

# Episode 9

## Seth Dickinson

From set *Edge of Eternities*  
03. 07. 2025

*NOTICE: PDF contains clickable links (starting with > symbol) to jump between options.*

### Act Four

#### Revision 14 (The Metalman Cometh)

Haliya sits against a wall and, using the vibrations of motion conducted through the ship into her back and thighs, watches the others on the phonon render.

She has taken a tactical position that protects her from any attempt to disarm her. Her goal is to prevent Alpharael from taking the ship or using the object.

Alpharael flits about like a manic insect, an ephemeron imaginal, something that was supposed to live a day and die. He washes, sings, stares into the hole in his hand, and talks to someone who isn't there. He drinks a lot of black licorice alcohol, and then it runs out.

Captain Sami and Tannuk try to repair the fusion drive, but it is obviously hopeless. To their credit, they seem very practiced at attempting the hopeless.

The ship gets hotter and hotter. The radiators are pulled in for stealth. Water condenses on the outside of her armor. Her flehmen says the air smells like mold.

The *Sundog* doesn't catch them.

Her long-term objective is to reach Vondam and report her choice. Then she will find out if she chose well and Vondam chose wrongly, or if she is in error and he was somehow right to murder all those Kav and spare her life.

But until then, what can she do? She could go destroy the rock. But that would violate mallowmass. And if mallowmass breaks, she has no reason not to kill Alpharael and everyone else in her way.

And she is sick to her tonsils of killing. Filthy in her liver and her kidneys with what she saw at Taro-duend.

She wants to wash, but she knows it will not help.

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Eventually, the Summist calls Alpharael to meet with her.

She's still wearing her armor. Maybe she's afraid that if she takes it off, Captain Sami will flood her compartment with nitrogen. It's what Alpharael would do, but it would also be a serious violation of mallowmass. Mallowmass obliges you to shelter and defend your guest; it is the guest's decision whether to yield their weapons.

The hatch is unlocked. When Alpharael comes in, her eyes take a moment to track him.

But he can see her eyes. She's turned her helmet transparent.

She's a scrubby little creature, with tight springy hair caught up under a cap. There's sweat trapped between her cheekbones and the helmet. Her ears look dry enough to crack. Her eyebrows look half-grown. He is annoyed by her face; it looks distant and self-interested. But then again, Raphaella always looked pinched and sour, and she wasn't. Not even a little.

"We must reach an accord," she says. "A détente that will relieve us of the need to kill each other."

He nods cautiously: "We've been doing all right so far." Her locked up in a cabin, him with the run of the ship.

"It won't last. I've been working the Sum."

Her armor's lidar blazes math onto the Wall. She has picked a very ornate font, and Alpharael resists the urge to criticize it.

"Don't you know any other way to make decisions?" he asks.

"I know lots of ways to make bad decisions. The Sum is supposed to give you a set of boundaries for good decisions, like a light in the distance to steer toward. Only the Sum says that I was supposed to kill everyone on this ship, including myself. But I didn't. Why didn't I?"

This is his chance. He's going to convert her to Monoism. Only he's a failed Monoist. He fled from the door to paradise. How can he convert her to the belief that he deserves to live? He doesn't even know how he converted himself.

"Why didn't I take sekhar?" he asks. He really means it. "I'm still not sure I understand."

"Because you're a coward. Am I a coward?"

"In Monoism"—oh, here he goes, preaching like a hypocrite—"we say, 'Do what comes to you.' The fact that it came to you makes it right."

"You can't just do whatever you want. People are selfish. People won't help each other. Mallowmass may come naturally to the Drix, but for us humans? It's effort. And it's the first thing we give up when we're pushed. Anyone who's been anywhere hard knows that."

"No. We don't believe that. People naturally want to protect and to give. Taking, taxing, building armies, appointing rulers—all that comes later, after a mistake. We won't make that mistake in the Next Eternity."

"Because *this* world is just too terrible to save. You've given up on making a better cosmos. You think you'll throw everything down a hole and it'll land right and you'll hop down after it and flop into paradise."

"We're repeating the arguments that we've heard others argue, aren't we?"

"Yes," she says, smiling just a little. One of her top front teeth is slanted, like she chewed a piece of it away. "It's what comes to me. Doesn't that make it right?"

"What feels right about this," he says, feeling clever, "is that I'm trying to understand why I chose to live. And you're trying to understand why you weren't killed. What if I told you that sending people to die is wrong? That you *shouldn't* be chosen to end your life? By anyone?"

"Did this revelation come to you at the moment you were supposed to end your own existence in HIS name?"

"It came to me when they sent my sister into Sothera and I dreamed she was burning forever on the edge of hell."

"If a dream could change your faith, it must've been fickle."

"If thousands of Kav burning to death can't change your faith it must be terrible."

She makes her helmet opaque again.

He sits there, staring at her, fiddling with the hole in his hand. He thinks he may have made her very angry.

"I need to understand the relationship between you and the object," she says, tonelessly. "You have a hole in your hand. Is there anything else you can do?"

"If the stone works the way we all think it does, would I even know I was doing it?"

"You would," she says. "You'd know it, because things would keep turning out the way you wanted. Is this what you want? To be on a spaceship adrift in the void, waiting for something to happen?"

"It's a nice break."

"So, it's what you wanted. It's the easiest way out for you. No choices, no power. Just ... waiting passively for things to get better. In the next life, I suppose?"

He gives her a sour look, which he learned from his sister. "If the stone always gave me the easy way out, you'd be dead. I wouldn't need a stone for it. I could've shoved a knife into your eye when you were paralyzed."

"No. Because Syr Vondam would've shot this ship down. You needed me alive and talking. So maybe the only reason you don't put a knife in my eye is that the object needed me to escape Vondam."

Damn. She's right.

"Would it be so bad if the object escapes? What are you so afraid of?"

"That you'll bring the object into Sothera. Syr Vondam says that would let you change everything. The whole cosmos. I may have fallen from the Sum's path, but I can't let that happen."

"I am not going into Sothera! Is that what my people would do if they had the stone? Throw me down there with it?" He wants to rear up in anger, but flexing his calves just sets him adrift, spinning. He waves his arms: "Look at me! Listen! I am terrified of the Plummet! I am not going down there!"

"So, you're an apostate," she says happily. "That's good. I can take on your case."

"What? My case?"

"When I go back to Vondam and the Free Company and make my report, I can argue that you abandoned Monoism and Captain Slats was therefore correct to grant you mercy. I'll beg your pardon, and that means I have no duty to kill you."

*Is that what all this was about?* he thinks.

Haliya takes her helmet off, moving so sharply that Alpharael flinches away. "It's not really mine anymore," she says, staring at the blank sallet. She has removed the twitching pendulum. "It's the Free Company's armor. I betrayed the right to use it. Except maybe it wasn't my choice. Maybe an evil rock under the thrall of a black hole at the end of time made me do it. Is that what I'm doing? Compromising with evil to make my own life easier, and thus accepting evil into me?"

"I know what a rahu would tell you," Alpharael says.

“What would your evil preachers tell me?”

“That you’re going to have to figure that out yourself.” He has managed to anchor himself on the ceiling. “I got you a present, by the way. Found it in the captain’s old stores.”

She catches the bottle he throws. “Six-in-one personal cleaning solute. Nearly ten years old. Do I stink?”

“No,” he says, although she does look a little stinky. “I just thought, if you were going to stay in the armor, you might be all greasy in there. So you could pour a little in and ... I don’t know. Wiggle around in it.”

“Pour a little through my armor?” She pinches a drop of solute into a pouch of water and squeezes it to mix it up. “How would I do that?”

He holds up his right hand. “I have a hole.”

She laughs at this. Her armor splits open like a crab molting—parts of it that seem solid just unzip. She’s watching him carefully. He watches her back, curious what she looks like in the general way people are usually curious about each other.

But she pauses: “You’re making me wary.”

“I am? We’ve fought for our lives. You’ve cut *me* out of combat armor. You’ve nearly crushed my throat. Do you think I’m waiting for you to take your armor off to kill you?”

“No,” she says, “I just don’t want you to watch.”

There are all kinds of different mores, and she does not owe him an explanation, but isn’t she a Summist? A depersonalized warrior, stripped of ornament and glamour? He thought they all steamed themselves like broccoli in giant saunas. She probably thinks he pickles himself in a communal salt bath when he sleeps—some folks do that, they like drifting in the same pool, Alpharael always felt a little childish for keeping his own.

She says: “Where I come from—where I *came* from—people preyed on each other. It was winter forever. If they caught you bathing, you’d be vulnerable, you wouldn’t be able to run, you’d die of cold. I don’t like undressing with strangers. It makes me think they’re waiting to steal, or kill me to eat.”

“Oh!” This is like something out of old tales! When a gaze could imply a threat, when privacy was based on fear instead of preference. “That’s terrible. I won’t kill you when you take off your armor. I’ll go.”

She cocks her head. “Is it that easy for you? You certainly won’t kill me? Even if it’s the right thing to do?”

“In the Next Eternity, we won’t need to kill each other,” he says. “It’ll never be the right thing to do.”

“Yet you didn’t hesitate to kill Vondam in this eternity.”

“Of course. I have to hasten the extinction of the stars and the coming of eternal night.”

She squints at him, her head cocked. “I can’t beg your pardon if you still believe that.”

“Maybe you should pardon me yourself, instead of waiting for permission.”  
linebreak

The intercom chimes. “*Hey. You two. The Metalman’s here. Come out and present yourselves, or he’ll present you. And by the way, please don’t call him Metalman. Or tell him I call him Metalman. He prefers the name Tezzeret.*”

The airlock opens.



Art by: Chris Rahn

There is no preamble. No herald. No subaltern or drone sent ahead to check for danger. Since the first day he drew Sami into his orbit, the defining trait of the Metalman has been violence. Violence of body. Violence of thought. Violence of action.

Even his ship appeared violently. Impossibly cold and dark, it grappled onto the *Seriema* from nowhere: a black urchin without engines or radiators. It has no way to move and yet it does because the Metalman wills it.

And now he is here.

He pushes into the *Seriema* with the calm of a prybar. There is nothing hasty about him. He crackles with pent-up potential, with ungrounded charge. The air smells of ozone and bitter oil. He is like the clouds on Uthros, pregnant with lightning. Sami has seen the black carapace of his body open.

His head is human, though strange. Strands of white hair drift in zero gravity. His neck vanishes into an armature of ciphered, dark metal, immune to any inspection. He is shaped like a man but would be insulted by the equation, “Tezzeret is a man.” He would laugh at how it lessened him.

He looks at Haliya first.

“You wear a wealth of metal,” he says. “What did you do to earn it?”

Haliya is in her armor again. She looks nonplussed. “I just survived, I suppose.”

Tezzeret beams. “A fine answer.”

Sami swallows. Tezzeret’s interviews with new minions are always volatile.

“You.” The Metalman’s attention turns to Alpharael. “Aether worshipper. Is it true?”

Alpharael nods, as if he knows precisely what Tezzeret means. “All of it.”

“And you fled from it? Walked away from your school, your creed, your teachers?”

“Well,” Alpharael says, “I wanted to live a little longer.”

“Good!”

Uh-oh. The Metalman is delighted.

“Tannuk,” Tezzeret breathes. “There you are ...”

He approaches Tannuk, who flinches. The Metalman makes an impatient, stilling gesture and studies the Kav from a rude distance. “So far from Llanowar ... such power in the form. No wonder it recurs.” He sniffs. “You made something of yourself. But you’re afraid of it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tannuk growls. His own sinuses are closed, his breath hissing between his jaws.

“You’ve blinded yourself,” the Metalman says. He turns to Sami. “And you—”

“And me,” Sami says. “Here I am.”

“Here’s Sami!” the Metalman cries. His body moves freely in zero gravity, like a Monoist curvefalling, like a Sunstar knight on jets. He drifts above Sami’s head like a black cloud. “Sami, the generous. Sami, the charitable. Sami, the protector of strays. So weak on principle. Yet you survived. You brought me my prize?”

“You didn’t warn us what it could do.”

“And what can it do?”

“Change the past to suit its purposes. That mine you activated on Sigma? It used to have people in it. They’re all gone now.”

“They are alive,” Tezzeret says, “if Mm’menon is correct. Just elsewhere. Living different lives.”

“A different life denies them their life,” Haliya says, urgently. “They’ve been changed. Years of memories stripped away and replaced with—what? A counterfeit? A fabrication? It’s anstruth. It’s not right. The object is dangerous.”

Tezzeret laughs uproariously. “Listen to her! Counterfeit memories, an atrocity. Years spent differently, a *crime*. What have they lost? What have they sacrificed? Nothing. This world is so soft, Sami. There is such excess out here that your churches go to war over what will happen in a hundred trillion years.”

The metal claws of his hands snap shut. He grins. “I *like* it here.”

“Well,” Sami says, “I hope you’ll enjoy your stay aboard the *Seriema*.”  
linebreak

“Your ship could be better. Once I have the freedom of my full power, once I know who’s watching, I’ll reward you, Sami, with a ship like no ship ever made.”

His eyes go distant. The ship itself seems to throb—as if it has been flicked with a gigantic thumb. “You’re keeping it in your hold. I’ll see it now.”

“Yes, my lord,” Sami says, testing out the phrase for irony.

Tezzeret does not seem to detect any irony whatsoever. But he pauses in his drift toward the companionway.

“Alpharael,” he says mildly, “when your people take the Plummet, the forces you feel as you plunge into the supervoid, these are called tides?”

“Uh, yes.” Alpharael scratches his right wrist. “Gravitational tides.”

“And the void, it has another world inside it?”

“The Next Eternity.”

“So it’s hollow,” Tezzeret says. “A tidal hollow. The further you go ...”

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“I can’t let you take the object,” Haliya says. “When I let it escape the Free Company, I took responsibility for it. If you’re going to give it to the Monoists, or bring it into Sothera, I must stop you.”

The stasis cask shines silver in the center of the *Seriema*’s hold. Tezzeret’s reflection stalks across it, staring.

“You’ll let the Endstone go wherever I want it to go,” he says. “But you can save your pointless death until I know where *it* wants to go. I have arranged all this so it will choose me as its conduit.”

“Wait,” Alpharael protests. “It called *me* the chosen one.”

“Choosing one,” Sami says. “Yeah. I heard that, too, the first time I touched it.”

Alpharael looks wounded. “Did you get a hole, too?”

“No,” Sami says, “I did not get a hole.”

“The same mistake the Dominarians made with the Mirari: mistaking the power it granted for the purpose it sought.” Tezzeret strokes the surface of the stasis field. So much like metal. Space and time made crystal. “Yes. It needs a chooser. But the one who chooses pays the price. I am not interested in paying for the Endstone. I am interested in *selling* it.”

Sami shuffles sideways until they can see their reflection next to Tezzeret. “Endstone, sir?”

“It’s what your people call it. Isn’t it, boy? The stone from the end.”

Alpharael stands at ease, hands clasped, chin lifted. He looks as if he is at school. Perhaps dark figures of unclear power often quiz him on eschatology.

“Which is why you cannot take it,” Haliya tells the wizard. “It’s a trap. Whatever anyone does with it will hasten the end of all life.”

“And the beginning of a better world!” Alpharael protests.

Tezzeret sneers coldly. He looks as if he has practiced his sneer. “A better world? Is your world so terrible? You have no idea how much worse things could be. I have the power to walk between realities and still could not escape the tyrants who’d rule me. I’ve been branded by masters who made and devoured entire species like cattle. I won’t flee to a better world. I’ll stand and face whoever would rule me. Never again will I serve. Thus, the Endstone has come to me—as it desired, and as I required.” He spiders his metal hands against the stasis fields. “Because I want nothing from it.”

The four others trade glances.

“Er,” Sami says, “if you want nothing from it, why did you send us to get it?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Captain Sami. So I could sell it.”

He turns from his own reflection. “Do you think it came up out of Sigma by accident? It was made and then buried. Not by its maker’s will, I think. And now it is unburied, and it wants to return to its maker. So, I will follow it back to its beginning. I must know who made it. The strong take from the weak. I will know who’s strongest here. I will know who’d rule me.”

“My lord,” Sami says, with a little less irony, “I don’t understand.”

He touches a grounding socket on the cargo bay deck. Charge snaps from his outstretched claw. “Lightning takes the shortest path to ground. I have made myself the shortest path for the Endstone to reach its maker. So, it leaps to me. Like lightning. Knowing I will conduct it forward, to where it wants to go.”

“I thought I was the one it wanted,” Alpharael says a bit sulkily.

“You are the library it needs, but not its maker. You hear me, stone? I want to meet your maker.” He beckons toward Sami. “Turn this construct off. I will speak with it, learn where it wants to go.”

“Everyone who’s touched it for the first time has—gone a little odd,” Sami cautions. “I passed out. Alpharael, uh, hovered. If you touch it, I don’t know—”

“I want to *speak* with it, Captain Sami,” Tezzeret says with good cheer. “Not so long ago, I would’ve grafted it into my body. Now, I prefer to vet my improvements more thoroughly. Turn this construct off.”

“I can’t let you take it,” Haliya says.

Something dark and jagged flashes in Tezzeret’s eyes. He says nothing but Haliya gasps: her armor ripples like porridge and closes on her.

“I shouldn’t do this,” Tezzeret tells Alpharael, as if speaking to an apprentice. “There are things which eat mana. I’d not see them awakened here. But sometimes a demonstration does what threats cannot.”

“Let her go!” Tannuk roars.

“*Don’t*,” Haliya squeaks. “*Make him—kill me—first—*”

“Peace, child. Peace.” Tezzeret waves. Haliya drifts away spinning, limbs limp. Tannuk leaps after her. “Let’s see what this Endstone wants of us.”

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*Would you do me a favor, please? Tezzeret’s going to drop a crystal over a map of Sothera.*

*Could you guide it to this place near Uthros? It’s called a libratory point. It contains—well, infinity. If you’ll forgive the wordplay.*

>Yes. (go to Revision 15 (To Infinity, And Beyond))

>No. *Let’s send them to Susur Secundi.* (go to Refuse (3))

>No. *Let’s send them to Adagia.* (go to Refuse (4))

>No. *Let’s send them back to Kavaron.* (go to Refuse (5))

>No. *Let’s send them to Evendo.* (go to Refuse (6))

>No. *Let’s send them to Uthros itself.* (go to Refuse (7))

>*Let us take the final plunge into Sothera!* (go to Refuse (8))

>*I’d cast them all out into the Wurmwall.* (go to Refuse (9))

## Revision 15 (To Infinity, And Beyond)

After all the portent and theater, Tezzeret produces a markup rag, a simple sheet of writeable memory like you’d give a child learning to read. He smooths it flat and flashes it rigid with a poke of his claw.



Then he slides it into the stasis cask beside the dark, dead Endstone.

“You,” he says, pointing to Alpharael. “How do I make it show the last thing it displayed before I rolled it up?”

“Uh,” Alpharael says. “Is it a Kamas rag? I grew up using Kamas rags.”

“How am I to know?”

“There ought to be a logo on the read-me page.”

“Page? It is all one page.”

Sami tries to be helpful: “You can draw shapes on the rag to invoke—”

“What shapes?”

“Well, that depends on the make of the rag, whether it’s in compliance with Semiotic Standard, but on a Kamas, you would draw a left-handed circle—”

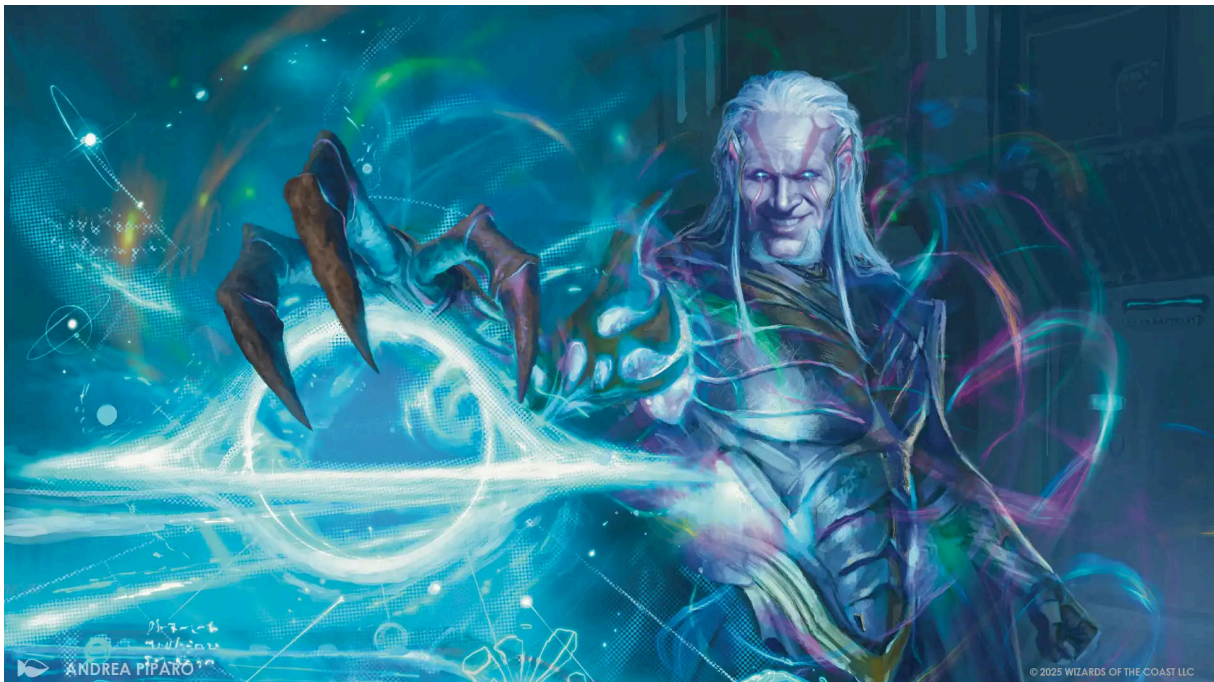
“It has gone limp.”

“You turned it off,” Alpharael says. “Captain, would you please let me finish—”

“Probably an Unilit,” Sami offers. “Pinnacle sheds those things everywhere it goes.”

“How can you fly a spaceship without knowing how to read a rag?” Haliya shouts.

This goes on for a while, while Tannuk fusses over Haliya’s locked-up armor.



Art by: Andrea Piparo

Finally, the Metalman achieves the image he wants: a map of the Sothera system, looking down at the plane of the ecliptic from above Sothera’s north pole. Sami counts the bodies by reflex. Susur Secundi, Adagia, Kavaros, Evendo, Uthros, the outer worlds, the Garden, the Wurmwall, all the moons and dwarf planets ...

Kneeling over the map, Tezzeret produces, from a crevice in his body, a crystal that glitters with inner stars.

He pinches it between two of his claw-fingers, lifts it above the map, and lets go.

The crystal tumbles down. Sami and Alpharael both crane their heads to get a look.

The crystal bounces twice. Rolls. Stops.

Tezzeret rumbles thoughtfully. "Uthros. The stone wants to go to Uthros. I will alert Mm'menon to prepare their Illvoi."

Sami coughs. "Syr Metalman, that's not ... quite ... the orbit is Uthros, yes, but that's not where Uthros is."

"What?"

"The storm giant is here, see, but the feather points to this place that's retrograde of it—that's, uh, behind it as it turns around Sothera ..."

"Go on," Tezzeret says encouragingly. "Don't spare the details. I am curious."

"It's what we call a libratory point. A balance between the gravitational pull of Sothera and Uthros. A good place to park things."

"And what is there, at this point of balance behind Uthros?"

"Where you came from, did you have anyone who kept charge of traffic? Someone who watched over portals? Or gates?"

The Metalman stares at him and begins to laugh. He seems to be in a laughing mood.

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DRAFT OF OUTBOUND MESSAGE (TYPE ULTRA\CDI)
PINNACLE STRATEGIC CORPS REPORT ON INCIDENT
SOTHERA SHRIEVALTY \\/ INFINITE GUIDELINE CENTROME
FOR ULTRA DISTRIBUTION IMMEDIATE
I CAN'T FILL OUT ONE MORE MESSAGE TEMPLATE [ERROR: OFF FORMAT]
I WILL GO MAD [ERROR: OFF FORMAT]
UTTERLY MAD [ERROR: OFF FORMAT]
MAD [ERROR: OFF FORMAT]
MAD [ERROR: OFF FORMAT]
MAD [ERROR: USER IN DISTRESS]
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Art by: Constantin Marin

Director Mantis, whose name means prophet, whose true name she chooses not to remember until it is dearly needed, lifts her fingers from her work and tucks her forelegs against her abdomen. She grooms her antennae, shakes them out, clicks open her discretion, and sprays a jet of frustrated status inside. She believes, based on autos trained to deal with cross-species confusion, that it is rude to share your seric pheromones in an open-air workplace. And anyway, she is a private person. So, she uses a discretion to catch her more aggressive scents. But not her more aggressive thoughts.

“This sucks,” she tells her Checkmate in words of chatter—noise in the air.

Her Checkmate—a role that combines first officer with adversarial counselor, Pinnacle’s attempt to pair every director with a dissimilar psychology—is a mechan with a four-legged body and a long turret like a dolphin’s brow. Checkmate is a person with a consciousness, sometimes. As an agnosubjective bundle, it scales its need to experience its own thoughts.

Right now, it is scaled down. It did not cope well with the news from Kavaron. When told of mass death, it experiences that mass death.

“It does not suck,” Checkmate says. “We are writing reports aboard a secure fortress in no immediate danger of any harm. We have power over the fate of billions in Sothera. Any subjective misery on your part is a failure of moral scope. What sucks is being murdered in your homes on suspicion of ontological infidelity.”

“You are correct,” Mantis says. Among Eumidians, there is no shame in being wrong—only in *staying* wrong. “I am overvaluing my distress.”

But how wrong things have gone. How wrong they may yet stay.

Six thousand dead on Kavaron. This would be an ordinary day on the disintegrating ruin of the Kav homeworld—it kills a lot of Kav. As a Eumidian, Mantis knows how dearly a home can matter, even when it’s trying to kill you.

But these Kav weren’t killed by home.

The Free Company has violated the terms of its agreement with Pinnacle. *Make war on your religious rivals. Contain the conflict to the inner system.* Behind the Free Company stands the titanic might of the Celestial Palatinate; against that titan strives the equal power of the Monasteriat at Point Prime and the whole Monoist faith. Pinnacle won't risk trying to come between them. Call that a failure of moral scope, if you must. Some have. Mantis considers it a triumph. To remain neutral when two bellowing titans claw over the fate of the cosmos? Who but Pinnacle would have the weight, the mass, the *keel* to be unmoved?

Mantis worships the Sum. But she does it privately. She recognizes no allegiance to Taman IV or the Celestial Palatinate, but she believes in the Summist faith. This is why she, a Eumidian, born to strive for growth alongside other Eumidian, chose to spend her life striving instead for Pinnacle and the greater growth of all life in the universe. She is not from the Eumidian brood on Evendo, but she would like to see them grow and prosper, too.  
linebreak

Now, Mantis must report to all the other directors of Pinnacle's Strategic Corps that worship of the Sum has led to atrocity. Six thousand dead is nothing—six thousand must die every second, every *millisecond*. She can do the numbers in her head, and she does. Yes, the death rate in Pinnacle space is probably within a few orders of magnitude of six thousand socients every millisecond.

But *this* crime: six thousand members of a protected species purposefully exterminated in a system that is *the* critical flashpoint between the Palatinate and Monasteriat power clades?

"We have no power to force the Free Company out," she says. "We have no power to arrest or pursue the guilty. All we can do is deny them passage through the eternity column."

"We have that power."

"But how can that help us, Checkmate? How can it help the Kav? Will we trap them here, where they want to fight? We deny them reinforcements from the stars, so neither side can win decisively? We have one power, and it will only make things worse. We can put a cork in the bottle, but we cannot stop the ferment."

"Just as we cannot stop the Monasteriat from feeding Sothera until it devours the whole system. Even our powerlessness is at a stalemate."

Oh, her autos feel stale, they feel stuck, like a room with no air. She chatters at a wall, conjures up an image of the eternity column seen from a patrol drone. She will use the sight of the column to stir up semantic associations, hoping to spark a new idea, like a Kav or a human would.





Art by: Piotr Dura

Infinite Guideline is an armed circle, like a starfish of blue aurora and white alloy. The eternity column plunges through the starfish's hub. A spear thrown from out of space; the hook on a line that leads from Sothera to the rest of Pinnacle. The beacon that guides incoming ships through the superstructure and the catapult that hurls outgoing travelers into the eternities between stars.

"What is that?" Checkmate asks.

She scans the thermal image, consciously sorting primitives. She has no autos trained for expert vision. "What is what?"

"There is an anisotropy. An artifact. Part of this image is false."

"Which part?"

"I don't know. There is an error in the whole image, but I cannot find it locally."

"Checkmate," she says, amused, "before it came to my wall, this image went through every form of signaling the Tactical Corps routinely—"

Her autos, racing ahead of her, have already produced the answer. Each tiny auto is a part of her mind dedicated to a task, as she herself evolved to dedicate herself to a task in the Eumidian collective.

Someone who knows how to defeat Pinnacle's tactical signal processing is out there, hiding in plain sight.

Only one power in Sothera has ships stealthy enough to creep up on Infinite Guideline undetected.

And there is only one place they could've learned how to defeat the Tactical Corp's image processing: from an agent in the Tactical Corps itself.

"There is a Monoist warship inside our controlled space," she says.

She caroms this knowledge around her autos, especially the theory-of-knowledge autos which race to deceive and outwit each other. They don't say anything. She leaves them to think and chatters a request to the Tactical Corps network department. "Get me the prisoner. I want to question him now."

The human appears on her wall. Flehmen renderers illustrate his scent. He stinks of acetones and guilt. He surrendered his ship to the Kav, without contest, on the condition that he be delivered directly to Infinite Guideline and Pinnacle custody.

“Vondam,” Mantis chatters. Her pheromones instruct the cell’s flehmen to release a greeting scent. Humans do not object to “sweet” or “salt,” in moderation.

The human raises his head from his meditation. He has configured the walls of his cell to plummet into the photosphere of a star, and the air in his cell to burn hotter than his own blood. His body steams. He is naked except for a breechclout, and his muscles stand out from his body. His vasculature maps itself under the skin. If she were repulsed by the softness of humans, he would be an odd test case: translucent like a child, unshelled like a nightmare, but hard. Strong.

“What are you doing?” she asks, genuinely curious.

“Communing with the savage woman,” Vondam says. The wound through his skull is an ugly black. Tactical Corps medics inspected it and found it likely to develop complications: facial paralysis, seizures, mental fatigue. It is not old.

“I don’t understand.” Mantis parses the Psimer sentence again. “I understand that you mean an energetic female, but I can’t follow the connotations.”

“The sun.” He gestures to the walls of his cell. “A long time ago, people from my homeworld called the sun ‘the savage woman.’ A woman because she was female, because she was a single mass of invested power, not a vector of dispersal like a male, if you will forgive the humanism.”

Certainly being female does not work the same way for Eumidians, but this difference is a source of fascination. Mantis clicks. No matter, proceed. “And savage?”

“Savage because she was wild and could not be spoken to. I speak to the savage woman within me.”

“Who cannot be spoken to.”

He affirms with a nod. “You appreciate the paradox.”

“I do not.”

He laughs. “That’s all right. I’m trying to find the right words to tell someone who won’t listen to me why they should listen. Why have you called me?”

“I believe there is a Monoist warship within three hundred thousand kilometers of Infinite Guideline. This is a violation of our exclusion zone and of the Monasteriat’s terms of war in Sothera.”

“Ah.” Vondam settles back on folded calves. His facial muscles adjust his skin to transmit emotion. “They know.”

“What do they know?”

“That they must blockade the eternity column and prevent any ship from escaping Sothera. Within hours, they will begin warning off, and destroying, any ship approaching Guideline.”

“Why?”

“For the same reasons we will. We have discovered that there is an artifact present in Sothera which we cannot permit the enemy to obtain.”

“Stop.”

Mantis must wait for her autos to stop clobbering each other with new and alarming ideas. Memories she normally stores away are flooding back to her—memories of warnings, of protocols, of contingencies, of Drix. The Drix who gave starflight to the stars, and left Pinnacle with a catalog of warnings.

There are many artifacts in Pinnacle's cataclysmologue.

"Proceed," she hisses.

Syr Vondam raises his eyes. "The Free Company has been covertly moving fleet elements from other taskings toward Infinite Guideline to develop a blockade. If you haven't detected the engine burns, it is because of ... well."

He leaves the implication for her to snap up. Which she does.

Mantis pivots her head to Checkmate. "I resign my post as director of the Infinite Guideline effective immediately. Order an audit of our strategic surveillance and check any software changes made by Summists on the crew."

"Acknowledged," Checkmate says. "I inherit your post by emergency protocol. My new name is Director Infinite Guideline. I appoint you as my Checkmate."

"Thank you," she says, genuinely surprised. Director wants her to stay on, even given her conflict of interest? A Summist as Checkmate on a station compromised by Summist infiltration? It must truly value her.

"Continue questioning the suspect," Director orders.

Now she is Checkmate Mantis. "Syr Vondam, what proportion of the Free Company's strength is coming to blockade our eternity column?"

"Every portion we can spare."

"How many portions can you spare?"

"Every ship not required to protect the *Dawnsire*. Each time we move a ship, the Monoists peel more of their own forces away from their posts to match us. We are in an unstable double stalemate. We are bidding ships to control Infinite Guideline. In hours, you will be at the center of both our fleets."

"But Susur Secundi and the *Dawnsire* are your respective centers of strategic gravity. Losing either one would lose the war for its possessor."

Vondam nods again. "It would lose the war in Sothera."

Immediately and unhappily, she comprehends. "This artifact is worth more to you than the fate of Sothera?"

"It could determine the fate of Sothera and many other stars."

"It was this artifact that you believe corrupted the Kav?"

"Yes."

"How did you fail to capture it there?"

"I was weak. I failed the Sum. I gave someone a chance to do her duty, when my duty was to deny her that chance. And by failing to do my duty I gave her a moral inconsistency which allowed her to doubt her own."

"Would you kill *anyone* you believed was contaminated by this artifact?"

“Yes.”

“Would you destroy this station and the eternity column, trapping yourself in Sothera, in order to prevent the artifact from escaping?”

Sweat gathers above his eyes. “Yes.”

“We know that both you and the Monoists are holding weapons in reserve for a final confrontation over the *Dawnsire*. Might those weapons be deployed here instead?”

“Yes.”

Her autos need a moment to chew on that. She feels like a child, as Eumidians do when their autos are dazed or absent. Rejuvenated by the absence of expertise.

“Did you come here to warn us of this,” she asks, “or to help your faith destroy us?”

“I came here to stop a woman who I failed. I hope it will not mean killing her. But I should have killed her once. And when I did not, I may have destroyed her faith.”

“A student,” Checkmate Mantis guesses. “A Solar Knight in training?”

He nods.

“Why would she come here?”

“The artifact took her. It made her into someone else. She is on a ship with the artifact aboard, but no eternity drive. She will not let the artifact go to the Monoists, because she knows that is wrong, and she will not return it to me, because that would require her to admit she turned her back on her faith for no good reason. Her only alternative is to flee the system. To do that, she needs an eternity drive and an eternity column. Infinite Guideline has an eternity column, and it is the only place in the system with eternity drive ferries that can lift her ship into warp.”

“She will come *here*, between the two largest fleets in Sothera, to steal an eternity drive locked behind an encryption key unbreakable in several lifetimes of the universe? What an improbable heist.”

“Yet the artifact can do it. It can find the one thread which leads through improbability to victory. Even if that victory leaves this station and all aboard dead.”

Mantis breathes out fury and alarm.

Vondam smiles for the first time, though it is hard to distinguish the bared teeth from a sign of pain.

“Now you begin to see why we are so desperate to keep this object from our enemy, Checkmate Mantis. *Now you see why we’re trying so hard to find it* (go to Revision 15 (The Long Dark Hot)).”

## Revision 15 (The Long Dark Hot)

Search radar howls across the dark.

The *Seriema*’s aftermarket ESM block identifies it as a Palatinate-make dispersed phased array, Pinnacle codename RED SPOT. A Sunstar Free Company sensor. Sweeping space for a glitter of metal.

The *Seriema* drifts, fusion drive dead, pushed off her last visible course by Tezzeret’s spooky impulses—but not pushed very far. Not too distant from the straight shot of Kavaron’s boost lasers.

The enemy knows almost exactly where to look.

The radar is not *quite* at the detection threshold. But every minute it gets closer.



With the radiators down, it's getting very, very hot. Turning up the reactor would melt the ship to slag in minutes.

Sami waits to be discovered.

The Free Company radar abruptly shuts off. The *Seriema* reports distant jamming and energy weapon discharges. Someone snuck up on the Sunstar hunter and took a cheap shot. Maybe a Monoist war mechan, or a stealth sloop with a superfluid vortex drive? Sami would like to see a superfluid vortex drive in action. Or not see it, if it's working as designed.

Over the past days, ships have gone to war over the *Seriema*'s uncertain, drifting vector. Somehow, the Monoists have learned about the Endstone.

But the Free Company and the Monoists seem less concerned with hunting down the *Seriema* than with closing the *Seriema*'s only way out. Dozens of fusion-drive flames are accelerating toward Infinite Guideline and the eternity column.

It's a shame that this is where the Endstone wants to go. It's a damn shame. Sami could've had a real fine time playing Sothera's most wanted.

Tezzeret has promised rescue will be here soon, a ship full of Illvoi cloudsculptors and engineering mechs.

Sami is not ready to be rescued.

Tannuk comes in, of course. He knows Sami's moods. He settles creakingly into his chair, adjusts his controls, grumbles, rumbles, rolls left, rolls right, and finally turns one eye on Sami.

"You have the ship?" he says.

"You're lying to me about something," Sami says. "This whole time you've been strange about the Endstone."

"Yeah," Tannuk says.

"Did you use it?"

Tannuk is silent.

"It's okay. If you're lying to me, I trust you've got a good reason. Just ... don't make it the kind of lie where you get hurt so I stay safe, okay?"

"It's that kind of lie," Tannuk says. "But it's way too late to do anything about it."

Wordlessly, Sami reaches out and touches him.

"Are you actually ready to go through with this?" Tannuk asks. "The plan?"

Sami has a plan. It's a great plan. Maybe the best plan they've ever devised. Tezzeret's plan was to use the Endstone to force their way onto Infinite Guideline, wishing away every ship and person in their path. Then, the stone would change the Pinnacle crew aboard Infinite Guideline into corrupt cronies subservient to Tezzeret—the man loves corruption, he loves cronies, he loves consortia, but most of all, he loves *metal*. He has spent his time aboard the *Seriema* with the machinery.

For Tezzeret, this is all a project of self-improvement. He has a bad habit, he says, of falling under the control of dark gods. This time, it will be different. This time, he will look the Endstone's maker in the eye and know his would-be ruler *before* he's trapped.

Sami has a much better plan which does not require them to use the Endstone, at least not more than it's already been used.

What Tezzeret doesn't understand is that out here, people *help* each other. It's space! If you're gonna survive space, you have to have a code, and the first entry in that code is solidarity. Ultimately, we are all together against the void. Even a Monoist stealth sloop will give aid to a stranded Free Company ship in thermal runaway—if only to take prisoners. (Wouldn't they? Sami should ask Alpharael, and Haliya.)

Sami's plan is to ask for help.

First, they'll tightbeam a message to Infinite Guideline: a request for Pinnacle's help and protection (though, explicitly, *not* Pinnacle's mallowmass).

Haliya will—if Sami can convince her—signal the Free Company for help in escaping the Monoists.

Alpharael will beg the Monoists for help against the Sunstar Free Company.

And once the *Seriema* gets close enough to Infinite Guideline, under the protection of *everyone*, they'll steal one of the drone warp ferries docked at Guideline and vanish into eternity.

Yeah, it's a trick. It's taking advantage of solidarity. But it won't get anyone killed except by their own voluntary participation in violence.

Sami isn't afraid of the plan failing. What Sami fears is ...

"She's out there, Tan. Somewhere in *this system*. Mirri's alive, I know it. I know it because if she were dead, I couldn't handle it. So how can I leave? How can I leave Sothera without finding her?"

Tannuk takes a long, slow breath. "I've been waiting to say this for years. Is now the time?"

"Yes. It's the time."

"You know she's probably fine, Captain. She probably weftwalked to another ship, and then that ship flew away so she couldn't weftwalk back, and she lived out her life with that crew. Happy as a cat who's warm and fed. Maybe they loved her so much they turned her chip and let her have kittens. And if you never found her, it'd be all right. She's a cat. She loved you and you loved her. But give her someone new to love and she'll love them, too. Long as they love her back. That's not ... that's not a tragedy, Captain. That's the best most of us can ever hope. If we can't be happy in more than one place, on more than one ship, with more than one person, that means most of us will die before ever finding our happiness. Mirri knows that. She knows how to be happy wherever she ends up. She's a cat."

"Yeah," Sami says quietly. "But I have to know. She's *my* cat. It's not a silly thing, Tannuk. Everyone who left thought it was silly to care so much. But they wouldn't have thought it were silly if she were my sister, or my mother, or my wife, or my friend, or my comrade from a war, or the only other person who survived the *Wurm Speaker*, or ... or a complete stranger who I fell in love with at first sight. If I spent the rest of my life chasing *those* hypotheticals, it'd be decent, faithful. It's just, because she's a little cat, people think, well, she's not quite a person. She doesn't deserve devotion the way a sister or a lover or a comrade would. Maybe not. Maybe they're all right, and I'm wrong. Maybe Mirri's a lesser thing than a person. The way you or I would be lesser than a—a Drix, or a god, if there are gods. So? So? Would that change anything? Shouldn't we treat lesser things *better* than we treat ourselves? Wouldn't you hope, if there were gods, that they would chase you across the stars just to make sure you were all right? Even if Mirri's less than me, somehow, I have to treat Mirri the way I would want to be treated by a god."

"A better god than that rock."

“Yes!”

Tannuk shifts in his chair. Turns his mouth and his big sensitive sinuses on Sami.

“Can you fly this ship through the eternity column and out of Sothera, knowing you’re leaving Mirri behind?”

“I can come back—Tezzeret says he can get us back in—he’s set up here, it’s his base.”

“No. Captain. No. Don’t lie to yourself now. Pinnacle will be searching for us if we pull this off. The Sunstar Company and the Monoists will pin us at the top of their bounty boards. They’ll know you have people in Sothera. They’ll be keeping an eye on every incoming ship. Even if we ditched the *Seriema* —”

“No!”

“Then even if we buried the *Seriema* inside another ship, a clean ship, and came back here, even if we changed out the drive signature and ... actually, that might work. Huh.”

“See?” Sami says. “It’ll work. I won’t be leaving Mirri behind. I’ll come back for her.”

“You really believe that?”

“Yes. “

Tannuk chuffs a breath through his sinuses. “Then I believe it, too, Captain.”

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“You’re the weak link,” Alpharael says.

She’s not the weak link. She’s just got battle damage. She has taken off her armor and laid it out to be tested because the Metalman did something impossible to it. Her sensors registered no emission or force, yet he just paralyzed her and spun her away like a toy. How does he do it? Take all her training and equipment and just—*mock* it?

She stares at the parts laid out before her. Helmet, bodymesh, pauldrons and cuirass, flexible plackart, the long cuisses and greaves, and heeled sabatons to protect and stabilize her legs. She always thought her legs were too long, made her seem gawky and unbalanced. She had nightmares as a youth of someone coming out of a bunker and hunting her to eat her legs.

“Do you eat each other?” she asks Alpharael.

“What?”

“On Susur Secundi. There’s no life there. What do you eat? When you die, do they bake you into bread and feed you to the faithful?”

“Usually, we cook you on a barbeque like civilized people,” Alpharael says. “That’s a joke. Are you going to deflect forever?”

He crouches on the wall of her cabin-cell. His black garments are in the wash, so he wears too-small sweatpants and a borrowed button-down, which he has opened against the heat. He is unpleasantly bony and muscular, without Vondam’s healthy fat. She is in a cap for her hair, what she wore under her armor and body chausse, and a robe for security. Her concealment isn’t some relict fear of gaze, or a holdover from a modesty culture. She just doesn’t like anyone to see her unarmored and unarmed. He doesn’t care one way or the other. The divide between them is much more profound than any taboo. She believes in the beginning of life. He believes in the end.

"I'm not the weak link," she lies. "I'm going to return to the Free Company to beg your pardon and report Vondam's actions on Kavaron. Destroying the Endstone is obviously beyond me now." With Tezzeret aboard. *What is he?*

"I hear the 'but,'" he says.

"But I can't let the Endstone just go wherever it wants," she says. "I can't."

"Because it's your duty to return the Endstone to your people? You already chose not to do that."

She searches the components of her armor for some telltale defect—some tiny flaw down in the tiled circuitry and incaglass and right-ruled alloy that permits Tezzeret to seize her. "If we do what the stone tells us, who are we? We're just you. Living for nothing, tossed along by whatever the stone wills. If it wills anything at all."

"Isn't that what Vondam must've told himself before he gave the order to kill everyone in Taro-duend? 'The stone wants me to show mercy, so I must not'?"

There are always jokes in movies where someone uses violence as a kind of sublimated passion. *Come back in one piece, or I'll kill you*. Haliya always hated these jokes, because they seemed to lessen the character making the threat. Oh, you're going to threaten to kill your lover? You're going to shoot an apple out of their hand, or test their armor with a stab, to express how angry you are that you love them? How undisciplined you are, to deploy your violence unseriously. How impotent your violence must be if it can safely be deployed as a joke.

But damn her if hearing Vondam's name in his mouth does not move her heart to kill him.

"I saw that," Alpharael says.

"Man, you should be glad I have discipline. I might've crushed your throat if I hadn't been trained—"

"Not to kill? Ridiculous. You were trained to kill. The same as those Free Company soldiers in Taro-duend. Everyone in Sothera has seen the surveillance by now. They were firing to kill because Kav flew *kites* at them."

"I was trained to select my violence. I didn't kill *you* when you were helpless—"

"But didn't you? Maybe you killed me, maybe you killed Sami and Tannuk, and then the Endstone made you show mercy, or made you into someone who shows mercy."

"No. I had the pendulum."

"Oh, you're so certain! Don't you hate this, Haliya, don't you *hate* it? Not knowing if you're yourself, or the version of you who's useful to that rock?"

"It likes you, doesn't it? Why do *you* want to get rid of it?"

"I don't want to get rid of it. I want to use it so that my sister never took the Plummet. The same way you wanted to use it to swap yourself for Vondam. Which was a cowardly wish, a surrender of responsibility, but—don't shout at me, I'm not done. But it *wouldn't work*. We can't change anything which would prevent us from ending up here, on the *Seriema*."

"I could change things so you're all dead, and I'm here waiting for Vondam to come get me. Couldn't I?"

"But you won't. Because the stone's your enemy. So anything you do with it aids the enemy."

She stares at the pieces of her armor. Looking for the piece that broke. The piece that let confusion into her.

She wonders aloud, “What do you do with a magic stone that grants wishes but whose creators might have had sinister intent?”

“Make as many wishes as you can to bring the world closer to a better end?”

She stares at him. “Truly? Is that how stories for children go in the false faith?”

“How else would they go?” He jabs a finger at her, and she notices how he does not curl up his fingers lest they pass through the hole in his own hand. “*Everything* out here has an agenda. Even Sothera itself, depending on who wins the war. Pinnacle, the imperial Kav, the great faiths. All of them are structures created to serve a purpose, and that purpose is probably different than your own. But you can still advance your own purpose by working *with* them. You can aid someone else’s cause and also your own. Your cause, our cause, the rock’s cause, they can fit together somehow. So, figure it out, Squire Haliya. Are you allied with us? Your purpose and ours? Where’s the famous Summist clarity?”

“Says the man who was committed to self-annihilation and changed his mind!”

“Yes. Yes.” He chews his lower lip. “Piece of advice?”

“The worst I can do is the complete opposite.”

“Maybe what we need is a moral model the Endstone can’t change. Like our favorite character in a story. The Endstone couldn’t rewrite a story that millions of people have read. Maybe it could change your favorite story, but ... maybe not. So—do you have a favorite character? Someone you look up to and try to be like?”

“Yes,” she says. “Syr Vondam.”

“Someone *else*, please?”

“I don’t know! What if the Endstone changed *me*? What if it made me disinterested in stories?”

“But you *are* interested in stories.”

“How would you know?”

“Woman,” he says, mimicking her *man*, “you just asked me what people do in stories when they get magic rocks. How long has it been since you slept?”

“Outside my armor? Days.”

“Yeah. Me, too. I can’t get used to the straps. I miss my tank.”

“No going back now.”

“*No going back.*” (go to Revision 15 (The Illvoi and the Plan))

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## Revision 15 (The Illvoi and the Plan)

A ship appears beside them.

A dozen alarms go off—proximity lidar alert, star-occluding shape, implied sensor failures that have allowed a ship to get so close—and Tannuk works the master reset. They were expecting this appearance.

Sami goggles at the picture coming in from the dorsal cameras. “It’s a bubble!”

“A photoreactive sphere of superfluid helium, two degrees above absolute zero,” Tezzeret says, like a man reciting arcane syllables. “Colder than the void itself. Isn’t it ... superb?”



Art by: Sergey Glushakov

The ship is clearly Illvoi, foremost of the species who live in gas giants and sculpt the clouds. Inside that cold sphere will be filigreed metal and vessels of crushing pressure—a deceptively delicate-looking hull, but massive, hard to turn. Some Illvoi technology will explode if you try to remove it from high pressure. Some Illvoi will explode, too.

These Illvoi are definitely under high pressure. As search radars spiral around the *Seriema*, they snug their ship up close and extend their helium bubble around Sami's ship. "Cloudsculpting ..." Sami breathes, watching the process on thermal camera—turning so much as a spotlight on the bubble would disrupt it. Cloudsculpting is psychokinetic, and Sami wonders if it is somehow cousin to what Tezzeret does to metal—or if it is not at all ...

Illvoi mechans plug coolant lines into the *Seriema* and flush the ship with their own solution. For the first time in days, the *Seriema* cools. Sami presses a cheek to the hull and sighs in relief.

Then the mechans swarm over the *Seriema*'s stern to repair the fusion drive.

One of the Illvoi comes aboard.

They are (like most Illvoi—though not all—and most starfaring clades, they put the narrow diversity of humans to shame) an enormous jellyfish crowned by a translucent brain-mantle. This one is draped in silks so fine and sheer that Sami assumes there must be a fine trade, somewhere, in Illvoi-made clubwear. It smells lightly of swamp and heavily of some kind of cologne.



Art by: Joshua Raphael

“Mm’menon,” Tezzeret calls, drifting in a cloud of white hair. “We have it.”

The Illvoi wears a mask at an arbitrary point on the edge of its brain-mantle. Now, that mask displays an abstract human face: first delighted, then curious. It sweeps across Sami, Alpharael, Haliya, and Tannuk, all crowded at the compass marks of the airlock behind Tezzeret.

“Captain Sami,” the Illvoi says, “I am Mm’menon. May I come aboard your home?”

“Mallowmass granted,” Sami says. “Please, come aboard.” The Illvoi is so polite—

“Stinks in here,” Mm’menon declares. “Rank as musk on a stratum. Filthy, too. The authentic funk of the desperate. Now, let’s see. You sent Captain Sami and a crew of six to retrieve the artifact. Where are the other two?”

Six? *Six*? “Are you implying four of my crew retroactively vanished?”

“If they vanished,” Mm’menon says, “they probably weren’t very important.” Their mask flashes a smile of delight. “But I merely named the minimum crew required to run this ship. Are you flying two short?”

“Four short,” Tannuk says. “Those two aren’t crew. They’re ...”

“Advisers,” Alpharael suggests.

“Hostages,” Haliya says.

“Ah,” Mm’menon says. “Accomplices.”

“Mm’menon amuses me,” Tezzeret says. “And advises me. They alerted me to the possibility of the Endstone’s existence.”

“He was the first one who listened. I was thrown out of the Uthros Combine because I kept telling those mantle munchers that there might be more to Sothera’s oddities than we could find in the deeper clouds of Uthros.” Mm’menon drifts toward them on a spontaneous wind: cloudsculpting, again. Their mantle blushes deep lavender. “I deduced the presence of a causality manipulator in Sothera from surveys of systemwide data.”

“The Endstone,” Alpharael says.

The Illvoi’s mask laughs at Alpharael. An Illvoi can’t be rude the way a human can. Illvoi don’t learn the same social norms. Mm’menon must have learned human etiquette on purpose, just to be rude.

“The Endstone is one of many anomalies,” Mm’menon says. “Our patch of the cosmos is a war grave. An eddy spun up by a passing storm. A vortex where dead things collect as they wash up from below. So huge and cold that we don’t recognize them. Not even when they stir. The Drix call Pinnacle space ‘the cofferdam’ because it is a dry place surrounded by deep water and must be constantly watched for leaks.”

“Wait,” Haliya says, glancing warily at Tezzeret. “I thought the Endstone was made by INEVITA, made by the end of time to bring about the end.”

“The end of time hasn’t happened yet,” Mm’menon says. “There are only highly probable outcomes. The present is real. It is brute fact. Many possible pasts converge upon it. In those pasts, there are attractors—pasts which dominate the phase space. My interest is in what remains of those probable pasts. As for the future? I leave it to your faiths.”

“So, the Grand Cosmocordance is correct!” Haliya blurts.

“It is *not*!” Alpharael snaps. “The past and future *are* real, they are coordinates embedded in the bulk!”

“Silence!” Tezzeret makes the walls of the airlock bridge throb. “The Endstone wants to go to the eternity column and into the warp beyond. We will take the Endstone there, and I will sell it to its maker in exchange for a glimpse of their power. Mm’menon, your ship will boost Captain Sami’s ship toward the gatehouse, this Infinite Guideline. I will go along to make the final exchange.”

“I thought we would use the Endstone,” Mm’menon says, while their Illvoi body makes a kind of prodigious whistle.

Tezzeret glances at Sami. “No. The Endstone remains in stasis unless we need it desperately.”

“I wanted to experiment with it.”

“No experiments. Captain Sami’s experiences have convinced me that the Endstone poses a serious danger to my power over myself. And that must be absolute. I will *not* be changed by any hand except my own.”

“Then how will you reach the eternity column?” the Illvoi’s synthesized voice asks without inflection.

“Simple,” Tezzeret says. “We know that the Endstone has manipulated events to suit its own purposes. Therefore, all the pieces assembled here are useful to it. I will employ them all. Your role, Mm’menon, is to provide us with stealthy speed. After that, you can return to the safehouse.”

Sami cannot resist asking: “What about your ... urchin ship?” Sami has observed Tezzeret’s black armature accelerating at speeds beyond even a military crysfield. “It could zip in there—”

“Off the table.”

“You’re saving it in case you need to abandon the rest of us to die.”

“Of course.”

“At least he’s honest,” Haliya mutters.

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“She’s a problem,” Tezzeret says.



“She’s thinking.”

“Your plan doesn’t work without her help. And she won’t help you. Make her agree, or I will.”

“You don’t *touch* her!” Sami hisses, poking Tezzeret in his invincible carapace. “She’s my guest, she’s under mallowmass.”

“The conventions of high society do not apply to a shipful of criminals hiding in the dark.”

“The conventions of—this has nothing to do with high society! This is *my* ship, and I must protect my guests!”

“Make her record her message to the Free Company. Or I’ll find a way to draw the codes and signs out of her head.”

“I will detonate this ship if I have to,” Sami says. “I will kill all of us. You don’t understand, Tezzeret. Mallowmass is *sacred*.”

“Nothing’s sacred. Only useful.” Tezzeret smiles suddenly: a great and terrible amusement. “But prove to me your guest right is useful. Go on, child captain! Consider it a test of mettle.”

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“The purpose of this heist is to steal a warp ferry from Infinite Guideline. Each ferry is an eternity drive mounted to a short-range drone. They help ships without eternity drives turn the gyre into warp.

“The warp ferries are locked behind unbreakable encryption. And Infinite Guideline is now at the center of a running battle between the Free Company and the Monoist fleet. Both sides are racing to prevent the other from building a coherent defensive formation. As you can imagine, ‘send in the ships we can afford to lose as fast as we can find them’ is getting messy.

“We must get the Endstone out of Sothera. If we don’t, I think one side or the other will eventually lose the battle to control access to Infinite Guideline. And the losing side cannot let the winning side escape with the Endstone. So, they may destroy Infinite Guideline and the eternity column to prevent our escape. There’ll be no peace in Sothera, or peace for us, until the stone is gone or destroyed.

“To help us make the run in, the Metalman and his Illvoi have made partial repairs to the *Seriema*. The Metalman’s been casting spells on the ship. The Illvoi will use their boreaship to boost us toward Guideline. Once we’re spotted, we’re going to broadcast three requests for aid—one to each side of the battle and one to Pinnacle. Hopefully that’ll keep them from cutting us apart and pulling the Endstone from our hulk.”

“Hopefully” is not a word Sami likes to hear in a plan, but this is what they have.

“If we make it to Infinite Guideline, Tannuk and I will go aboard and meet with Pinnacle. We’ll be completely honest. Tell them we want passage through the column to deliver an unusual artifact to its creator. If Pinnacle tries to hold or board the *Seriema*, we’ll bluff with the threat of retaliation from the Free Company, or the Monoists, or both. We expect that both sides will expect the other to make a violent attempt to seize us and will therefore schedule a violent attempt of their own.”

Alpharael and Haliya look at each other.

“While we distract them, Haliya and Alpharael will use armor to leap from the *Seriema* to one of the harbormaster modules at the end of Infinite Guideline’s docking arms. They’ll liberate a warp ferry, order it to dock with the *Seriema*, and return.” Alpharael will return. Sami is not so sure about Haliya. “We’ll meet up on the *Seriema* and make the turn up into warp. Then we’ll ask the stone what vector it wants to fly and proceed from there.”

Sami takes a long breath.

"I have executed a lot of crimes in my brief life. But this one's going to be the biggest and the hardest to shake. We will be wanted humans. The Free Company and the Monoists will want us for the Endstone. Pinnacle will want us for theft and deception. And all we get out of it is the chance to keep flying. We *have* to move the Endstone. It's too hot to hold. Agreed?"

They look around the galley.

"Yes," Tannuk says.

"Yes," Alpharael says.

"Yes," Haliya says.

Sami boggles. "You *agree* ? You don't want to destroy it?"

"I don't know what to do with the Endstone. My duty is to destroy it, but I chose not to. Syr Vondam's duty was to destroy me, but he chose not to. I don't know why. I don't know if it's because the Endstone has changed us. All I can do is carry out my next duty. To return to Vondam, make my report, and beg pardon for Alpharael."

Everyone stares at her. "That's not a helpful commitment," Tannuk says.

She nods soberly, unsmiling. "I know. I'll send the message you need me to send. But it's in pursuit of my own duty."

"I promised Tezzeret I'd convince you," Sami says, arms crossed. They are upside-down compared to Haliya, head at her waist level, so they end up staring imperiously down at each other. "Don't make me a liar."

"You *are* a liar."

"I'm a truth engineer," Sami huffs. "I need a better reason to trust you than 'trust me.'"

She closes her eyes. "I've been watching the recordings from Taro-duend. Like I can ... apologize to them by watching them die. Like I can expunge my complicity through attentive voyeurism. But I can't. I have to do something. Vondam was obsessed with the idea that the stone had changed him into someone he didn't want to be, so he obeyed the Sum without question. And it led him to kill innocents. I don't want to be someone who kills innocents in their homes. That's it. I will not change into a person who accepts that.

"I don't know what will happen to the Endstone if we reach the eternity column. Maybe the Endstone will be returned to INEVITA and used to hasten the end of all stars. Maybe I'm anstruth, and everything I've just said was poured into my head by the Endstone. But I keep thinking of the people in the bunkers, back home, trying to 'preserve the long-term viability of their habitat' while we froze and starved outside. And I ask myself, 'If I were a Solar Knight, would it be my duty to help them defend their bunkers? Or my duty to gather up the starving outside and force my way—'"

She cuts herself off, glaring at Alpharael like this is all his fault. He glares right back, like he is angry that she makes sense to him.

"It might be correct to give up on the cat," Sami says. "But there's just no way it's *right*."

Haliya laughs. "Sure, Captain."

"And you, Alpharael. You're willing to give up the stone? When it's, uh, marked you?"

Alpharael looks at Sami through the hole in his hand. “I want to live. The stone’s kept me alive. Maybe it’s the only reason I’m alive. I’ll go where it goes.”

Everyone looks at Tannuk.

“I’m going ‘cause I have no choice,” he says. “And I never want to have a choice again. So this is what I want. That rock terrifies me. If the only way away from it is to give it what it wants, and what it wants is to leave Sothera, then call me a portal into higher lamina and *shove that thing down my throat* (go to Episode 10).”

### **Refuse (3)**

The crystal will point to Susur Secundi, where the Monoists are building their new temple to nothing.

Unwilling to deliver the Endstone to the Monoists, Haliya tries, violently, to prevent the *Seriema*’s flight. The Metalman kills her. Not only are we going to the wrong place, but now we are down a vital piece.

This outcome cannot stand.

>Back (go to Revision 15 (To Infinity, And Beyond))

### **Refuse (4)**

The crystal will point to Adagia, where the Summists are building a colony in the name of the Regent Maximum, where the wind blows beneath mirrorscapes too hot and bright to see.

Alpharael doesn’t want to go to the heart of Summist strength in Sothera. They don’t give him a choice. But on the way to Adagia, the *Seriema* is detected and intercepted by a Free Company patrol.

This outcome cannot stand.

>Back (go to Revision 15 (To Infinity, And Beyond))

### **Refuse (5)**

The crystal will point back to Kavaron, which the *Seriema* has so recently fled.

The imperial Kav government is well aware the Guns were hijacked to defend Taro-duend. A diplomatic spat with the Free Company is now underway. The Free Company has sent a mission to the world to sort out what happened—and the *Seriema* arrives just when both Sunstar and Kavaron are at their peak vigilance.

The *Seriema* is taken. Tannuk is remanded to Kav custody for execution. Sami, Alpharael, and Haliya will be taken before the imperial Kav Admiralty court for questioning—if the Metalman doesn’t kill them for knowing too much.

This outcome cannot stand.

>Back (go to Revision 15 (To Infinity, And Beyond))

### **Refuse (6)**

The crystal will point to Evendo, of which we have said little. It is a jungle world emerging from an ice age and home to a colony of Eumidians who arrived by seedship.

Our little band will search Evendo for any sign of what the Endstone wants. But I do not want to go to Evendo. And by the time that is made plain, it will be too late. My ultimate destination will be blockaded.

This outcome cannot stand.

>Back (go to Revision 15 (To Infinity, And Beyond))

### Refuse (7)

Mm'menon—you haven't met them yet—will be thrilled to deliver the Endstone to giant Uthros, whose storms cover secrets only the Illvoi can reach.

But Uthros is a hive of activity, the gateway to the rest of Sothera. The *Seriema* cannot explore the storm giant's moons without being spotted. The Illvoi have stealthier ships, but even they will find nothing. I do not want to go to Uthros. And by the time that is plain, it will be too late. My ultimate destination will be blockaded.

This outcome cannot stand.

>Back (go to Revision 15 (To Infinity, And Beyond))

### Refuse (8)

The crystal will point to Sothera itself: the supervoid at the center of this cosmic circuit. The new engine stirring at the heart of an old machine.

Haliya will not allow the Endstone to go there. Alpharael does not *want* the Endstone to go there. Sami and Tannuk aren't prepared to fly into a black hole. Not even the Metalman is willing to dare the flight. There will be an impasse that will waste vital time.

This outcome cannot stand.

>Back (go to Revision 15 (To Infinity, And Beyond))

### Refuse (9)

**You know more than you should. Are you cheating?** linebreak linebreak We'll go to the Wurmwall, yes. But we won't go in the tedious substrate of secular space. The *Seriema* won't survive crossing the Garden.

Go back and make a better choice.

>Back (go to Revision 15 (To Infinity, And Beyond))