
Episode 2

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From set *Edge of Eternities*
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Revision 10 (Inspect the Colony)

“It’s still in the wrap.”

Sami and Tan stand on the runway apron in their risk armor and stare. The light is deep violet, falling to black: this eerie anti-golden hour.

Everything looks adobe, faced in clay. The mechans must’ve used the local rock to cover and connect prefab buildings, then wrapped everything up in clinging membrawn to keep it fresh until people arrived.

The whole colony is still in its sheeting.

Low-pressure atmosphere has sifted fine clay dust over the wrap, then gathered it with licks of rain into orange clots. It looks tasty.

“So why are the lights on?” Sami asks. “Tan?”

Tan wiggles his belly against the tarmac and rumbles thoughtfully. “I feel ... machines. Industrial equipment. Operating near the center of town. Probably at the mining face? Those big ticks looked like drone digging sheds.”

“I wonder if they tried to operate the colony remotely.”

Sami exhales in relief. That would explain everything. Lights are on because the power’s on. The mining sheds churning away, doing what they do best, filling cargo containers with moxite—and if they find anything they don’t know how to handle, what do they do with it? They toss it aside and wait for a human operator to decide.

“I get it,” Sami announces, bouncing up on their toes (the armor makes this nearly impossible, but Sami is determined to bounce). “The Metalman loves machines, right? He’s switched this place on remotely. Now the machines have dug up something they can’t identify, and he wants us to find out what it is. So, he sends us in foolish, like a couple living assays, and we figure out if it’s—you know, dangerous, or valuable, or whatever. Tan?”

Tan sniffs. His armor sucks air through its flehmen node, samples it, and renders equivalent smells out of a synthetic library for him to inhale.

“I smell dinner,” he says. “Doro wat and tibs in a ... a big plate of bread.”

Sami stops bouncing. “What?”

“Someone’s hungry. Someone’s gotta eat.”

“No, Tan, this place is being run remote, there’s nobody here to—damn it. Damn it. Someone got here before us.”

Lac du Palt’s crew, or captain scour, or the runt. Someone a lot better-armed than Sami and Tan.

But someone who doesn’t need this score *nearly* as bad.



Art by: Dmitry Burmak

Tan raises his arms. His metal-shearing work claws snap open.

“Sometimes I think,” Sami sends, “that the spread of effective and affordable personal body armor has made violence too appealing for the modern renegade. You shoot first, you probably won’t even kill anyone. Just knock them out of the fight. So why not blast them and *then* ask questions?”

“*Captain*,” Tan hisses back. “*If you transmit, you’re going to get diffed.*”

“Direction finding? Please. They don’t know we’re here, or they’d keep their smells sealed up.” The modern renegade also uses scentsors, like the flehmen on Tan’s armor.

“*How could they not know we’re here? We flew down out of the unset and did a pass over the whole colony.*”

“Oh. True.” Sami is very focused on details, but they sometimes fixate on exactly the wrong details. “So why wasn’t anyone waiting at the runway? Afraid of the *Seriema*’s guns?” The ship has no guns.

Maybe they’re squatters. But who would squat on Sigma, where you can’t breathe without a slipsuit? Someone who *really* needs to hide?

Did the Metalman send them to take a bounty?

Sami spiders up between two adjacent housing blocks. They have to stop to sneeze. There’s mold in their armor. When they inhale again, their flehmen activates and they smell it—the armor’s imitation of tasty rachicken and rabeef, piled up on a plate of injera bread.

“I think I’m next to the smell,” Sami sends. “Let me find a window to peep through.”

They crawl up another half-meter and stick their chin over a windowsill.

A house sensor's irises open right at forehead height. The house transmits, quite loud and clear: *"Welcome to the Chopright family home. We invite a guest for dinner if you're in need! Take a look at our mannerslate and leave your boots on the mat. Our two-year-old isn't comfortable with guests, so please let her set her own boundaries."*

"Good sneaking," Tan sends. *"Spotted by a house."*

"I didn't know it was an extrovert!" Sami ducks back down, waiting for whoever's eating inside to make a ruckus, or possibly shoot them through the wall.

Nothing happens.

Sami calls up the house mannerslate on wireless and gives it a scan. Polite, fashionable, no sign of a strong religious affiliation—Monoist, Sunstar Summist, Faithal, Besurdist, Reform Pith, Deform Pith, none of them apparently answers to the Choprights' existential questions. There's a construction certificate, three years old. But the Choprights never actually showed up—their friendly house just sat here, under the soft rains.
"Three years," Sami repeats.

"What?"

"The house was built three years ago. The Choprights filled out their preferences but never showed up."

Tan rumbles. *"So how does the house know they have a two-year-old child?"*

"Maybe the kid was scheduled."

"Maybe they're right here, eating doro wats and tibs. Where's the smell from?"

Oh, it smells *good* ! There's a tear in the membrawn sheeting, where the epoxy between two sheets failed. Right behind it is the window that spotted Sami. It's porous two-way breathing plastic, the kind that keeps your house's humidity and air balanced.

The smell's coming from there.

Sami stares inside.

"It's a common room with a table. Cushions out for kneeling, basin for handwashing. Full of water. A big bread plate with," Sami's stomach rumbles, *"doro wat and rasteak tibs."* They ate tibs every night at the end of kitchen service, years ago, on the *Wurm Speaker*.

The lights are on. A teapot simmers on an induction plate, burping hot water onto the tacky self-cleaning floor. There are torn squares of injera bread on the plates, like someone was in the middle of serving dinner.

"I'm sorry," the house says. *"The Choprights aren't here to receive guests right now. Please make yourself at home. What's ours is yours."*

It's the same everywhere.

Like everyone stood up and walked away in the middle of life.

"I've got the colony viy on wireless," Tan reports. Humans are famously bad at splitting attention between reality and the virtual, so Sami leaves that to Tan. For Kav, it's like splitting your attention between left and right eye. *"I convinced it I'm an inspector. Maps, safety records ... There's a lot here."*

"Does it think it has a population?"

Viys are smart in the same way as slime molds are smart—creatures of data, capable of solving exponentially complex problems, but without any underlying model of reality. They're great for planning and administration, especially the kind of multi-variable, constantly changing problems that drive most socients to howling frustration. They grow their pseudopods of optimization out into the maze of possible futures, feeding the ones that find reward.

They are not, however, known for their common sense.

"No. I don't think so. It says no one ever showed up to work here."

"Does it think it's being operated remotely?"

"No. What do you feel out there?"

Sami hops from rooftop to plastic-wrapped rooftop. Membrawn crunches satisfyingly underfoot as they land, crouch, kick off, soar. They're heading for the colony center. The *Seriema*'s sensors detected heat and carbon dioxide from twenty thousand people. They've got to be here somewhere.

"It's a nice place. Savanna layout. Cells of four habitats and four civic buildings around a central square."

"Savanna layout because you evolved on a savanna?"

"I suppose. The squares look nice. Of course, you can't go outside without a slipsuit." The air is thin; you wouldn't need a full pressure suit, but you'd need heating and a breather.

"I didn't know you were interested in colony planning, Captain."

"You fly over enough of them, you get curious why they make those shapes." Human urban planning is very different from modern Kav settlements. Humans don't make as many preparations to flee. "I'm coming up on a big avenue. Looks like a track for trains to carry cargo to and from the spaceport." Sami sneezes, coughs, sucks down moldy air and jumps to the next building. "Wait while I—oh, Walls ..."

"Captain?"

What can they say?

"Captain. Sami. Talk to me. Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes. You have my vitals. You can see I'm fine."

"I didn't ask if you were fine. Please talk to me, or I'll have to decide to come over there myself."

"There are ... slipsuits. Empty slipsuits. Everywhere."

Hundreds of them. Strewn like palm fronds on a decorative carpet, all down the avenue. Like the remnants of some strange molting.

"Did people wear them?"

Sami scurries down to ground level. The nearest slipsuit twitches in the thin sunset wind. The attached breather is switched on. It's run empty.

Sami loves to touch things. Maybe a little too much. They twist off their right gauntlet. Then they stretch their bare fingers out into the cool air and stroke the empty slipsuit.

Warm. Warm like skin. *Wet*. Like it's sweating ...

They look up at the field of empty suits and get an ugly chill.

"Yeah. They're used. Recently used. Like people tore them off a minute ago."

They turn the empty suit over, find the seal, and push a hand inside. Expecting to touch ghost flesh. But—there's nothing.

Sami shivers. "Ask the viy if there are people hiding around here."

"A storage container full of slipsuits cracked open. They blew down this road."

"What? No. And the breathers turned on and ran empty? It doesn't make sense."

"I'm not guessing. The viy says the storage containers upwind have bad gaskets. One of them cracked open. The slipsuits blew away."

"Then—why are the breathers switched on?"
linebreak
linebreak
"Maybe they had bad gaskets, too."

Sami rises from the translucent husk. Looks around. "Tan, stop being reasonable for a second. It looks like a hundred people dropped dead and evaporated and left their suits behind."

"It does feel like that."

"The Metalman wanted us to find something important here. Why did he only send us? Just us? No muscle. No minders. Just two losers with a broken-down ship?"

"I'm not a loser."

"That's true. You're not. I'm sorry. Tan, what if he only sent us because he's trying to limit his losses?"

A rumble on the radio. *"You think he knows what got dug up here? And he's sending us to see what happens?"*

"Yes."

"What should we do?"

"Go back to the ship. Preflight her, get ready to take off the moment I'm back. And if I don't come back, you've got to find someone who'll look for Mirri."

"No."

Sami sneezes on suit mold. "What?" Tan never makes decisions.

"I'm staying with you. Let me limit my losses." Tan rumbles elliptically, an *I-want-to-stop-talking-about-this* sound. *"Captain? I'm checking the viy's audio records. There's something."*

"What? What is it?"

"I'll send it over—of course, I've got the sound all set up for Kav hearing ranges—"

"Tan! Just tell me."

"The viy hears something at the center of the colony. Near the big tick sheds on the mining face. Captain, I think it's a cat."

When Mirri lived on the *Seriema*, she had a routine—we can't call it a routine, it wasn't that reliable—a habit, a behavior that she would sometimes emit. She would roll on her back making cryptic gurgles until someone (Sami, often) reached down to pet her creamy white belly fluff. Then she would latch on to the grasping appendage (an arm, usually) with all four of her legs and kick it furiously with her back legs, as if disemboweling it. Only she kept her claws retracted, so that all you felt was her little jellybean toe-pads brushing on your skin. While doing this, she would gape her toothy little maw open and look around wildly, as if she were bewildered by her own excitement.

Then she would begin industriously licking your limb, starting at the wrist and progressing toward the elbow, rasping away busily with her tongue. If you tried to pull away, she would shout “Nyah!” and kick at you with her toe-beans.

You just had to wait while she crawled up your limb, adjusting her grip, like some kind of industrial machine traversing a length of pipe, cleaning every patch of skin or scale she could reach until, at last, she was on your shoulder, licking the side of your face and purring, having expressed the overflowing agita of her love.

>What’s Tan asking the colony viy? (go to Revision 10 (Query the Viy))

>Never mind Tan’s questions. Proceed directly to cat. (go to Revision 10 (Chase the Cat))

Revision 10 (Query the Viy)

The colony viy is extraordinarily intelligent, but it has no need for self-awareness and no concept of reality. It is a network of data in phase space.

It experiences nothing as Tannuk shells it with questions.

TAN_THE_MAN: Why are there discarded slipsuits on the spaceport avenue?

They blew away from a storage container with a failed gasket. Their clumping is within the stochastic distribution of windblown randomness.

TAN_THE_MAN: Why is the food hall on the avenue serving a full meal? Captain Sami reports carboys full of cactus tea and melting ice. There are buffet stations with adobo rachicken on induction heat. There are loose food trays. There is a garlic sauce spill with boot prints in it.

The food hall mechans prepared a full meal as a rehearsal. One mechan suffered a mechanical failure and dropped its load of trays. A maintenance mechan arrived to repair the failure, leaving the boot tracks you observe.

TAN_THE_MAN: Why would you prepare a full meal as a rehearsal?

There was a refrigeration failure. The food would otherwise have spoiled.

TAN_THE_MAN: It seems as if the trays were dropped by people fleeing in fear.

They were not. There are no people here.

TAN_THE_MAN: Captain Sami reports a roadside fire main has been opened onto the tarmac to create a puddle. Several work gloves drift on the surface. What is the explanation for this?

The fire main had faulty gaskets. Maintenance mechans opened the valve to lower the local pressure in preparation for repairs. The work gloves were blown here alongside the slipsuits.

TAN_THE_MAN: It seems like people opened a water tank, dipped their glove hands in it, and disappeared.

There are clear surveillance records indicating otherwise.

TAN_THE_MAN: Are you familiar with the work of Crampton Severine?

Crampton Severine is a human author of horror and unease fiction, an art form which exploits the human ability to entertain the unreal as emotionally relevant. Severine portrays the Edge, the known universe, as a malignant puppet show operated by unknowable beings who mock human notions of causality. Ultimately, the universe is revealed to be a theater for suffering, without reason or ultimate purpose.

TAN_THE_MAN: Thanks. My captain won’t stop talking about Crampton Severine.

There is a new logon from a privileged terminal. The new user is SERIEMA_SAMI.

The new logon sends a query:

SERIEMA_SAMI: Inventory non-worker life in Sigma's Reach.

The Sigma's Reach colony has no life in it, worker or otherwise. Some livestock were grown in test batches, but they lacked any higher nervous system.

SERIEMA_SAMI: Inventory atmospheric carbon dioxide and heat.

Atmospheric CO₂ and heat is consistent with the colony's anticipated population of fourteen thousand workers and their families.

SERIEMA_SAMI: Why?

Carbon dioxide off-gassing and thermal stresses caused by tidal forces acting on Sigma.

SERIEMA_SAMI: Kavshit. Sorry, Tan.

TAN_THE_MAN: I agree, though. Absolute manshit. Viy, let's inventory supply consumption.

Sigma's Reach has received automated delivery of consumables such as water, food, spices, tools, medicine, clothing, and low-pressure safety gear.

TAN_THE_MAN: Why?

High spoilage in stockpiled supplies required replacement.

SERIEMA_SAMI: Is the spoilage rate consistent with consumption by a population of between ten and twenty thousand?

Yes. But there is no such population. The actual cause is storage-container gasket failure. The probable cause is a polymer-eating microbe that arrived with the first wave of colonists.

SERIEMA_SAMI: WHAT FIRST WAVE OF COLONISTS?

The viy detects and prunes erroneous low-level connections in its bulk, so vestigial they seem close to random noise. It resumes normal function:

That statement was in error. The gasket failure was probably caused by a polymer-eating microbe that infected the first wave of supplies sent to the colony stockpiles.

TAN_THE_MAN: Captain, you're getting distracted.

SERIEMA_SAMI: Tan, I'm getting upset. But yeah—where's the cat, where's the cat?

There are no cats on Sigma's Reach.

SERIEMA_SAMI: I hear a cat.

There is an audio anomaly on the mine's workface, near one of the clay-processing sheds. It is probably a mechanical strain. It does resemble the calls of a domestic cat in distress, but it is caused by metal under repeated stress.

SERIEMA_SAMI: Give me a waypoint.

There is another sound nearby.

It is a periodic knocking, like a piece of gravel rattling against a wall. It is associated with a report of an anomalous object from one of the processing shed's sorting mechanisms.

SERIEMA_SAMI: GIVE ME A WAYPOINT!

>Proceed to waypoint. (go to Revision 10 (Chase the Cat))

Revision 10 (Chase the Cat)

“Captain, wait!”

No time to wait. There has never been time to wait for anything. Sami must go forward, forward out of the past with its disappointed crew and vanished cats, forward into a future where everything is—finally—right. Ship and crew and cat and self. That dying voice on the *Wurm Speaker*’s flight deck, the rasp of prophecy from ruined lungs, “*You will come to nothing, Sami*”—finally proven wrong.

And if that means leaving Tan behind for a little bit—just a few minutes, not forever—then run. Run!

Sami tears down the rails of the colony’s big cargo haul, past ingots of plastic-wrapped titanium that wait, stacked like precious cheeses, for someone to need them. Sami sprints past the frozen construction of a colony that never had any colonists—except, it feels, the ones who vanish just a moment before Sami lays eyes on. There was hot food in the hall near the spaceport. There were gloves drifting in the pooled water, like people knelt together to hide from some rising fire.

“Captain, before you go in, wait for me. Wait!”

No. There’s a cat in trouble. And maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe, maybe it is Mirri. But even if it isn’t—someone has to save the damn cat.

Sami balance-beam sprints down the cargo rails through a bola garage. The huge biolabor amplifiers are caught in crazed postures of urgency—they’re unplugged from their maintenance cradles, tethers and plugs tentacle-wild, bristling with wrecking magnets and water. One of them can’t hold its posture: it staggers as if shoved, its onboards shouting, “Work regime violation!”

There is no one piloting the bola, of course. Just like there’s no one to exhale twenty thousand human bodies’ worth of carbon dioxide and heat.

There are no people on Sigma’s Reach.

But now—as Sami plunges forward, closer and closer to the mining face—there are *shadows* of people. Right there, below the cargo rail! Look! Baked into the clay. Glazed impressions of bodies, twisting in anguish. The silhouettes reach desperately for the shadow of the rail but cannot reach it.

Something awful happened here, just an instant ago, a moment before Sami saw—

But there is no sound. No movement. Not one living or dying thing.

Sami runs, astonished, through a field of glass flowers. Frozen explosions in the clay. It looks as if the center of the colony was bombarded, prickled with explosive heat from the sky. And the bombardment stopped mid-second.

They manage to choke a question to the colony vii: “Why are *these* here?”

The vii replies tersely: “*Lightning strikes.*”

“There are people—dead people—”

“Lightning fulgurites may resemble human forms.”

“Lightning? On an arid planet? With—with no thunderstorms?”

“Orographic lifting builds up charge in dry dust storms ascending the tethys. The lightning discharges at the mining face due to the presence of large metal structures.”

No people here. Never were. Just coincidences that resemble people. Just lightning that strikes glass into the form of burnt bodies.

And large metal structures.

Ahead of Sami, a row of clay-processing sheds stretches out to the left and the right, their beetleshell backs (ready to open and deliver their yield to grasping cranes) are patterned with bright graphic tiles of Eumidian middenmass art. Turquoise Eumidian acid digesting the black compost of the past into green-growing future. The huge machines would do most of the work of mining here. Maybe the Metalman has switched them on and *made* them active—they take in clay and fracture it, crush it, grind it, screen it, dry it, calcine it, bleach it, blunge it, and extrude it into processed product.

Anything strange they find would be stored. Waiting for someone to come check it out.

The sound of the cat is coming from the nearest processing shed.

Sami kicks off the rails, vaulting three meters up and forward to grab the access ladder beside the shed's folded up work ramp. They slap at the emergency release, huffing and wheezing on the suit mold, and pull it so hard it twists.

The hatch slashes open. Sami wiggles in head first and plunges down the access chute. Up ahead—the irregular rattle of something slapping into metal, then into wetness. And the bawl of a cat in desperate distress.

"Hang on!" Sami shouts. "Hang on. I'm coming!"

They fall out of the emergency accessway, straight forward, into the pitch dark.

The floor's soft. They hit with a nominal "Oof!" Suit lights reveal a label on the fabric floor—"QUALITY ASSURANCE CYST ZERO-ONE."

From the darkness, a cat mrowls softly.

"Mirri?"

No response. Just that random rattle of something hard hitting metal, hitting wetness.

"Sorry," Sami whispers and fires suit-sonar into the darkness.

The QA cyst is a soft-walled bladder. The walls are made of detonation-grade membrawn, capable of stretching a hundredfold without breaking.

"Viy," Sami says. "What's the purpose of this space?"

The viy doesn't answer. The QA cyst is isolated, mechanically and otherwise, from the rest of the colony. This is where the clay-processing shed stashes anything it doesn't know what to do with. And even Sami, a criminal of motley education, knows that Pinnacle takes *very seriously* the control of unidentified stuff mined from alien ground.

Maybe the artifact is *here*. A perfect place to keep something safe.

"Hey?" Sami calls softly. "Pspspsp?"

No cat.

Sometimes, in movies, slivers mimic the sounds of things they hear. To lure you in. Of course, slivers aren't real.

There's an armored shutter at the far end of the cyst. This is where the shed ejects unknown objects. They roll down into the inspection pool at the bottom of the cyst.

The armored shutter has popped loose. It's swinging free. Is that where the cat sounds are coming from? Tortured alloy?

The pool is a greasy-clear puddle of shear starch. Shear starch acts as a solid when struck by anything moving too energetically. That pool—and the cyst's walls—are meant to protect everyone outside in the sad event that the shed plucks up something *really* dangerous, like a singularity bead, or a relic of some ancient war between bleached things, or a fetal worm.

There's something moving in the inspection pool.

Sami's armor experiences a series of software crashes.

Motion under the shear starch. Something moving quickly and erratically. Something that makes a sound. A voice. A *word* —

Chosen—

>Keep going! (go to Revision 10 (Keep Going))

Revision 10 (Keep Going)

Chosen—

No. That's not right. The voice in the pool *sounds* like Psimer, but it's not. It's just rattling and sloshing around, and Sami's brain is hallucinating words in the noise, words like—

Choosen one—

Sami steps closer. Who doesn't want to be the choosin' one? The one who does the choosin'?

The thing moving in the white murk of the pool looks like a hunk of raw pitchblende, a dark unpolished egg. Its surface is oily black, pebbled with little blisters that tempt Sami to poke them, like a fidget toy. It looks weirdly *lickable* —but maybe this is only true, this desire to lick, if you are Sami, a tactile maniac.

But there is a faint blur around it, a pink astigmatism. Like light isn't quite sure of the right path to take, so it experiments with all of them. Rainbow interference patterns spray from its glossy highlights.

Oh—and it's shooting around like a gnat. The whole pool full of shear starch is *stirred*, like it's soaked up heat from below and this has created a slow vortex on which the hunk skips like a kernel of popcorn.

"Okay," Sami says. "Okay. I see you."

This has to be it, right? The Metalman's artifact? The thing he sent Sami and Tan to find.

Sami may be naive, but they are not naive enough to touch *this* thing. Proper handling, now. Carefully.

Moving slowly, as if planning to trap a skittish cat, Sami unstraps a hotcell from the wall.

Alongside Unilit reading rags, hotcells are Pinnacle's favorite gift to give. There are a dozen aboard the *Seriema*. They're not as good as a proper stasis cask, but they can hold neutron-activated engine components or chemical spills or split fuel rods or even corpses. It beats inhaling fuel fleas. Mirri used to play inside them, and Sami would shout "Hey, hey, that's not for cats!" and Mirri would crouch and stare and make a noise like a duck but not come out.

Sami dips the hotcell into the pool of shear starch.

The strange stone bounces happily toward the hotcell. But a ridge of shear starch builds up at the mouth—hardening as it rushes in. The stone skips off the scab, bounces off the safety barrier at the edge of the pool, and rolls like a deranged coin back down into the pool to ride the vortex.

Like an orbit. Like a spaceship hurtling toward a black hole but always just missing. Like a voyager chasing a cat, never quite making contact. Like a dying traveler on the *Wurm Speaker* 's flight deck, trying to finish a sentence, never making it to the end before that killing wheeze catches up.

Like that glint of perfect future, always just out of reach, reaching, reaching, but it's gone—

Sami shakes their head sharply. Remember your hunches. The Metalman sent you to get something he couldn't get himself. But he *only* sent you, instead of a whole gang of his minions, because he wanted to limit his losses.

Maybe this thing puts a curse on you when you touch it. Maybe you only live twelve days. Maybe slivers grow inside you and jump out your ears.

But—whatever it does—the Metalman wants it. And if the Metalman gets what he wants, then Sami has a chance to fix their ship and keep going, keep flying, keep searching—

“Ah, Walls,” Sami says. “Ah, sheesh, Tan.” No, don't ask Tan, he hates to make choices, and anyway, he's outside. “Mirri. Mirri. Should I do it? Should I grab it?”

The voice in the pool says: *choosin' one* ...

A part of Sami says: you're never going to find Mirri. You're never going to keep the ship. And you know it. Nothing you do can get you any further from her. You have nothing to lose. So just do it. Reach down and *grab it* .



Art by: Darren Tan

Sami leans down. Reaches out.

The stone ricochets around the perimeter of the pool and races for Sami's hand like it's coming home. The voice in the noise is louder now, and it's not saying *chosen* or *chosen one* or *choosin' one* or even *chosen one* .

It says:

Choosing one—

“Captain,” Tannuk says. “Captain. Hey. Captain? Captain Sami? Captain, stay with me. Captain ...”

Sami whirls in shock.

Something terrible has happened. Tannuk’s armor is cracked and burnt. Huge spines of black glass protrude from his back. His work claws are split open, broken by some terrible effort.

Tannuk struggles forward toward Sami.

“You sure caught up quick,” Sami says. “What did you do? Get in a fight with a mining shed?”

Tannuk lifts his armored gauntlets. He’s carrying something in them. He raises it toward the pool, as if offering it.

Something speckled black and burnt. A disfigured, melted suit of risk armor, trailing buckles and straps and severed cables. A shattered visor. A stain of mold. A staring face—

Sami reels away. That can’t be. That can’t be. “Tan! Tan, what—”

Tannuk reaches for the thing in the pool.

“Hey!” Sami shouts. “Wait! Let me get it in the hotcell—”

They lunge. Trying to knock Tannuk’s gauntlet aside.

Their armored gauntlet smashes into the hotcell cask and breaks the caul plugging its throat. A gulp of fluid rushes into the cask, pulling the stone into its heart, hardening around it and dropping it like a big spitball right down into the cask.

Sami almost gets away clean.

But on the way in, the rock knocks against Sami’s gauntlet.

It isn’t really *touching*, is it? Touching armor that’s touching layers of suit that’s touching Sami’s skin? Why does *that* count as touching?

Maybe because the armor goes wherever Sami chooses to go. So, it counts as part of them.

Tannuk drops the mass in their arms into the inspection pool. Trying to keep it safe. After all, this is a perfect place to keep something safe.

It’s not me. It’s not me, Sami thinks. *It’s not me. It’s not me. It can’t be me.*

But the rock’s touch has knocked Sami off balance, and now they are falling, falling into the pool—falling exactly where that blasted armor has fallen—as if drawn to match—falling into *their own dead and staring eyes*—no! No! NO!

You will come to nothing.

Gasp!

Oh, Walls, it hurts to breathe. Gasp again! Oh, that sucks. Do it again!

Now you’re coughing and it hurts. Good job, fool. But you deserve it, don’t you? Do it again. Cough harder. Hurt harder. You fool.

This is how it often is when Sami wakes up.

This time they feel (touch before sight, like a Kav) that something is holding them down and they try to twist away. But it’s just Tan.

“Hey. Easy, Captain. Easy. You had a respiratory attack. You fell pretty hard. I think you might be allergic to the mold in your suit.”

The *Seriema*. Sami’s in their bunk on the *Seriema*. And that roar, that vibration—they’re under fusion thrust, they’re back in space!

“Tan, the warmakers! How did you get past the—are we going to be intercepted?”

Tan inhales slowly, sifting air through his poisons-taster sinus. “Did you dream about warmakers?”

“There were—there were four Hopelight warmakers, I remember, the palestar set them on everyone trying to escape—”

Tan tugs one of his dangling horn-hairs, a very literal Kav gesture for “hang on a moment.” He peers one-eyed at a diagnostic patch on Sami’s forehead. Sami tries to ask about the warmakers again, but Tan tugs sharply on his horn-hair, turns, and studies the diagnostic patch with his other eye.

“I don’t think there’s any brain damage,” he says. “I understand that’s very serious in humans.” Kav brains are a bit like livers, except instead of filtering toxins, they process physical trauma. “You seem to have avoided any new excesses of character.”

“Tan, the colony, the people. They were killing the people ...”

But it’s all going. It’s sliding like muck through Sami’s fingers, like shear starch down a drain. Oh, to have Tan’s stable attention stack! There was a colony, there were people, and they screamed, and they ran. The ground around them erupted in black flowers. This awful light came down and rastered over them like it was checking each of them for a barcode. Beads of glass bled from the soil. People fell or vanished. And they left burned shapes in the clay ...

No. None of that happened.

Sami pants in fear and runs hands through white, sweat-soaked hair. And cannot for the life of them remember why they were so afraid.

“We dodged a palestar on the way in,” Tan says. “A Solar Knight patrol. But they went off chasing ghosts. Remember?”

And Sigma’s Reach was empty. There was no one to be burned into the clay.

“Tan, what happened to me?”

“I found you in the QA cyst attached to one of the mining sheds. You found a weird rock. You put it in a cask. You had a respiratory attack after sprinting around inhaling mold. I carried you back to the ship. Then I had nothing to do but read about human brain injuries and get the ship preflighted. Since you weren’t around, I followed your plan and got us flying again. Best to do it before the palestar came back and saw us. You know the Solar Knights. Liable to run a few figures and decide that vaporizing us extends the Bright Sum.”

Yes. They would be liable to do that. The Solar Knights (and the whole Sunstar faith) compute their idea of goodness on scales so large that they tend to crush the small. If it’s mathematically likely that your presence might distract them from an enemy maneuver that reduces their chance of victory fractionally, thus jeopardizing, in ultima, the future of all stars in the cosmos—it becomes morally imperative to erase you, just for the crime of possibly distracting them.

Or so Sami understands it, anyway.

“Wait. Wait. Tan, the cask! What did you do with it?”

"I didn't do anything," Tan says. linebreak linebreak "You left it?" linebreak linebreak "No. I did what you wanted. You seemed like you wanted to take it with us. So, I had the mechans take the cask to the *Seriema* and load it up."

"It's here! It's on board?"

Tan shrugs elaborately, all the way from hair-horns to claw tips, as if to say, *Don't you dare blame me, it wasn't my choice*. "I thought it must be what the Metalman sent us to get. Wasn't it?"

"Yes! Maybe? I don't know. It was certainly the strangest thing there. And it was in the right spot, locked up in a cyst waiting for human retrieval. Are we safe? Is it—doing anything?"

These questions go on Tan's stack, and he gives the first one a proper think before replying. "Well, we're on a busted-up, broken-down torch about twelve years overdue for a rebuild. We've got two crew on a ship that flies with no less than six. Our flight plan's been rejected, so we could at any moment be hailed and arrested for unauthorized discharge of a fusion engine in a populated system. And we're burning by a war zone so vicious that even Pinnacle's staying clear. Which means we've got no one to so much as squawk a protest on our behalf if we get atomized by a passing Solar Knight, or taken by Monoists and thrown into Sothera to help it grow. So no, we aren't safe. Does the addition of a weird rock make a major difference to our safety? I'm not sure I'm qualified to assess that."

"Okay. Okay. Very fair. Where are we burning?"

Now Tan looks really worried about the state of Sami's head. "To the next place on our flight plan."

"Tan. Please just pretend I'm not quite in my right mind and tell me."

"We're going to Kavaron, of course. Where we told Pinnacle we were going. If we don't finish our flight plan, how will the Metalman meet us?"

"Okay. Okay. Kavaron. You're okay going back there?"

It is, after all, Tan's homeworld. And he is forbidden from ever going home.

"Well," Tan says, diffidently. "On Kavaron, we dig a lot. We dig up things long buried. So, we need ways—very reliable ways—of locking things up. Therefore, Pinnacle gifts us stasis casks."

"Tan, you're brilliant." It's the perfect place to stash a weird artifact. A stasis cask contains a loop in space-time, an orbit along which everything falls at an appallingly rapid pace. So rapid, and therefore so sludgy with time dilation, that, to the outside world, it seems frozen.

Like those black glass flowers around the processing sheds. Fulgurites, the viy claimed. Lightning strikes. That just happened to look like people.

"Tan, when I was looking for the cat—there wasn't a cat, was there?"

"Lots of things that sounded like a cat. No cat."

"I saw things. Like people had ... had burned up, and left their shadows behind. I thought ..."

A terrible thing had happened, and they could not remember it. They could only remember the fear, and the need to run deeper into the fear to save something. Like on the *Wurm Speaker*, where they were almost a hero, except that, unlike the real heroes, they survived.

But the source of the fear is obscured now, swallowed up in itself, like the sun Sothera swallowed by its own darkling core. A terrible thing dwells inside Sami, buried between heart and spine, like a sliver embryo ...

Tan turns his head to face Sami straight on. This is like looking away for a Kav: neither of his eyes can quite focus straight forward. But it is not the same as ignoring Sami, because even without sight, Tan's wide mouth and all the keen nostrils inside can still taste the air.

"I saw the same things," Tan says. "But I can't decide what they meant. It was all explainable by coincidence. A series of ... ghastly coincidences. People putting their hands together in the spilled water. What could that mean? Or was it just windblown gloves?"

"Crampton Severine," Sami says.

"If you insist." Tan's jaw churns, reaching out, huffing in air, bringing it back to Tan's poisons-taster sinus. "There is one strange thing."

"One *more* strange thing?"

"While you were out, I checked the local mallow registry. I wanted to know what kind of things we might be able to ask for on Kavaron. I noticed ... the gift value of moxite's been sliding. Steadily. For the past ten years."

"Where? On Kavaron?"

"Everywhere in Sothera."

"As if ... moxite were becoming more common?"

"Yes. Like someone opened a new moxite mine here. Maybe the mine at Sigma's Reach."

"But the mine never started exporting. Nobody showed up to work it. The mechans can't do it all themselves, Tan. There are rules." Mechans, left to their own devices, tend to optimize their work into absurdity.

"I agree. The registry agrees. The mine never opened, the moxite supply never grew. The value's just been sliding. You decide what it means." He reaches over Sami to adjust the medical sleeve. "You should rest. I'm going to clean out your armor. Too much mold."

"We're almost out of enzyme cleaner. Don't forget to dilute it down—"

"Enzyme cleaner? I was going to lick it all out."

"Tan!"

"I'm joking. All that tasty mold is ruined with human smell."

"Tan, that's disgusting."

"You think eating mold is disgusting. I think it's disgusting when you leak salty, hormone-rich coolant from your entire skin. Now we can both find your armor disgusting."

"All right, all right, point taken. Don't forget to—"

"I won't," Tan says, without even knowing what Sami will ask. "I never forget. We'll be clear in range of the Kavaron VORSPIN soon enough. I'll wake you then."

This act is finished. Everything is in motion.

You can follow Sami and Tan if you want. Jump straight ahead to their arrival on Kavaron.

But something else is happening that I want to show you. Something very important.

Don't worry. We'll get back to Sami and Tan and the *Seriema* and Mirri. Everything comes together in the end. Everything.

>*Let's see the next act.* (go to Episode 3)