

Episode 11

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Revision 15 (The Giant and the Hungry)

“What is that!” Sami screams.

“An eld!” Checkmate Mantis stridulates back. The last surviving war mechan has seized all three of them and now boosts them up the spinal shaft of Infinite Guideline’s number-three docking arm, away from the *Seriema* and the alien.

“That doesn’t tell me anything!”

The thing passes after them. It makes a sound like a great unzipping, like a train car shuddering down loose rails. Like an icebreaker crashing through a pack of blood clots.

The mechans sawed at it with front-line Pinnacle effectors, with beams of molecular precision and shaped charges of surpassing penetration. It could be harmed—the flesh was cut, the white bone blasted—but the thing rotates through strange dimensions, and new, uncut flesh is there instead.

The mechans were reduced to graphs.

“It’s old,” Tannuk grunts. “Eld means it’s old, dug up. Like from inside Kavaron.”

“Yes! Old! Everything in Pinnacle space is too new, you understand? Too young! Space should’ve been dominated already—full of life—but instead we grew up in calm and lonely stars. Only—once in a while we find something *older*—and the Drix come—”

“Would be nice if they showed up now!” Sami howls.

The wall of the shaft ahead of them turns to chalk.

Another alien erupts into their path.

This one is different in aspect. Webs of bruise-purple tissue cover a long, ridged head, binding together branching limbs. Sami kens a shared logic between those webs and the graphs left behind by the thing chasing them, but then Sami also realizes that it is about to devour them.

The mechan—bless its reflexes—immediately diverts.

They zag out of the spinal shaft through a lateral process—out into a huge half-empty hangar. Emergency bulkheads slam shut behind them. Spotlights flicker on. At the center of the hangar, the hulk of a ship not very different from the *Seriema* drifts in a protective web. Pinnacle has either been refitting it or stripping it apart as a hazard to navigation.

“Bad omen,” Sami whispers.

“I see a reactor,” Tannuk says. “All the fusion drive components are in hotcells, but the fission power reactor is still intact—”

"You want to make a weapon," Checkmate Mantis stridulates, as softly as she can. "But our weapons don't work."

"Pretty easy to see why," Tannuk says. Somewhere in his blessedly stable attention stack, evolved to keep thinking while Kavaron's giants tumbled primordial Kav underfoot, Tannuk has been analyzing the battle. "Isn't it?"

"I don't have autos for this," Checkmate Mantis admits.

"Nobody taught me monster killing," Sami says.

"Yeah, me neither. But I do know basic engineering." Tannuk snaps his work claws open and shut. "Every time our weapons hit those things, they cut part of it. Or blow through part of it. But most of it isn't there. It's somewhere else. Buried in the laminae, maybe. How do we hit the rest of it when we can only see part of it?"

"Burn it!" Checkmate Mantis warbles. "Poison it! A spreading acid, a chain reaction!"

"Electrocute it!" Sami says, remembering about seven dozen electrocutions on the *Seriema*.

"Any of that might work. We just need—"

The emergency bulkhead crumbles. Tentacles curve out of the shaft behind them. Probing into the hangar along invisible gradients of appetite.

"Time," Sami says, finishing Tannuk's sentence.

"You know engineering," Checkmate Mantis says. "I am more expendable. I will divert it. Go."

And before either of them can protest, the mechan hurls Sami and Tannuk at the ship hulk.

Pinnacle is under attack.

The giant is gentle. It does not wield its weapons unless it must. It would prefer to gift, bribe, plead, bargain, cajole, interdict, and coerce.

But there is a scourge loose on Infinite Guideline. There are holes shot through her immensity. Inchoate matter pumps through her spaces. And now, boarding crafts full of Solar Knights and gravkill paladins fall upon her like viroids, shooting the rapids of enemy interception to shatter Guideline's great blue flanks and deliver their warlike passengers. They want the *Seriema*, and control of the *Seriema*'s only way out: the eternity column.

This is more than a giant can bear in peace.

Guideline's main power may be gone. Its nerves may be snipped. But if there is one word you can apply to the giant, it is—decentralized.

All across the station, each on their own, Tactical Corps personnel reach the same decision. *Release the violence delegates.*

From rookeries all around Infinite Guideline, spikes of arcjet lift mechans free. They race out to meet the warships of the two faiths, bristling with effectors and spectral warfare antennae. Some are the size of pebbles, some are cutters, some are frigates. Gifts for those who come ungifted.

They go at the warships of the faiths like castration scissors.

Their target is the most vulnerable part of any warship—the radiators. Snip off the radiators, and the heat of battle has nowhere to go but into the ship itself. Melt yourself or surrender.

But it is no easy task to stop up a Summist warship's recirculating fountains of molten metal or paint over its blazing emissive panels. It is no simple task to kill a Monoist warship's singularity heatsinks, buried in armored magnetic cavities deep within the hull.

And on Guideline itself, where there is no heatsink to wick away violence, the war parties crash against each other.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

Here at last, the Sunstar knights and the monastery gravkill paladins who have ached for holy battle meet like hammers on the forge.

There is a woman, a hero in the battle at Maledikt, Syr Cataline, who worships the brown dwarf aspect of the Sum. It's humble, it's a failure—but steady in its failure. Failing now to keep ranks, she rushes ahead of her squires and photophoroi to charge the Thinner, best of the *armor fati*, beloved of the Monasteriat.

They go for each other in the gardens at the base of Third Dock. But the Thinner's miracho Yamno, frenzied with will, comes between them, fast, close range. Modest Cataline burns him through and through, hot spot to cold exit, and the beam kills his armor in one blow. Call it The Event, for no alabile stops it. Yamno tumbles on heartless, and his armor rings against him.

Then the Thinner, fate's armorer, grips the tapped-out Cataline in his tides. Photophoroi cast their lances at him, but his armor denies their weapons. Gravkill means gravity killer, but there's a simpler word for the place you're drawn to die: your grave. Call the Thinner grave-killer, for he kills foes before their time. All the garden rattles like a drum, beat by the gravid power of his grave.

Seeing his knight at peril, young Isidor, Cataline's squire, born to the craft of mirrors but chosen to reflect war's blood and sparks, closes to her side. His error, though it's from good instinct: to stay by your knight. But the fist of fate grips all. As his mother once showed him how to polish the mirror fine, now he's scraped flat by the tides—flensed of his outer parts. Stretched and severed, he's bent over an invisible orb and broken, and his screams go out to the Walls.

It's like this all over Infinite Guideline. War. And you'd never know who's winning, but for one thing:

Among the melee, a hunger out of space whirls and feeds. It feeds on photophoroi and Pinnacle mechs. It feeds on Sunstar knights and armored constables from Pinnacle's Tactical Corps. It feeds on fools who didn't heed the warning to evacuate, and friends who stayed to lend Pinnacle their aid.

But it does not feed on Monoists.

Not one.

This hunger eats *potential*. The ability to become many things. And the Monoists worship only one.

If you were a clever giant, of course, you'd notice the pattern. *If you had the time and the senses* (go to Revision 15 (A Better Sum)).

Revision 15 (A Better Sum)

"Sometimes you screw up so badly," Syr Vondam says, "that there is no fixing it. And you just have to mark your life—before, when I did all right, and afterward, when I failed. You can't apologize. You can't make it right. You just have to live with your failure and try not to fail again. I should've killed you when you begged me to. But I didn't, I couldn't, and now we both have to live with it. That's my lesson. If you'll hear it."

"Alpharael," Haliya tries to say. "Get out of here. Get back to the *Seriema*. Use the stone!"

But all that comes out is: "Syr ..."

"We all have flaws," Syr Vondam says.

Alpharael tries to move and Vondam, without looking, cuts the bulky, elevated boots of his suit off. The Kav armor just can't stand up to Vondam's radiance—the alloy fails instantly, the enormous high-traction, low-pressure footpads snap off. Alpharael tumbles forward against a console, flailing in zero gravity. His human toes protrude from the armor's amputated ankles, stockinged and pathetic.

"We all have flaws," Vondam repeats. "We can choose to rise above them. But the curse of choice is that it also allows us to choose wrong. And that anathema—the Endstone—it can find our worst choices. It can force them on us. And when it can't do that, when it needs us to be capable of even greater failure, it can find a weapon to hurt us. Like you. It is you, isn't it? The one who put a hole through my brain."

He's talking to Alpharael.

"Syr," Haliya manages, "it wasn't your choice. It was *mine*. I took the Endstone away. It's not on you."

"Yes. That was your error. And it was my responsibility to kill you for it. Which I failed to do, because I let love outshine duty. Let one good thing come of that error, Squire."

He opens one armored gauntlet to her. She can almost see the himsary banners wrapped around his skin beneath. The holy bandages, like the mummies they made in winter, on her homeworld.

"Come back," he pleads.

Oh, Walls help her. She wants to.

"You're the best squire I ever had."

It's true. Captain Slats said he thought so.

"You would've been a better knight than me, if I hadn't led you to the stone. If I hadn't let it take you. We've both failed. I failed when I let you go in my place. And because of us, because of the weakness that stone found in us, the stone has come here. To the very edge of escape. Thousands of the faithful, thousands of innocents, are dying because of *us*. Hold yourself responsible. Come back to the faith."

“Syr—”

She can’t say it. She can’t say *no*.

But she has to say no, doesn’t she?

She has to own and commit to her choice. She has to make it her own, an inevitable result of her immutable identity.

Because if it’s not her choice, if it’s changeable, then it’s the stone’s.

There is a love in her heart that cries out to go to him.

“Syr,” she says. “I understand why I had to do what I did. It’s the Sum. We talk about it like it’s beyond our power. But, Syr—” Oh, yes, yes, finally she can articulate it, finally she knows what to say.

“The computation of the Sum must include and anticipate our own choices. If I see that you choose to slaughter Kav in the name of greatening the Sum, and I reward that with obedience and honor, and I return the Endstone to the Order so it can be vouchsafed to a coronal and taken away ... I am altering the computation of the Sum. I am creating a path that leads to victory through thousands of dead Kav.

“But I do not believe the Sum should *ever* pass through thousands of dead innocents on its way to greatening. I do not believe the dawn’s light ever burns the helpless and the small. So, I must become the reason that the Sum diminishes when you butcher thousands. I must modify the Sum through my own choice. The Sum will not greaten because your squire will revolt. That must be in the Sum.”

“I will not go home with the stone and be a hero. I love the faith, Syr. I love the duty of the Sum. I love you. But I will not let the Free Company find a path to their objective that goes through thousands of dead Kav.”

“Tongue,” Vondam says.

“Syr?”

“Make sure you’re not biting your tongue,” Vondam says, “when I hit you.”

Alpharael pushes off the wall. His armor may have no feet, but he uses the stumped legs to lunge at Vondam.

Vondam steps into him. “I gave you mercy once!”

He’s going to cut Alpharael in half. She doesn’t want to see a helpless man cut in half.

She thrusts her long-handled bladiator from the hip and drives Syr Vondam off. Alpharael tumbles past him and crashes into the wall.

Vondam closes his helmet.

“Squire Haliya,” His voice comes hard, “for conduct unbecoming of a companion of the Sunstar and for egregious derogation of the Sum, by my authority as a knight of the company, I hereby degrade you. I darken the illumination that showed you the rank of squire. I de-light you from my service and bar against you the path to knighthood. Remove your armor; the wound is beneath it. Remove the insignia of your service; they no longer signify. Surrender your weapon; it has wounded the faith. Do you understand me?”

Her pulse blasts in her ears. She hardly hears herself say: “Yes, Syr. I understand you.”

He has cast her out of the Free Company.

She has made it permissible for him to strike her with lethal force.

And though her heart breaks for it, though her mind tells her it's futile, she makes a choice.

If she was wrong to flee Kavaron with the Endstone, then she threw her future away for nothing and caused this battle that is killing thousands for *nothing*, and she just cannot allow that to be true. She cannot live in that reality. She chooses to believe her choice was right, because if it was not, it would destroy her.

Which makes this choice right, too.

She strikes at her knight (go to Revision 15 (Two Reckonings)).

Revision 15 (Two Reckonings)

The monster goes after Checkmate Mantis and her combat mechan. It buys Sami and Tannuk maybe twenty seconds.

"Cable!" Tannuk shouts. "I've got the reactor running. I have power. Now I need PTS main cable!"

Cable, cable—there's no loose cable that Sami can see. Someone packed this work site up too well! There are hotcells and stasis casks lashed to scaffolding all around the hangar, and the tools and spares must be in those. One of them has to have spare cable!

Sami leaps from cell to cell on thrusters, opening and slamming shut containers full of neutron-rotted reactor shielding—

A shadow grows over them. Harsh edged in the hangar's floodlights.

It is a graph of the war mechan's components, spread in three dimensions. The thing has eaten it.

Checkmate Mantis is probably dead, or worse. It would be wrong for Sami's first thought to be *she was beautiful*. But let Sami be wrong.

"Get ready!" they scream. "It's coming for us!"

"I'm ready! I need a cable!"

The hotcells aren't worth searching, they're all full of radioactive metal. Sami leaps for a stasis cask. According to its timer, it has been closed for more than ten years. According to its label, it is "CONTRABAND, SEALED, TYPE UNKNOWN—MARKED FOR CAREFUL DISPOSAL."

Sami deactivates it and tears it open. Their headlamps illuminate the interior of the cask.

A pair of green-gold eyes shines back.

Sami's heart doesn't skip a beat. It leaps a whole measure.

An orange and brown cat bristles and hunches into the back of the stasis cask. Her growl crosses the hangar's thin atmosphere as a faint whine. Her whiskers are white and long and very unwise.

"Mirri?" Sami gasps.

It is. It's her. She's glossy, healthy, *real*—oh ways and ends—she hasn't aged a day. She was in a stasis cask. She weftwalked away from the *Seriema* when she was startled and went to a ship that looked almost like the *Seriema* and landed in a stasis cask. That's why she never came back. She was frozen in time. And the ship ended up where nearly any private ship in Sothera will end up: getting an overhaul or a teardown on Guideline. But no one opened the cask, because no one remembered what was inside—

She's all right. She's okay. She doesn't even know she's been away. She doesn't think Sami abandoned her for years.

Sami reaches up to open their helmet.

Mirri tenses.

“Shh,” Sami whispers. “It’s okay. It’s me—”

The horrible clatter of the approaching thing rises.

Mirri yowls and vanishes. Weftwalks away.

“No!” Sami shrieks. “No, no, *no*!”

“Captain!” Tannuk bellows.

“She was here; she was right here—”

“It’s coming!”

Sobbing, Sami leaps for the next stasis cask. *Maybe she’ll be in this one—*

She’s not. The cask isn’t even active.

But it holds a coil of Power Transfer Standard main cable, in pristine condition.

“Got it!” Sami turns, hurls one end of the cable to Tannuk, then pins the other end against the wall of the cask and strikes away the connector with their antenna rapier. The superconducting core gleams with the promise of lightning. Sami jams the rapier into the insulation further down the cable and lifts it like an enormous noodle on a chopstick.

The back end of the stasis cask comes apart into puzzle pieces. Something white and hungry shines in the floodlight’s fill. The alien is here.

“Power on!” Tannuk bellows. “You’ve got current!”

Sami doesn’t scream. Instead, they point the rapier and thrust it straight down the center of the stasis cask until it strikes a plate of bone. The rapier pushes the cable ahead of it. Contact shorts the two bars of superconductor inside the cable and current leaps between them.

A spectacular buzz. A flash of fire. Power arcs through the thing’s matter. It convulses in more dimensions—limbs rotate into existence and out again, grasping at things which aren’t there—huge, throbbing sacs of purple webbing spasm and rupture blue and red—fire spreads in pale limbs along a shape that does not fit in Sami’s head.

“Tally-ho!” Tannuk roars.

The second creature hits him from the side.

“Tally-ho,” Vondam says, mildly.

She hit him. He took it right in the chest. But it wasn’t enough—the armor of a knight is proof against directed energy. It wouldn’t be much armor otherwise, would it?

If she wants to win, she will have to cut him open.

He fires back. She whirls as he takes aim, puts a solid meter of Pinnacle equipment and the reflector of her cloak between them, and still gets hit—but survives.

If he wants to win, maybe he will have to cut *her* open.

He comes at her.

They fight as they have fought on the sparring floor. That's the worst part. It's *no different*. There's no vengeful force or cold hatred to Vondam's shearing attack. He still loves her. She still loves him.

He takes the linear role: straight at her. Knife attacks usually lead with the empty hand, to grab and control, but Syr Vondam has no empty hands. If he gets in range, he will stab her eleven times a second (his median performance in training) until her armor gives.

Haliya should take a contralinear role—using her polearm to keep the range open, to fend him as he tries to close—*but she knows she will lose that fight*. It will keep her alive, because a less powerful fighter can buy time by giving ground, but it will not lead to victory. Eventually, he'll corner her.

She never beat him honestly. Of course she couldn't. He is decades her senior and a veteran of real battle. He's a killer.

But he always told her—

"Anyone can lose a fight. A fight isn't a monotonic test of power. A fight is an event. A complexity. Fight it ten times and thirteen things happen.

A fight is like life. The only way to know what happens is to fight it. That's why I love a fight, Haliya."

She chooses a circular fight. Bladiator out and sweeping. Reflective cloak whirling. Sideways, like a crab—but the damn control deck is laid out like a *grid*, all lines of approach and retreat, it's good ground for Vondam—

"I can't kill you!" Vondam bellows. Carbon crystals spill from eviscerated machines as he sweeps the space between them clear. "You know it. I know it! But I only need to give you a survivable wound! I survived a hole in my brain, Squire—you can survive a lot of holes in armor like this!"

Holes. Yes. *Holes*.

"Thank you for the idea, Syr!" she shouts back.

She retreats down the aisle into another cluster of Pinnacle control stacks. She flashes her armor's emitters. Sparks explode from metal all around her; she can see herself as he sees her, a small, beloved shape in silver and gray, lost in a field of pyrotechnics. Her armor reports a battle on another plane as her emitters clash with Vondam's, trying to cancel out each other's power, to create hot spots that jam or degrade the enemy's sensors. Her flash cost her that battle; she is losing emitters, losing the invisible war. Her armor's surface crackles with capacitance. The grounds in the heels of her boots discharge into the station with every step.

She breathes. You can't fight too hard and fast. For the sake of your body and your armor's limited power and heat capacity, you have to pace yourself. Nobody believes it, but a long fight really is cerebral.

But he presses. He sets the pace—she retreats toward Alpharael—

"He won't—be able—to intervene," Vondam grunts, lashing out on each syllable. "I have a—constant track—on him. Look—elsewhere."

She has reach, she can fend him back with her polearm if she attacks the space he's entering: "So—kill him—now!"

"He's—defenseless! I'm—still—a knight!"

"That didn't—stop you—at Taro-duend, Syr!"

He disengages for a moment. Just long enough to say it: “I had to. Protocol dictated it. The purpose of the anathalmanac’s protocol for the Endstone is to make every knight in that situation behave exactly the same way, so the stone can’t swap a zealous knight for a merciful one.”

“So it wasn’t you who chose to slaughter them,” she says, quick-stepping back and toward Alpharael. “The Sum chose it. I would’ve chosen it, too, if I were a good knight.”

He has answered the question she came here to ask. The fault is not in him, or in her. It is in the Sum.

“You’re working toward him. Why?” Vondam comes back at her. “He can’t kill me this time!”

But Alpharael has the hole in his hand.

Vondam doesn’t know about the hole.

But how can she get him close to Vondam, close enough to use it? His pulse-trains can saw through anything in this compartment except—

Her.

Put yourself between the innocent and danger, Haliya.

She slashes through a superconducting battery and flashes her emitters again. The discharge sets metal afire. Pinnacle emergency systems spray blobs of foam as she leaps and fires her thrusters. A tunnel of burned foam marks Vondam’s fire, but the foam soaks up enough energy to save her armor minus her main conformal antenna.

She lands between Vondam and Alpharael.

Alpharael crouches like a beast in his half-ruined armor. “I get it,” he says. “Go.”

Vondam leaps after her at bone-warping speed. She stays between him and Alpharael as he blasts her, a full pulse-train from both emitters, burning through her cloak and her left arm vambrace as she tries to cover her weakened chest. She smells hot glass, like metal in her throat. Then he’s on her—the first nine stabs hit in less than a second—there is no time for thought, just a shrimped-up defensive curl to put her shoulders and helm in the way—no, her neck. He will cut through her neck—

Alpharael leaps into her from behind. His Kav armor is massive, and he crushes her against Vondam. She loses her breath.

Vondam can’t get a weapon at Alpharael’s head or heart or spine. Haliya’s in the way. He still disarms Alpharael. His right bladiator blows out Alpharael’s left shoulder actuator. His left bladiator, tucked under Haliya’s armpit, saws off the Kav armor’s right cutting claw—

Exposing Alpharael’s bare right hand.

Alpharael reaches around Haliya and grips Syr Vondam by the back of the neck.

Vondam’s suit irradiates Alpharael’s hand with a burst of microwaves. Alpharael screams and flinches. His hand blisters and burns from within—

But he presses his sizzling flesh to the back of Vondam’s neck.

As Syr Vondam’s blades punch into her failing armor, Haliya embraces him and jabs her right thumb into the hole in Alpharael’s hand. Through the hole. Into the back of Vondam’s neck.

She digs her thumb into his vertebrae and pops them apart.

The second alien smashes into Tannuk from the side.

He goes down under an intrushing fountain of alien flesh, constantly swallowing itself. Webbed purple tentacles lash at the half-disassembled ship, converting structure into a white lattice of plates and cables.

“Tan!” Sami screams and lunges rapier first into the alien maw.

Tannuk roars and cuts. His huge work claws scissor through alien gore. The thing is unmoved, it draws the injured tissue away into its higher-dimensional body, rotates into place new flesh—

The new flesh is *burning* .

The alien keeps rotating, swallowing itself into newness, but the quicker it turns on that orthogonal lathe, the more it comes apart. Ash. Dust. Blasted ribbons.

It rotates apart. Like the trunk of a tree, obliterated, leaving all the branches to scatter.

Sami’s lunge crashes into the fission reactor housing beside Tan. “Are you all right? How did you—?”

“Wasn’t me.”

“Then—”

“You must wash,” a voice says.

They look up, together.



Art by: Valera Lutfullina

A slender bipedal figure in a gray silk wrap and armor of woven reeds stands on the hangar ceiling. It has arms, a head, and a face: split down the center by a line of blue light. It holds a staff. On the end of the staff, there is nothing.

“You are dusted in potential matter,” the biped says. “It could be anything. It could be anywhere. You must wash it away or you will attract the eld.”

“Did you ...” Tannuk swats at a drifting chunk of alien. “Did you do that? Save me?”

“On the end of this staff,” the creature says, “is a thirty-meter-wide blackbody divergence in the ultraviolet range. It has been rotated into lamellar spaces where the stem of the eld dwells. Thus, I strike at my prey. I am called Tumulus, or Barrow. I am a sentinel at the cofferdam.”

“A Drix ...” Sami breathes. Goosebumps prickle their wrists. “Tumulus, or Barrow, please. Do you love cats?”

“No,” the Drix says. “They attract predators. I have saved the beautiful insect and delivered her to her post. Now I must hunt. Please spread the word to your fellow kins that they must wash away the potential matter.”

“How do we wash it?”

But the Drix makes a motion like a drawing in the air, and space unseams itself, wraps around the Drix, closes again. Barrow is gone.

“Oh ...” Sami breathes. “Oh, Tan, no, we *can’t* leave ...”

“What? Why?”

“Mirri’s still here. She’s here on Infinite Guideline. She weftwalked again. And the Drix said cats draw predators—”

“Captain. Captain.” Tannuk grabs a handful of PTS cable and throws it to Sami. “Take hold. Come to me. Mirri’s safe. She’s safe.”

“She’s not safe. They’re eating this place! They’re going to eat her!”

“Captain. Take hold of the rope.”

“Tan, you aren’t listening, we have to go out there now, we have to check every single stasis cask in this hangar, and then we have to find a directory of every stowage on the station, and we have to open all the casks, every single one until we find her, and then we have to keep her calm and safe until we can get her back to the *Seriema*, and then we have to make sure she’s never scared again so she doesn’t—”

“Captain. Captain Sami. You’re having a panic attack.”

“Tannuk, you aren’t listening—”

He wraps his arms around Sami. He draws them away from the skeletal ship, this dead ship.

“I am listening,” Tannuk says. “I can’t decide what to do next. I need you to do it for me. Are we going back to the *Seriema* to finish the job for the Metalman? Or are we going to look for Mirri? It’s your choice.”

It’s not a choice at all. They’re going to look for Mirri, wherever she went—

She’d go to a safe place. She’d go on a ship that looked like the *Seriema*. And maybe, by some feline instinct, she knows that stasis casks are the safest place.

It’s not a choice at all because both choices lead to the same place.

Sami grips Tannuk’s helmet. “I know what to do, Tan. I know what to do.”

Vondam could still control his armor through his nerve interface. But his squire reaches through the hole in her enemy’s hand and cuts her knight’s nerve interface away.

She is not crying; she is not afraid. She finds she only wants to carry this out as swiftly as she can and go.

Now Vondam is helpless. He is only human: all his germline modifications and recombinant augments can't save him from the need for a spinal column. Maybe he wishes, now, that he had replaced his nerves with incaglas, so he could think with light.

"I have made my report," she tells him. "I cannot serve the Sum because I believe the Sum is wrongly calculated. Therefore, I must lessen the Sum, so that, in seeking to greaten itself, it will amend its calculations to show mercy. I also ask pardon for Alpharael. He chose to turn away from INEVITA and should be granted a new life."

"Kill me," he says.

"Vondam," she says, no Syr. "You know I can't."

"You will try to escape with the Endstone. Our fleet will destroy your ship, and if that fails, the fleet will destroy Infinite Guideline. The Sum demands I stop you before that can happen."

"And the only thing you can do now," she realizes, "is demand that I kill you, so that maybe I will stumble on my love for you and hesitate."

"No. I must be *destroyed*, Haliya. I failed because the Endstone still moves me. I am anstruth. I am not who I was, I am a curse, I will lessen the Sum. I cannot bear it. *Kill me, Haliya.*"

She lifts Alpharael off her and rises to her feet. Stares down at that battered, beloved face. He was so good to her. He had so much left to teach.

But the teaching was interrupted by another lesson. She cannot do what the Sum asks. She cannot kill her way toward a better tomorrow. If there is a drowning man between her and the best destiny of the cosmos—she cannot swim past him. She must help him back to shore. Though it means turning back and never making the crossing.

The shattered, sparking ruin of the control deck slowly floods with emergency foam. It hardens on Vondam's armor like meringue.

"Let him live," Alpharael pants. He's burned badly, and it has his blood up. "You don't want to kill him, it's obvious. So don't. You. Vondam. It's better if you live."

Vondam's eyes flick to him. "Why?"

"Don't be a hypocrite," Alpharael says. "You just said it. You can't make it right. So live with your failure and try not to fail again. Go throw yourself before the Kav and let them execute you. Or go sun yourself into a raisin. I don't care."

"Quiet, hollow man. I'm not speaking to you. *Why?* Why do you need so desperately to leave this system? Is it because we succeed? Is that it? Anathema? We will relight Sothera, and you can't survive the radiance? Is that why you had to call Alpharael to you and flee?"

Alpharael rolls his eyes. "You think you can talk to the rock? Fine. Rock here. We are going to feed everything in Sothera to the supervoid and concatenate it with Point Prime and it will all be reborn into the Next Eternity. It's inevitable. So, I'm moving on to new stars, to see them turned into cenotaphs to the glory of HIM WHO FALLS. There. Happy?"

Alpharael dips his limbs into the Pinnacle emergency foam, trying to seal it back up for the return to the *Seriema*. "We have to go," he says. "I need the Endstone to guess the codes to the warp ferries. Are you coming, Haliya? Or are you going to stay here and play martyr?"

"No," she says. "I'll go. I made my report and begged your pardon. I've been cast out of the Free Company, but I am still a Summist. I place myself on errantry. Syr ..."

"It's all right," Vondam says, still smiling a little. "I like it when you call me Syr. Always did. Made me feel ... worth it. Oh, child. What did we do? How did we let this happen?"

"Syr," she says, unable to break the habit of respect, "it wasn't the Endstone. You just shouldn't have murdered all those Kav. That's all. I couldn't abide it. I won't see you again, Syr."

"You will," Vondam says, sadly. "You're my responsibility, Haliya. Even as my failure."

She cannot bear to watch him watching her. She flees. (go to Revision 16 (Exile Target Ship))

Revision 16 (Exile Target Ship)

Sami and Tannuk almost make it home free.

But there's a huge, armored form drifting outside the *Seriema*'s hatch. A hulk wrapped in a tissue of black metal, highlighted by purple veins of condensed event. That's alabile. The war metal of the Monoists.

The worshippers of INEVITA have taken the *Seriema*.

Sami tries to brake and cover. Instead, they plunge straight into the armored figure. It has become the center of space and time.

"This is the grace of gravity," the armor rumbles. A single purple eye tracks Sami from the center of its head. "Gravity is the gift of purpose. A free path through space feels like nothing. Effortlessly, you speed to your fate. And when you are close enough to fate, time and space change places. Going down becomes the same as passing time. The absence of effort, the geodesic of—"

"That's *my* ship!" Sami snarls and gets the antenna rapier up.

They stab the Monoist right in the chest. The event of the collision becomes a flicker of purple light and drifts off around the curve of the armor.

"The Endstone is aboard," the gravkill paladin says. "You will aid Alpharael of Secundi. You allow the stone to guide you to its purpose. It is the will of INEVITA. It does not matter if you understand."

Now Sami feels rude. Stabbing is no way to make an introduction. "You're—letting me go?"

"The Endstone has come here, to the eternity column. If it wishes to go through the eternity column, then it will, and we will aid it."

"So, you sent all these ships here—all these warriors—those *things* —"

"Things?"

"The things that made *those*," Tannuk roars, pointing to the obscene graphs drifting in space. "The space squids with the appetite for everything!"

You'd think the hulking armor couldn't shrug, but the metal layered like deli meat is surprisingly flexible. "They have not troubled me. If they destroy the enemies of INEVITA, then they are in accord with the will of INEVITA. It would be hard to comply with the will of INEVITA while under assault by Sunstar." The genderless, rumbling voice chuckles. "Sunstar. A word so good they used it twice. We should be the voidholes, eh?"

"So—we can just go aboard?" Sami asks.

"Yes. But I will accompany you."

“We already have Alpharael.”

“I look forward to speaking to the blessed one. His twin has plummeted, but he remains. This is an omen.” The huge form emits a long thump that stretches Sami’s bones. “I have alerted the faithful that the *Seriema* will fly now. You can be assured of our protection. I have earned the war name—”

The armor flashes violet. Jets of energy sputter from its seams—trapped events crackling back into reality, releasing years, *decades* of battle—shrapnel and energy beams crack and whine in all directions as the alabile collapses.

The Monoist manages to lash out, once, at its murderer. The tidal growler tears a fist-sized hole through Infinite Guideline’s hull and both walls of the docking umbilical beyond.

But its real target, struck in the chest, doesn’t so much as move.

The gravkill paladin collapses into a crumpled ball, like crushed foil.

Tannuk and Sami stare in horror.

“Come aboard,” Tezzeret calls from the docking umbilical to the *Seriema*. The holes in the walls flow together and seal. “There are others coming. I employed you to bring *me* to the Endstone’s maker, Captain. I am not taking new passengers.”

“You just—that was a gravkill paladin—”

“I would have had less trouble with the Solar Knight, but the two apostates handled themselves.”

Tezzeret gestures. Sami’s armor reports nothing, no field or influence. But the crushed ball of alabile drifts into Tezzeret’s outstretched arms.

“You have such fascinating machines here,” Tezzeret murmurs. “But they do still answer me.”

Alpharael and Haliya fly back to the *Seriema* under the terrifying scrutiny of warships.

Their suits strain and blister under the sheer heat of probing sensors. Both sides of the war are watching the *Seriema*. Waiting for any sign of activity—any report that their forces have boarded it and made it secure.

Tiny white puffs ahead of them, and two cheerful running lights, draw Alpharael’s eyes, a Pinnacle warp ferry maneuvers like a friendly shrimp to grapple with the *Seriema*’s prow.

“I still can’t believe you guessed that code,” Haliya says, breaking her long silence.

“INEVITA provides,” Alpharael says, which is probably not wise, because Haliya’s the one with the thrusters and she could throw him into space.

Some Free Company warship decides that the warp ferry is an unacceptable risk of escape. Targeting lidar bites into the *Seriema*. The raster of the beam speckles its hull with black pixels.

Then, everything freezes.

Looking up, down, all around, Alpharael finds the battle slowed to a crawl. The stars are burning brighter than he’s ever seen. Paintbrush strokes of energetic violence cover the void.

“What’s this?” Haliya calls through her grip around his waist. She’s steering his hulked armor with her thrusters but struggling. Vondam hit her quite badly.

“Tactical event horizon,” he realizes. “A cherazad! The Monoists must’ve sent an inevitator to protect us. We have time to hook up the warp ferry and go!”

“Oh,” Haliya says. “Don’t your people *want* the Endstone? Why would they help us go?”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the ass, Haliya!”

“What? *What?*”

She pushes him into the *Seriema*’s dorsal airlock. It cycles him through, and he struggles out of the Kav armor. He rushes to the hold before she’s even in behind him. The only reason he could’ve guessed the warp ferry’s code correctly is that he used the Endstone—but he hasn’t used the Endstone yet. What happens if he can’t get it out of stasis and use it? Will there be a paradox? Will he be suspended in an eternal error, cast out of the eternities as an orphan from the flow time?

He finds Captain Sami fidgeting beside the active stasis cask. “I am *glad* to see you,” they gasp, throwing their arms around Alpharael. Alpharael hugs them back, quite unsure what made Sami so glad to see them. “Tannuk’s up in the cockpit readying to fly. We’ve got to get this open.”

“Yes—I need to use the stone—”

“Yes, I know—”

“You do?”

“To figure out our course once we make it into warp?”

“Yes,” Alpharael says, “but also to decrypt the warp ferry—”

“But you’ve already done that—”

“But I won’t have done it unless I do it now—”

“Never mind! Let’s open it up!”

Sami triggers the stasis cask’s release and throws themselves down on all fours. They look pathetically hopeful.

The stasis cask deactivates. The mirrored barrier vanishes.

The Endstone waits.

Alpharael reaches for it like it’s the box full of everything he loves.

In the dark behind it, a tiny voice says, “Nyeh?”

Sami tries to say something but all that comes out is a sob.

A cat trots out of the dark. It sniffs skeptically at Alpharael and crashes head first into Sami’s outstretched hand. When Sami doesn’t move, the cat rises on its hind legs, bunts its face against Sami’s, makes a sound a bit like a duck with its tail feathers stepped on, and begins to lick Sami’s forehead. When Sami tries to move, the cat shouts, “Nyah!” and grabs at Sami’s head with one paw, as if to hold them in place. Presumably Sami doesn’t smell like the cat at all. This will probably require a lot of licking to fix.

The Endstone brushes Alpharael’s fingers, as if to say, *Wishes do come true*.

“You still won’t get this ship repaired without me,” Tezzeret says from behind Alpharael’s ass. “Don’t consider yourself released.”

Sami doesn’t seem to hear. Sami is sobbing with joy.

Tezzeret taps Alpharael on the shoulder. His touch is heavy and frigid. “Use this.” He drops a reading rag beside Alpharael. He’s already called up the map of Sothera. The man learns.

“First, I have to make my guess correct.”

“What guess?”

“The code to release the warp ferry.”

Tezzeret cuffs him, light enough to smash him into the wall of the cask. “I told you the code. Would we have come all this way to steal a warp ferry without the code to use it? Now, use the map. I’ll not treat you roughly again. Here—take it.”

Alpharael blinks away stars to find Tezzeret offering a fingernail-size crystal: “You want me to drop that?”

“Yes,” Tezzeret says. “It’s a reminder of things forgotten. Give it back when you’re done.”

The crystal projects light when Alpharael touches it: pinpoints that might be stars, or sun on the tips of ocean waves. Afraid that it might be some kind of radiation urchin, Alpharael tumbles it onto the map of Sothera. It bounces twice and settles on the very edge of the reading rag, and the solar system, too. “We fly that way?”

“We warp that way. Until the stone tells us we’ve reached its goal.” Tezzeret claps him happily on the shoulder, throwing him to the floor. “We will see what god or monster made this thing. And I will decide whether it is to be fled, bargained with, or overthrown.”

Turning the stasis cask back on may be the hardest thing Sami has ever done.

But Mirri will be safe in there. Until there’s time to find some proper food. Time to let her explore the ship, re-establish her scent, observe the newcomers from safe places, and feel at home again.

They slam down into the captain’s chair beside Tannuk, wiping tears away. “Good things, Tannuk. Good things. I have the ship.”

“You have the ship. We are done with departure prep. Separation in thirty. Your switches are set for,” Tannuk drums on the console, “column interface maneuver.”

They’ve never done this before. But Sami has the checklist memorized anyway. The ferry will do all the hard work—issuing maneuvering commands to the *Seriema*’s jets, entangling with the column’s wedge of laminar topology, and riding it redways into warp.

The warp ferry transmits an error.

“What?” Sami cries. “Time stamp error? No pingback from the column?”

“We’re in a cherazad!” Haliya comes trampling into the cockpit on armored feet.

“A what?”

“A tactical blasphemy, a fast-time bubble! Can’t you see?”

The sky is frozen. So *that’s* why nobody has lasered them to pieces just for clearing moorings. “But we can’t talk to the column unless we’re in the same timeframe—the clocks won’t align—”

“We can’t leave the bubble! The Free Company fleet will kill us the moment we prepare to warp.”

So close. *So close to the end.* And yet—Sami can’t see a way—

“We’re under fire!” Tannuk roars.

Hot spots and penetrations spackle the ship’s display. “Solar Knights outside!” Haliya calls. “They’re leaping from the dock. We’re being boarded!”

Not now. Not with Mirri back. Sami growls and switches the arcjets to manual. They do the hands dance, quick and sure.

With a drumbeat of thruster fire, they jerk the *Seriema* free of the mooring. Apply thrust: forward. Straight for the center of Infinite Guideline. Faster. *Faster*. Until there is no possibility they can brake in time. Collision is guaranteed.

Time to play chicken with a stationary object.

The *Seriema* bursts out of the cherazad.

The time stamp error clears. The warp ferry communicates with Infinite Guideline.

In a few lines of diagnostic text, Sami reads—

“The Column is closed to outbound traffic. Sync request rejected.

NEARFIELD LIDAR WARNING! IMMINENT COLLISION!

EMERGENCY COLLISION ALERT!”

The *Seriema*’s ESM block detects the targeting lidar of ship-to-ship lasers imaging their hull—

The viy systems aboard the warp ferry and Infinite Guideline search the decision space, looking for any option to avert the collision—

And then Sami wins the game of chicken.

Because there is only one option. Only one way to get the *Seriema* clear before it smashes into Infinite Guideline. Or explodes under laser fire and smashes into Infinite Guideline.

The only option is to give Sami what they want.

The column opens. The spike of laminar geometry within meshes with the warp ferry’s eternity drive. Like a virus penetrating a cell.

Key meets lock. Eternity opens.

The Seriema falls redward into warp. (go to Revision 16 (Final Revision))

Revision 16 (Final Revision)

Afterward—when wounds are tended, armor stripped, weapons stowed, bruises prodded, radiation doses assessed and recorded, luxurious zero-G baths taken, bruises prodded, stasis casks briefly unsealed—they gather in the *Seriema*’s galley.

Even Tezzeret appears. Sami thinks he may be playing with the wreckage of the Monoist armor he crushed. When he comes over from his black urchin ship, he doesn’t use the airlock. He just opens a hole in the hull.

The *Seriema* flies on its repaired fusion drive, soaring through the superstructure of warp. There’s gravity to set a table. Sami brews and pours the freeze-dried coffee they’ve been saving for a special occasion. Coffee addiction is a serious vice, but this is a great day, so it’s allowable.

Tezzeret offers a toast. “Where I come from, there are elder dragons, unholy machines, and sphinxes with metal to surpass men. They all sought to master me. But I survived. Why?” He thumps his chest. “The spark. In *here* . The fire of possibility. And what fuels it? The unknown becoming known. You discover what you do not have. And you *take it* . We have taken a piece of the unknown.”

Everyone stares at him.

“You’ve done well,” he offers. “All of you.”

“Have we?” Haliya asks from Sami’s left. “Pinnacle attacked. Thousands are dead.”

“The dead chose their fights,” Tezzeret says.

“Except the Kav. And the Pinnacle crew killed in the fighting.”

Sami, as table host, must deflect this brewing argument. “Have you ever seen this view before, my lord?”

Sami calls up an exterior camera view of the warp. The enormous geometries of the laminae—attic and cellar of the Edge—reach to infinity around them. Like towering cities of shape, built by the intersection of fields and geometry on different lamina. Dawn through the clouds of a topological heaven. There is no light here, but the eternity column’s beacon radiates through the geometry here and inspectral renders it as warm color.

You fly through warp the same way you fly through space. But you don’t get to the same places. They’re headed toward the edge of Sothera—the Wurmwall. This direction has been bothering Sami. They have a sense of what the Endstone wants now.

“Bring it out,” Sami says.

Alpharael drops the Endstone on the table.

Haliya stiffens. Tannuk reels back, overturning his chair. Mirri, curled up on Sami’s lap, raises her head and goes back to sleep.

“We’re waiting for it to do something,” Sami explains. “Alpharael’s the one it likes. So, I let him handle it.”

Haliya sticks a finger in her cup of coffee, connecting herself to the heat bath, trying to use it as a kind of statistical ward. “Aren’t you all worried it’s possessing you? Making you do things? Altering your choices?”

“I haven’t done a single thing out of character in my entire life,” Sami says.

“It’s changed,” Alpharael says. “Look at it. It’s gone fully egg.”

The stone has lost its glistening facets. It is now a gleamingly black ovoid. It rolls on its side around the table and settles itself, pointing to Tezzeret. He grins at it like a hungry dog.

“What’s *your* deal, anyway?” Haliya asks him.

“Far away.” Tezzeret kneels, as if to look the stone in the eye. “I have an interest in metals. A kinship with them. When I washed ashore in your strange reality, I made it my task to learn all your metals and their arts. Sigma caught my interest. A world rich with ores, but not with miners. Was it an opportunity overlooked? Or a threat? Where metal gathers, sometimes danger grows ... then Mm’menon showed me.”

He reaches out one clawed metal finger. Almost touches the stone. Does not.

“Mm’menon taught me languages in exchange for my help pursuing the anomalies that fascinated them. Mm’menon and I agreed that Sigma was an anomaly. So I began to plan an expedition. And do you know what I realized then? Do you know, Sami?”

Sami takes a long draw of coffee. “That I was the very best for the job?”

“That I was weak. *Suspiciously* weak. That my organization lacked specialists in the recovery and handling of artifacts. A mistake I would not make. So how could I have made it?”

“You didn’t,” Alpharael guesses. “You sent them to Sigma and they—”

“Vanished. As if I’d never employed them at all.”

“But why? If the Endstone wanted to leave Sothera?”

“Because I was not yet a route for the Endstone to leave Sothera. I realized that if whatever power dwelled in Sothera had the power to redact my own attempts to retrieve it, it could also redact my *knowledge* of it. Yet it had not. Why?”

“It wanted something from you,” Tannuk growls. “So, you sent us.”

“Yes. I chose the most desperate, disposable pawns in my employ. So that they could not succeed except by the favor of the thing hidden on Sigma. And I made it my genuine intention to bring that thing, once it was in my possession, wherever it wanted to go.”

“That’s been bothering me,” Sami says. They throw a rag on the table, their course drawn, in rough warp-to-world mapping, as a green line across Sothera. “I thought this course looked familiar. Out into the Garden of Apeiron, where all the cosmic gas that Sothera is sucking in collides with itself and heats up. And then, if you cross it, you end up in the Wurmwall.”

“Uh-oh,” Tannuk says. “Uh-oh.”

“What’s uh-oh?” Haliya demands.

Tan leans out over the map. His torn horn-hair’s wrapped in cloth. “After I left Kavaron, I wanted to die. So I worked search and rescue in the outer system. We flew out of a station in the Garden. Our worst calls were for ships lost in the Wurmwall. One day, we responded to the loss of a scientific expedition, trying to communicate with the creatures that live out there. That’s where I met Captain Sami. On the wreck of the *Wurm Speaker*.”



Art by: Hardy Fowler

“And that’s where we’re headed?” Haliya cries.

“No. We’re headed somewhere light-minutes away.”

“Yeah,” Sami says. “But that was years ago. The wreck has had time to move on its orbit.” They mark the wreck of the *Wurm Speaker* on the map. “Assume a circular orbit around Sothera, and by now, it’s ... here.”

They drag the wreck forward, around the Wurmwall, until it crosses the green line of the *Seriema*’s course.

“What are you saying?” Alpharael demands. “We’re going to a wrecked science ship?”

“No,” Tezzeret says. “They are saying we are going to the place that killed it.”

“How long do we have until arrival?”

Sami sees stars.

They sit up and grip the table. A terrible silence has taken the *Seriema*.

“The engine!” Tannuk says. “The engine’s out!”

“Can’t be, we have gravity—”

A proximity alarm wails from the cockpit. Their view of the warp outside reverts to an emergency display. Cutting off the view of something closing around the *Seriema* like a hand.

“Ah,” Tezzeret says. “Here it comes.”

The Endstone turns slowly on the table.

Stars gather before Sami’s eyes. Distant galaxies. Pulsars whirling in a polarized vacuum. The cosmos splits open—right in the middle of the *Seriema*’s galley.

A beautiful, beautiful creature steps through.



Art by: Chris Rallis

Its face is a green mask, scaled with the oxides of eons. It has lips, eyes, a nose, a brow—but its ears are whorled knives above empty cheeks. Behind its face is nothing but pale light. Sami’s mind finds it primally satisfying, like a mold from which humans were pressed, like a better shape. Leaves of metal wrap slender arms, broad shoulders, a perfect chest, a waist so narrow it simply disappears. It is not gendered but contains all the charms Sami finds in the gendered. Wedges of leaves gather beneath a tall diamond codplate that suggests nothing except some ancient eros, some long-ago connection to flesh and reproduction, which has diminished into an aesthetic or an abstraction. If it once knew beauty as a signal of fitness—like any animal might—now it knows beauty as a sign of likeness to itself. It has no genitalia because it need not reproduce because it is finished, it is the end, it is final and complete.

Alpharael grabs the Endstone.

It buzzes in his hand like a wasp. He cries out and drops it.

The figure translates beside him.

The Endstone falls into its hand.

The figure cups Alpharael’s face. He screams. A voice sounds, though the face does not move. “Touched by the core. Blessed ...”

Alpharael drops like his mind has taken flight.

Haliya lunges. Without her armor’s power supply, her bladiator is only a molecule-fine cutting edge.

The expressionless thing reaches out to catch her. Haliya’s blade goes through two of its fingers. The other fingers on its hand fasten around Haliya’s throat and *crush*. She falls, tearing at her neck, making an awful sound.

Tezzeret lunges to catch the severed fingers.

“You smell of aether,” the voice says. It reaches out with its cut hand and touches Tezzeret’s chest, above his possibly absent heart. Nothing happens. It makes a soft, curious noise. “You taste of the Wall.”

Tannuk puts his claws up, faking surrender. Sami lifts a hand. “Hello. Who are you? Is this stone yours?”

With their other hand, they reach over Mirri—who is trembling, claws locked into Sami’s trousers—and draw their antenna rapier beneath the table.

“I am the last thing,” the beautiful android says. The way it pronounces that single sound, I, is full of dreadful love. “So, it comes to me.”

Sami glances at Tannuk. At Tezzeret. No sign of a plan. This thing can be cut by a bladiator—a single transmission from the rapier might kill it—but where? The head?

“Not here,” it says. Looking directly at Sami. “Not now. But the serpent needs a hero. Find me if you can. Put your lance through my heart. You’ll come to nothing in the end.”

Sami jerks the rapier to bear on the android’s chest.

But stars and nebulae close before it, and it is gone. Just gone. The Endstone with it.

Tezzeret’s mission is complete. The Endstone has been delivered. He has his glimpse of higher power.

Sami leaps up, tumbling Mirri onto the deck, and rushes to Haliya. Her throat is crushed. It’s treatable, but she needs air *now*. “Tan, get her to a bunk!”

“He’s out,” Tan reports, leaving Alpharael. “You! Tezzeret—help him!”

The Metalman stares at the two fingers he caught in his claw. They seem delicate; almost insubstantial. Their severed ends flicker with violet light.

He looks up at Sami and smiles carnivorously. “So. You *do* have something like a Planeswalker.”

He touches the tip of one of the severed fingers with a curled claw. Pale purple light leaks from it like ichor. Tezzeret stares into it. Inhales deeply.

“That was very aspirational,” he says. “Don’t you think?”

Sami doesn’t know what to say to that. Mirri is staring, wide-eyed, at the place where the cosmos split open. Sami picks her up, holds her close. Just for a moment—they need to go help Tan with Haliya.

But Mirri is here. Mirri is *still* here. One thing is all right.

The End