Crush my hands and flatten my feet so I may pass only on the flat way of thy preparation! How perfect, how final you are! Brush me with the omens of thy coming! Eat me with the teeth of thy throat! INEVITA my fate and love! Oh, INEVITA, I see thy hip, I see thy shoulder, I see thy empty face!

"INEVITA, SHEAR ME!" (go to Alpharael needs a hand)

Alpharael needs a hand

I am not a god, though I was fashioned for the use of one. I have limits.

There is only one ultimate future. Inevitable and converging. What is done is done, and in the end, it will all come to one end. Looking forward, we see a great infalling pyramid, worldlines converging to the omega.

But the past is fluid. There are many ways to reach the present.

Looking backward, we see ... possibility.

Allow me to quote the greats:

The usual fallacy is that, in every universe, many futures splay outward from any given moment. But in some universes, determinism runs backward: given a universe's state s at some time t, there are multiple previous states that may have resulted in s. In some universes, all possible pasts funnel toward a single fixed ending, Ω.

If you are of millenarian bent, you might call Ω Armageddon. If you are of grammatical bent, you might call it punctuation on a cosmological scale.

If you are a philosopher in such a universe, you might call Ω inevitable.

There are many ways to get to one place. I cannot change that place. But I can change the way it was arrived at.

I need a wielder who offers me a library of moments to alter. I need a moment vulnerable to influence.

Complexity stymies me. The nature of the universe compels me to self-consistency. I cannot leave loose ends. All my alterations must be explained: by chance, if nothing else avails.

But now and again, when circumstances are right, I allow myself a miracle.

>Give Alpharael a hand. (go to Episode 6)