

# Episode 6

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From set *Edge of Eternities*  
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### Revision 12 (Death and the Coach)

Sami flies the *Seriema* like death itself is riding in their hold.

“Taro-duend, this is IPVN *Seriema*, echo seven, babel five-nine-zero. Declaring an emergency. Please advise.”

The radio hisses. Stratospheric lightning tolls out static.

“Taro-duend,” Sami sends again. “This is IPVN *Seriema*. Echo seven, babel five-nine-zero. We are coming in fast. Declaring an emergency. Please advise.”

“*Seriema*, this is Taro-duend. No radar spoor. Storms. Who are you? What is your emergency?”

Sami tries not to shout. “Taro-duend, mayday, mayday, mayday! Twenty-four KMN aboard with lethal radiation trauma. Repeat, two-four Kav, dead hot. Request medical, whatever you’ve got.”

Taro-duend is a temporary settlement, a laager where miners stage before heading out into the dying world. They must receive wounded Kav. They must have a quick way to get them to a hospital on Kavaron Before.

When Alpharael’s Hopelight came down, it irradiated the entire Kav Memorial team with its fusion engine. The dosage was instantaneous. Their deaths were not. The Kav have three-dimensional burns—burned organs, burned bone—where penetrating radiation went through their armor and through them.

They had just enough strength left to stagger into the *Seriema*’s cargo bay and beg for rescue. Now, they’re all comatose, entombed in their armor, shot full of drugs.

Of course, Sami could’ve abandoned them. But Sami’s never been very good at that.

Static on the radio. Like the world’s thinking how much blood to spill.

The *Seriema* shoots the rapids between walls of ash-rich stormcloud. Sami keeps their hands busy. Fly first, talk second, think third. Wait, no. Think second. Talk third.

“*Seriema*. Confirm two-four casualties. Radiation.”

“Confirm.”

“You are first to land. Can you hover?”

“We need a wet pad.” The *Seriema*’s arc jets tend to melt whatever they land on, so it’s better to come down in water.

“You can land on the slag pit. We will pull you into a cave hangar. *Seriema*, identify?”

Sami winces. “Echo seven, babel five-nine-zero.”

“*KMNTRAC lists you. Untracked reentry earlier. Seriema, interrogative, did you fire your fusion drive?*”

“Negative, Taro-duend, negative. It wasn’t us. A Free Company ship came down behind us. KMNTRAC will have it.” Probably.

“*Seriema, prepare to receive marshals for telemetry check, okay? Don’t touch your computers.*”

Sami swears like they shouldn’t, a really rude Kav word. They look around guiltily for Tan. But Tan is tending to the dying Kav.

“Okay, Taro-duend.”

Technically they haven’t done anything wrong. They came down, landed, found some sick Kav, put them in the hold, and ferried them to safety.

Only they’re carrying a stolen rock from Sigma and a Monoist whose ship poisoned these Kav. And when Sami put the bleeding Monoist in the stasis cask with the rock, the Monoist had a fit. He passed out, and there’s no moldy armor to blame this time.

The rock did something to him.

Now, the rock is in stasis, and Alpharael is locked up in one of the empty cabins with a medical sleeve on him. A medical sleeve on his right hand.

And when Sami put that sleeve on Alpharael, they discovered a mystery: a perfect hole in his right palm.

*None* of this will survive a close inspection.

“*Cleared for descent. Zero your vector over the slag fields. Hold for final. Hang on, Seriema.*”

Think fast, Sami. You need a scam.

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Taro-duend is a burst of color on the basalt and glass of Kavaron That Is. It looks like a Kav stomped on a fruit basket and shit on the splattered seeds and left them to grow. Kavshit is pretty nutritious. You get a lot out of it in recycling systems.

Sami plays the telescope over the town. Inflatable barracks cluster around dirigible-hauled smelting rigs. Open markets get Sami’s stomach growling. There are healthy Kav in Taro-duend, hacking off cuts of barbequed meat with swords, and Kav beside them haggling over salvage, and all around them the quick slap-and-kiss trade of that game called *money*. Like some species between the Walls, the Kav do not use Pinnacle’s potlatch economics—not here, at least.

Sami understands this place. A place to stockpile supplies and sell your finds. It must be under the coverage of the Guns, or a falling mountain could wipe it all out. But not too far under the coverage—not too close to the law.

Yeah. Sami gets Taro-duend’s scam.

If it has a legal government, it will be an emergency government, concerned with managing casualties and keeping the right kind of criminals in control. There will be a coach and a postilion, the two archetypical positions of authority in the contrimperial Teamer culture that survived the Break. The coach drives the team, and the postilion navigates.

Probably they are no friends of the Memorial Navy. But they'll like explaining a bunch of *dead* KMN even worse. So they'll help.

But if there's heat, if word comes to detain the *Seriema*— what will they do?

Sami could dump the sick KMN soldiers and fly away to the Metalman. They're so close.

But not close enough. The *Seriema* can't make another interplanetary boost without more water and fusion fuel. There's plenty of power left in the fission reactor, enough to run the arcjets, but arcjets won't see them all the way to the Metalman.

They need to refuel.

They hit the intercom. "Tan. You ready to do this?"

"Yes. "

"If they ask?"

"*My name's Gorodoro, and I'm very foolish. I don't think too good. Had a stroke.* "

"If they press us for identification?"

"*Our flight plan is on file with Pinnacle. Contact Infinite Guideline.* "

"If they do figure out who you are?"

Tan doesn't like this part of the plan and grumbles loudly before replying. "*We offer them a very large present.* " It offends Tan to think that a bribe could possibly get the local Kav to ignore him, as if it's somehow belittling his exile.

Sami chews their lip. "Tan, should we turn Alpharael over to them?"

"*Why?* "

"He's guilty of wake crime. He fired his fusion engine on descent. He killed—he may yet kill all those soldiers. That's evil, isn't it?"

"*It was a disaster. Unpreventable death falling out the sky. Kav live in disaster, Captain. The thing about disasters is ...* " Tannuk has to pause to collect to himself. "*Disasters are fair. Disasters are random. A thousand years ago, a stampede was a disaster. Now, building a corral to divert the stampede onto your neighbor, that's evil. A ship coming out of the sky and cooking you? Is that a disaster, or is that evil?* "

"I would call it evil!"

"*No. It's a disaster. Caused by neglect. You fix it with better procedures, better training, better warning. Things fall out of the sky and kill you on Kavaron. Some idiot might be responsible, they might've neglected the safe way to do things, but that idiot didn't mean to kill you. They just caused a disaster, and the disaster claimed you. You can't avenge a disaster. You can't punish a disaster. You can only try to stop it or save people from it. It's when you try to steer the disaster that you cross into wrongdoing. Because then you're violating its fairness.* "

"See, as a ship captain, I'd decide"—as the *Wurm Speaker* 's captain must have decided—"to triage the situation. Close the ruptured compartments, cut off air to the fires. Lose a few to save the rest."

"*A disaster culture will risk a hundred people to save ten. Every time. Never give up on anyone, so everyone knows they have a chance. To live with disaster, you have to believe that it is random and uncaring and uncalculated and fair. And that we're all united against it. Or you'll go mad. The way humans do when they start seeing plans in everything.* "

At this point, of course, they're not talking about Alpharael's crimes anymore. They're talking about Tannuk.

Tan was a Kavaron Memorial Navy command pilot. He had the role of lead KMN daunt (you can say commandant) during a precipitous, unforeseen Ring strike. He was the spaceborne observer and controller of the Guns.

And as lead daunt, he made a choice. The last choice he has ever willingly made.



Art by: Viko Menezes

He commanded the Guns of Kavaron to fire on a bolide headed for the city of Summotank, where four million Kav dwell on the drainage lake of great shattersprings.

He could've accelerated the bolide, moving its strike point further along its ground track. But then it might have airburst over Summotank.

So he braked the bolide instead. It fell sooner, closer, onto the mountain villages in the Rushdown range. One with a total population of less than thirty thousand.

Five thousand survived the strike.

The abomination of this choice is deeply tied into Kav ethics and yet very simple to explain.

A natural disaster was about to kill four million Kav. They had their chances to prepare. They had the chance that disaster and providence had given them.

Tannuk killed twenty-five thousand Kav. Tannuk meddled with their fair chance.

He did not trade four million lives for twenty-five thousand. You cannot trade lives. He engineered a disaster. He preferred the death of some to the deaths of others, and that is an old and despicable corruption to the Kav. When the people in charge of managing disaster start to have preferences—even a preference for thirty thousand over four million—terrible things follow.

There is no ambiguity here for the Kav. There is no tradeoff or gray area. Tannuk put his hands on the traces of fate. The cards were dealt, the quiyos were thrown, and Tannuk leapt in to rearrange their fall.

Tannuk is a murderer. Not just a murderer, but a murderer by engineered misfortune.

Tannuk is a traitor to the solidarity of all Kav against all disaster.

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The airport can't take the *Seriema*, it's built for light spaceplanes. Taro-duend's control tower talks Sami down in a shallow pool of water that was probably once a smelter's exhaust field. The moment that Sami cuts thrust, someone opens the sluicgate and drains the slag pool. Kav rovers and rigs burst out of the access road and dash for the *Seriema*, throwing up spray and blasting their sirens. Sami makes a silent little cheer. Even here, on the edge of this world's disintegration, they've got ambulances. A disaster culture.

Along with the emergency medical services (which in Teamer tradition is called Trample) come the coach, the coach's mother, rival salvagers curious about this newcomer on their territory, several juveniles curious to see a spaceship, the emergency engineers (who plan to drag the *Seriema* into a cave lined with radiation-blocking panels, as if the ship itself is radioactive), the political postilion with a small staff (handheld) and a small staff (accompanying), and motley others.

Tan has stripped the comatose KMN out of their armor, and they wait, wrapped in emergency blankets, drooling thick mucus as their throat linings die.

The Trample ambulances take them away.

A crowd of Kav stares up at Sami. The coach, his mother, and the postilion come forward. The coach wields an enormous staff that looks as if it could be used as a radio antenna.

The coach looks at Sami, first with one eye then the other, and enunciates, very carefully, almost phonetically: "I'm going to tell the truth."

"I'm going to tell the truth," Sami says.

The coach listens to something, probably a translator viy. "The truth is I came down to Kavaron ..."

Oh. Sami gets it. "The truth is I came down to Kavaron to get a stasis cask. I found these soldiers in distress. So, I flew them straight here."

"So, I flew them straight here instead of leaving them to die ..."

The coach has been told, on the ride over here, that Sami is a human, and that humans are obligate mimics. Speak to them, and they're compelled to reply with the same words.

"So, I flew them straight here instead of leaving them to die because I'm not a dung chip," Sami says. "And now I need to fuel up and get out of here. I'm leaving Kavaron with my stasis cask and going away. Forever."

"But first I'm going to provide proof ..."

"But first I'm going to provide proof that I wasn't involved in their deaths. My engine telemetry. You'll see it hasn't fired since I decelerated for reentry."

There is a brief conference with the coach's mother. A juvenile peeks out at Sami and makes a threatening display. Sami bares their teeth and growls. The juvenile yips and withdraws. There is some

mirth. The juvenile's minder gives her a fond cuff, hurling her down the ramp where she displays excellent tumbling skills. Ah, Kav! They don't harden up properly unless they're tossed around.

The coach comes back at Sami with a big Kav grin, which looks like a toothsome yawn. "If I really did save those soldiers, I'm a pretty good sort. I'd be welcome to stay a day or two and trade. Maybe tell some stories to my juveniles. Maybe run them over with a truck, so they can say a human hardened them up."

Sami can't help grinning back. "I am a pretty good sort! I'd love to stay in your home and hit your kids with a truck. But I have to refuel and fly as soon as I can."

"Damn!" the coach says.

"Damn!" Sami agrees.

The political postilion, identifiable by a staff a lot smaller but a lot less homemade than the coach's, is speaking to Tannuk in imperial Kavar. "You took their armor off?"

"Thought it best. For ambulance help."

"You wanted to keep the armor? Sell it?"

"It's full of their filth."

"No attempt to identify them?"

"They were sick. I gave them water and comfort. Did I do something wrong?"

"How long have you been in space, child?"

"Can't remember."

"Kav are tough, child. We need to be the toughest up there in space. We need to prove it's our new home. This home is gone, you understand? It won't last."

"Oh, yes," Tannuk says. "No home here. I understand."

"Good lad. But you're not very quick. Not a resilient thinker. Did space ... make you this way?"

"Oh, no," Tannuk says. "Mining accident. No air. Had to breathe liquid. Got stuck in me, though. Made clots. Had a few strokes."

"Ah ... strokes." A relatable injury for the Kav. Kav blood likes to clot quick and hard. "I see. I see. It's good you can help around the ship. You're a good first mate?"

"The best," Tannuk says.

"And this mining accident, where did it happen?"

"Sigma's Reach," Tannuk says. Which is a very odd lie. Because there were never any miners on Sigma's Reach.

Only—

The political postilion doesn't take it as a lie. He just nods.

"Yes, yes, Sigma's Reach. They'd want Kav labor, wouldn't they? They've been undercutting our moxite with all their fancy mechans. But in the end, if you want to carve treasure out of precious ground, *you always need Kav*. (go to Revision 12 (The Postilion))"

## Revision 12 (The Postilion)

It's so weird that Sami just can't let it go. "He thought Sigma's Reach had people in it. He thought Sigma was *exporting*. Undercutting the gift value of Kav minerals!"

"That's what I saw on the mallow registries," Tan confirms. They're huddled in the corridor outside Alpharael's locked cabin. He is still in a trance, or comatose, or dying. Touching the weird rock did something to him. "Ten years of falling mallow."

"But we were *there*, Tan. That mine never opened. Nobody ever worked that ground. So why would the gift value fall?"

Tannuk works his jaw. "Sothera is a star with a curse on it, Captain. Ghostly things are always happening, and I don't know why. But I know we need to refuel before we can fly."

"Yeah. Yeah. I'll go ask for fuel."

"You might have to buy it, with money."

"Oh, shit."

"You could claim my bounty. That's probably worth money."

"Tan!" Sami kicks him. "That's not funny. What's up with you?"

Tan grunts. Sami figures he is probably feeling complex feelings about coming home to Kavaron. They would say, "Tan, you really didn't do anything wrong," but they've had that conversation so many times before, and it never works. By Kav, standards he did wrong.

He took the wheel of a truck headed for four million people, and he steered it into a mere twenty-five thousand people. It wasn't their turn to get hit, and Tan *made it* their turn.

"If you want to go check out the mystery of Sigma's Reach," Tan says, "I should be the one to get fuel for the *Seriema*."

Oh, Sami wishes they weren't thinking the same thing. "Tan, if you're recognized—"

"There are two things we need to do before we can fly, Captain. You do one. I do the other. Then we *go*."

"There's only one thing we need to do. The other thing is a sop to my curiosity."

"Are you willing to let your curiosity go unsatisfied?"

"No," Sami says, doing Tannuk the courtesy of directness. There's just no way they can't investigate. Weird things keep happening around this damn rock, and if they don't figure out what it is before they gift it to the Metalman, they will regret it for the rest of time. "No, I'm not."

"Then make a choice, Captain."

So, Tan goes out to buy fuel and reaction mass for the *Seriema*.

And Sami, mouse-small in the crowds of Kav, goes to find the political postilion and ask him what he knows about Sigma's Reach.

Taro-duend's a working town—cordwainers and armorers, lung rinsers and herdcarees, gardens, slack shops, garages, smokehouses with entire truck-size carcasses rotating over pools of bubbling tar. It smells like hot grease and thunder, which is the smell of fresh ozone from the airport lasers. You don't walk on the ground. You use narrow walkways on wobbly pilings to soak up quake tremors. Wrack pilots project their tense-ten highlight reels on walls of smoke, waiting for a crew to approach and say "We could use a pilot like you. We're headed out to look for fortune."

Sami, determined to stay focused, gets euphoric off the sheer pace of life and starts singing. Why not? And Kav settlements have a rhythm, no, that's not some daft human cliché, comparing things to music because you don't have a better word for "it tugs at my associations." Kav settlements have an actual rhythm. Kav footsteps always fall into sync, all across the crowd. This evolved millions of years ago, Sami supposes, so that any threatening noise will disrupt the beat. Walk with rhythm so you can detect the worm.

Of course, Sami's legs aren't the right length to step to the rhythm. But they sing along anyway, an old dadeumi song, from the laundry on the *Wurm Speaker*.

This is not the right way to avoid attention. But there is no way to avoid attention anyway, if you are a fey little alien.

"Captain Sami," they tell the bored Kav on the political postilion's porch. "I'd like to make an inquiry with the postilion."

"Your Kavar is admirable," the Kav says. "The postilion can see you in ... perhaps two hours?"

"On my mother's milk, you are the head of a conspiracy against me," Sami cries. "In two hours, my business will be dead in a hole with you to blame."

Bristling, the Kav rears up and snorts: "I am not the creditor of all your debts, small one!"

This goes on for a while until finally Sami secures a meeting in half an hour. The delay is necessary so that Sami can be seen waiting to meet the postilion, which will make the postilion look important. An alien, kept waiting!

Finally, the doorwoman unrolls a thick brambly carpet for Sami to proceed into the office. The postilion stamps out a greeting with his staff. "Captain Sami of the *Seriema* ! Where is your addled man? Gorodoro?"

"Out buying fuel."

"You trust him with such a task?"

"I trust him with my life," Sami says, wishing they had a staff to rattle. "And I trust also that my engine telemetry has satisfied you?"

"Sent to Kavaron Before for inspection. The matter of your guilt or innocence"—the postilion wobbles his staff back and forth—"is not mine to decide. Though I think you won't wait to hear the verdict, will you?"

"No, sir. My departure window is closing, and I must fly. If you think I am guilty of wake crime, give my ship's name to Pinnacle and they will find me."

"Of course, of course. Do humans take silt?"

"Alas, we lack the gizzard for it. Is there word, please, of the Kav we rescued?"

"Also sent to Kavaron Before for treatment. Though I understand their prospects are poor." The postilion looks Sami over with interest. "Are you a liar, Captain Sami?"

"Habitually," Sami says. "Is there a particular lie you're interested in?"

"You let the coach treat you like a dumb automaton. Feeding you questions to answer. Mimic forcing! I have been educated, Captain. I know mimic forcing will not work on a human. You wanted him to think you're a simple little creature. Why did you want that?"



It strikes Sami that they are the guest actor in a particularly exciting episode of Taro-duend's day-to-day life: "The Human," an episode in which a human claims to have rescued a team of Kav from radiation death—but can our hero (the incorruptible postilion exiled to this scrappy salvage town) extract the truth?

"I need to fly," they say, choosing the smallest part of honesty. "As I said, my departure window's closing."

"Departure window? On a fusion-powered ship? I daresay you can go where you please when you please."

"Don't question me on my flight plans, sir! I came here to ask after the people I saved. And to ask you for information. I want to know what you know about Sigma's Reach."

"Where you came from."

Now that must be a bold guess! "Did I?"

"When I was in your hold, unloading our wounded, I saw the hotcell cask. It had a destination stamp, Sigma's Reach. How are our rivals up there in the heavens doing?"

Yes, he *is* sharp. "Your rivals?"

The postilion protrudes his lower jaw and pours a stream of hot silt into it. Steam comes out of his nostrils. "Should I say our enemies? We doomed our world, Captain Sami, trying to get the riches out of it. And when doom was certain, we realized the only way to save ourselves, to send our children to the stars, was to triple down, to mine *through* the doom. Now some consortium from beyond the stars thinks they can get more out of this dwarf planet, this—sterile gonad! It's an insult to every Kav. And to me, personally!"

"You, personally?"



Art by: Alexandr Leskinen

"Yes! I was long on moxite futures! Do you have futures up there in space?"

"I understand the concept." Pinnacle economics does include futures in the form of promises, though speculation on the value of vitals like food and fuel is despicable. "You gambled that the value of moxite would keep going up?"

"And instead it plummeted! Undercut by cheap, clean moxite from Sigma's Reach! I had"—he stamps his staff—"to seek relief from ... less respectable elements of our planetary economy. So here I am, among the less respectable elements. Instead of back in Vu with herd and hearth!"

Sami feels dizzy. They want to sit down. "You're *sure* of this? That moxite came out of Sigma's Reach?"

"As sure as fever."

"Have you spoken to anyone from Sigma's Reach?"

"I'd sooner choke."

"So, you don't *know* —"

"Know what? What do I need to know except that the price fell?"

"Sigma's Reach never opened."

The postilion wobbles in surprise. "I beg your pardon?"

"The miners never arrived. The mine never opened. There has never been any production from Sigma's Reach."

"But that can't be. The price of moxite ... you were just there! I saw it, that hotcell in your hold!"

"So, I can promise you, watchful postilion, that Sigma's Reach is empty. Just machines and dust." And the sound of a cat crying and a stone rattling against the walls of a pool. "This has been a very interesting conversation."

"Yes, it has! But we're not done! How could my investment have been ruined by a mine that *never opened*? Tell me, space fairy! Tell me!"

"I wish I could. I have only one more question for you, sir."

The postilion leans heavily on his staff. "What is it?"

Sami produces a picture of Mirri. "Have you seen this—"

The doorwoman bursts in. "Postilion! Postilion! Word on the wire!"

Oh, no. They've caught Tan.

"What is it?"

"Another ship coming in, sir. It's the Sunstar Free Company. They're demanding we turn over the escaped spies we're harboring."

Both Kav look directly at Sami.

"I'm not a spy," Sami says. "I'm just—"

"Tell me nothing! The day I turn over a fugitive from Taro-duend to any authority," the postilion roars, "is the day Taro-duend falls into a crack in the world. This is a harbor for scum! Go raise the coach on the phone. *It's time we obstruct justice* (go to Episode 7)."