

# Episode 8

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From set *Edge of Eternities*  
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### Revision 14 (Haliya Lives)

The Kav have opened the sluiceways to flood the slag field. The crashing cataracts give Sami and Tam just enough cover to slip around the rim wall, back toward the *Seriema*.

The palestar flying circles over Taro-duend opens fire on the airport. Pulsing laser fire crackles like laughter. A sputtering white electrical fire climbs the control tower and the weather radar.

"I recognize this," Sami says, staring at the distant devastation. "*I recognize this*. I saw this on Sigma, Tan! But I didn't. It didn't happen. What—"

"Come on, Captain. We've got to move."

But they're too late. Someone has found the *Seriema*, and the prow cargo ramp is down, opening the long jut of the number-one cargo bay to boarding. Sami bolts for the ship, shouting "*Seriema*, deploy—" Something hits Sami. They fall on their face, shuddering.

Tan grabs them in one work claw and drags them to cover. When Sami recovers enough to look up again, they find a preposterous sight: a suit of golden armor standing, frozen, over Alpharael, who is huddled wretchedly around its ankles. In one hand, he holds the weird rock from Sigma. In his other, the jet injector full of primary paralytic Sami left in his cabin. By his face, a spittle-covered telescope bearing rolls in small circles.

"She killed you," Alpharael says. "I saw it. But—she didn't. I think ... I don't know."

"You should put that rock back in stasis," Tan says, very casually. Sami looks around in alarm. That's the casual that comes before violence.

Alpharael looks at the rock, and then at Sami. "I guess," he says. "She was going to kill me. But she wanted me to change something. In the past. She wanted me to stop someone from dying. Is that ... could I do that? Could I save—could I stop something from happening?"

"Yes," Tannuk says. "But you might not like the price."

The empty Kav expeditionary armor looms behind Alpharael.

Sami carefully approaches the Summist armor. Just because the Summist seems paralyzed doesn't mean the armor's viy won't defend it. "How did you manage to get an injector through this?"

"I have a hole," Alpharael says. "You told me that injector was for seizures. It was a paralytic? You gave me a paralytic and said it was for seizures?"

"Yeah," Sami says, distracted. There's a pendulum dangling from the brow of the Summist's helmet. Sami gives it a push to keep it going. Maybe it's a failsafe, and if it stops, the Summist will explode.

A tiny voice sounds through the helmet. The voice of the Summist's tactical radio, passed through bone and flesh and alloy.

*"Haliya. I'm sorry. " And then the quick trill of a channel change. "Vondam to all units. We are going to protocol seven. You have two minutes. Flare Three, I want you over Star Two's last position, fangs out. She's gone silent and the target may rabbit. Galvarinha, get in there and help Star Two. "*

"Protocol seven," Sami says. "In two minutes. What's protocol seven?"

"I think it's when they kill us all," Alpharael says.

Tannuk bellows a long cry of frustration and runs for the cockpit.

"Hey, Alpharael," Sami says, pausing on Tannuk's heels.

"Me?" Alpharael says, massaging his jaw.

"Is that rock magic? Does it give us good luck? Can you use it to get us out of here?"

He blanches, which is a pretty severe reaction on a man who's already pale as cheese. "It doesn't—I can't make it do anything. It didn't stop her."

"Yes, it did. You just stopped her."

"Huh." He looks at it. "I guess I did ... and you *are* both back here safe ..."

"This is a bad idea," Tannuk shouts back from above. "This is a really bad idea."

"We're already dead," Sami says. "Our chances of flying out of here with a palestar and Hopelights overhead are zero. So how much worse could things get?"

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Sami slams down in the pilot's seat. "We'll fly with the fuel we've got," they announce, as if there's a choice. "Tan, do your codes for the Guns still work?"

"No. But—"

"But the subedar's armor in the hold had new codes?"

Tan growls affirmatively. "And the encryption's no match for Pinnacle breakers. I pulled them already."

So maybe—if they can get past the Hopelights—there is a chance. Sami does the hands dance, singing quietly to herself, switch, switch, switch, guard up, switch down, leave the guard up, there is no time—

"Inspectral up," Tannuk reports.

Sami gets a couple frames of image from the inspectral: the mouth of the cavern straight ahead, the slag field outside, and something bright and hot coming straight at them.

Then a blinding laser snuffs out the image. Aftermarket alarms go off as the ship's illegal countermeasures package detects an imminent laser attack and fires bundles of aeromuck and mirrordust.

The sonic boom of the Hopelight passing overhead rattles the *Seriema* on her landing legs.

"Jets!" Tannuk calls.

Sami gooses the ship up on a pulse of thrust. The *Seriema*, unloaded, barely fueled, leaps into the cave ceiling and smashes her radar. Sami takes the crunch as good news, she really wants to fly, and translates forward, hard, out of the cave mouth, over the slag field, *up*. Debris bangs off the hull like the footfall of a stampede. Sami hauls back, whooping. *They're flying!*

“Airfoil deploying,” Tan reports. “Get her in lift attitude.”

Sami skews the ship ninety degrees on its side so it stands tall. Somewhere, Alpharael yowls. “Done—” There is a louder bang. “Hopelight lasered something off us,” Tannuk reports, and then wails. “The main drive! They took out the mag nozzle!”

“We don’t have fuel for it anyway!”

One of the airfoils has jammed halfway open, but that’s fine, the *Seriema* will just have to substitute thrust for lift—throttles open, let’s go, let’s go !

“We’re dead,” Tannuk says. “We’re dead.”

“Yeah,” Sami says. Kinematically, it is impossible to escape the palestar. The nuncio lasers on that patrol ship will go through ten meters of aluminum a second. “But we’re not dead *yet* . They’re shooting to disable. They want us down in one piece.”

“They want the rock,” Tannuk guesses.

“I don’t think so. I think they want the soldier in armor down in our hold. I heard their top guy calling for her. He called her Haliya.”

Tannuk tugs a horn-hair until the top layer peels off in his hands. “We need a scam.”

“Hostage?”

“Yeah. Get down to the hold and grab—”

A bladiator intrudes between them and taps the main display.

“Looking for a hostage?” Haliya says.

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It didn’t take long for Haliya’s armor to identify and release a counteragent for the paralytic drug. But it was an infuriating wait. Alpharael tried to get her armor off, even poking his finger through her helmet to search for the nerve interface. How does he do that? There’s no drop in capacitance or sensor failure. And why doesn’t he just reach in and pull out her eyes?

Why doesn’t he kill her?

She remembers killing the human and the Kav. But that must be wrong. They got up and ran up to the cockpit.

This must be the object at work. Alpharael has changed something. But how could he change what she did? She has the pendulum, she’s armored against it.

The ship lurches into motion. The whole cargo bay tips on its side. Kav armor tumbles like war table miniatures, and in all that tumult, she feels the cool kiss of a jet injection. Her armor has released her. She can move!

She grabs Alpharael by the throat. He screeches and kicks her. It would be very easy to close his throat forever. But something’s bothering her.

“We’re supposed to be dead,” she says. “All of us. Protocol seven.”

He slaps at her face with his right hand, but she cooks him with a microwave emitter and his spine jerks his hand away before his brain can even get to screaming. “Don’t touch me.” She fries his left hand, too, so he drops the object. “Or that. Put that in the stasis cask.”

When that's done, and the cask is active, she marches him up to the cockpit, bladiator in her free hand. He jabbers, but she's not paying any attention. The human and the Kav are talking about a hostage.

"Looking for a hostage?" Haliya says, throwing Alpharael down between their seats. "Land this ship. Put me on one-forty-two." That's COMASU, the Pinnacle distress frequency everyone's supposed to monitor. Syr Vondam will hear.

The ship's captain is a pale, dark-eyed youth, probably not much older than Haliya. They're armed with an antenna rapier and a charming smile. "Land? When we've got such a fine escort out of here?"

They bump the display over to rear camera.

A Hopelight warmaker hangs directly off their stern. It's so close and so agile it could probably peel this ship apart like a model kit, until it was nothing but engines and a power reactor and a skeleton, with Haliya and the three others standing in an open cockpit enjoying the wind.

But that's not what the charming captain wants Haliya to see.

The view is clear. The storm clouds have parted.

The *Sundog* looms over the Kav settlement at Taro-duend like a scepter.

It has retracted its airfoil and tipped vertical, floating like a tower on pillars of arcjet thrust. It is stunningly vulnerable. But this is necessary: the *Sundog* is recovering its soldiers.

Free Company troops swarm up from the boardwalks and rooftops below. They rise on armor jets or chained to tabors, their squad-level utility mechans. The *Sundog*'s skiffs are down, too, loading wounded.

All else is light. A clean light. A pure light. But not a good light.

The *Sundog* is killing everything in Taro-duend with its lasers.

There are nuncio emitters all over the ship, though the weapon has two primary beam cores. Then there are the point-defense lasers meant to engage incoming missiles. And the lidar arrays, which can kill unarmored targets at close range. All of them firing with plain, unhurried efficiency.

Each living thing or working mechanism in Taro-duend is a hot spot on thermal imaging. The *Sundog*'s fire-control systems convert each hot spot into a target. One by one, the lasers service the targets. The point-defense weapons set people on fire as they rasterize the crowds below. The nuncios flash entire bodies to plasma. It's hard to say which is less merciful.

Many of the Kav out in the streets are on fire. Think about what that means, Haliya. Their flesh is hot enough to create a self-sustaining reaction with the oxygen in the air. And what are those burning Kav doing? They're trying to put each other out. Lumbering around gasping and beating each other with their claws. They throw themselves onto each other to snuff out the blaze, but all they do is make piles of burning bodies.

And the ones who can get away are going into the houses. The *Sundog* lets them gather, then sets the houses on fire.

Haliya goes cold. From her brow to the soles of her feet.

She has never seen—she never imagined—she cannot *believe*—

Such an exercise of power against the helpless. So they rioted, so they attacked—so? It was their home. They didn't know anything about protocols or sacred objects. The Free Company is strong. It can survive the outrage of a few thousand Kav.

Unless those Kav are tainted by mere proximity to the object.

And she is in closer proximity.

“Why haven’t they killed us, too?” she demands.

“I think they don’t *want* to kill you,” the captain says.

The Kav in the other seat groans and tugs at his jaw. A hornlike spike comes free in his hand. Blood follows.

The palestar seems to hover at the center of a red flower. The edges of the petals are lines of laser light. The tips of the petals are the pyres of Kav.

“I saw this,” the captain says. “On Sigma. Glass flowers burned into the clay. The viy said they were lightning strikes. but they weren’t. It was laser fire. And then it ... *un* happened. The patrol ship never caught us. Now it’s happening here, instead. Anywhere the Metalman’s rock goes, the Free Company kills everyone.”

“It’s not my fault,” Alpharael says, from the floor. “I didn’t know. I just touched a rock. Captain Sami told me to do it. I didn’t mean to get anyone else hurt.”

Of course he did—he was a kamu-shiku, a deleter, a suicide commando. But she doesn’t care about that right now. There’s a Hopelight *right behind them*. “Why haven’t they killed us?” she repeats. “He knows the object’s here. It’s not back there. It’s on this ship. Put me on COMASU. Put me on!”

The captain touches switches, long-fingered, careful. Staring at her the whole time. “You’re on.”

“Syr Vondam. Syr Vondam, this is Squire Haliya. I am aboard the ship that *Flare Three* is tailing. The object is here! I have it! Stop killing the Kav, it’s *here*!”

She waits for *Flare Three* to fire. As it must. This is protocol. And you have to obey protocol every time, or it doesn’t work.

The palestar keeps firing into Taro-duend.

“Syr Vondam,” she repeats. “Syr Vondam, this is Squire Haliya. Come in.”

“*Haliya*. “The voice in her helm is thin and flat: the noise of the lasers exploding the air is interfering with radio. “*Thank the Sum. I thought—your armor reported you’d been incapacitated.* “

“Syr, cease fire on Taro-duend, I have the object here.”

“*I know. We’ll keep pace until you can kill the crew and force it down.* “

“Kill the crew and—Syr, we’ve gone to protocol seven!”

Thunderstorm static. Cosmic ray static. The throbbing static of lasers cutting air.

“Yes,” Vondam says.

“You have to destroy this ship! I’ve been exposed to the object. My own protections have been disturbed. My past choices have been altered. You said yourself that if Alpharael reached the object before you reached him, I would have to order your death. We traded places. Now you *must* order mine!”

“*Calmly, Haliya. We’ll retrieve the object and return it to Candela in stasis. Bring that ship down.* “

“Sir, you are killing every Kav in sight, you are murdering their *children*, you cannot spare me!”

Silence.

She tries to convince him the way he would try to convince her. “What if I’m an anstruth double now? What if I’ve been adjusted to guarantee the object’s escape, and it goes to the Monoists, and they throw it into Point Prime to the Immortal Faller, and the whole universe is revised in favor of their cause? If there’s even a one-in-a-trillion chance of that, the Sum must diminish, Syr, it must. And if letting me live causes the Sum to diminish, you cannot let me live! That is who we are, Syr, we greaten the Sum!”

Suddenly, Alpharael finds his breath: “Forget the Sum. Come on. Say ‘Forget the Sum.’ I did it. I said fuck the Plummet, fuck the faith of my life and my heart, I’m going to live. You can say forget the Sum. Just look. What do you see happening back there? Is this good? Is this what you wanted to be part of when you were small?”

“Shut up,” she snarls. “You’re a coward and you do the bidding of a stone. You don’t even know it, but you do.”

“Whose bidding are you doing?” the captain asks softly. “Look. Look what they’re doing back there.”

She finds herself trying to justify the atrocity before her, just because someone outside the faith has challenged it. “You’re—you’re exploiting the urgency of visible suffering and the limits of human scale sensitivity to compromise the long-term clarity of the Sum! Killing, uh, uh—” she stammers like she’s been asked an incident question and has no coherent response, “killing a few thousand people is intuitively wrong, but it’s nothing compared to a minute improvement in the possible outcome of a struggle over eons! Even, even a mild improvement in the faith’s strategic position will save more lives than we take here today!”

But she doesn’t believe it. She can’t take this poison pill of slaughter and dilute it down in the big tall glass of eternity until she can’t taste it any more. It’s right there. Walls, they’re *burning*.

“Look,” Tannuk says. “Look and see.”

The Kav points at the rear-view display. The palestar has finished recovering its soldiers. It stands like an obelisk over the smoking ruin of Taro-duend. The pace of its laser fire has lessened. Running out of targets.

The display paints a black ball over its stern.

The ball swells and becomes an oval, pointing down below. Then it swells to the sides like a bell. The *Sundog* moves up.

Haliya doesn’t understand.

“Oh, no,” the captain moans.

Then, Haliya does understand.

The palestar has ignited its main fusion engine. The *Sundog* is climbing away from Taro-duend on a nuclear blast. The fire is so bright that the screen is censoring it out. No, maybe the *sensors* are censoring it out, to protect themselves.



Art by: Yohann Schepacz

The Sunstar faith has given birth to a new sun. Those Kav buried deep enough to survive the radiation will be strangled as the oxygen burns away.

Tannuk roars in grief.

“The rock!” Alpharael cries. “Let me go get it, Captain! Let me stop this! I can get rid of—of—I can make it so this never happened!”

“It won’t work,” Sami says. “It didn’t work on Sigma, and it won’t work here. You’ll just make a ghost town. Everyone gone. But we won’t even remember why.”

What if there was a choice that didn’t suit the Sum, that didn’t point to the most probable good in the longest term, but you were sure it was still ... right? Necessary? Good?

The way Haliya knows that this eradication is evil?

Static floods the radio. The radiation of the fusion drive and its fireball.

But she says anyway: “Syr, kill me. If this object is worth so much. If the Sum requires it. I protect the innocent, and I must die before the innocent. It’s ridiculous to kill them all while letting me live! It’s hypocritical! If they must die, then kill me, too! Kill me, too! *Kill me, too!*”

No answer but the roar.

After a little while Captain Sami says: “May I take this as your permission to make my escape?”

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Tannuk has control of the ship’s communication lasers. But they can only talk to something in line of sight—and Kavaron, of course, has no satellites. They’d last about as long as wildebeest in a worm run.

But Tannuk has found something else.

Forty kilometers above the southern horizon is an armored stratosat balloon. Kavaron Before uses them to monitor Kavaron That Is, provide a tenuous communications link, and spot targets for the Guns.  
linebreak

Tannuk submits a request. The codes pulled from the subedar's armor clear.

The first sign is a "blorp" from the *Seriema*'s aftermarket ESM package. The electronic surveillance monitor has detected a new radar illuminating them.

Someone high above is taking their picture. The *Seriema*'s electronics complain; the lights flicker and dim; the radar is so powerful it hits like an electromagnetic pulse.

Aboard the *Sundog*, they understand at once what is happening. A laser flicks out and kills the stratosat.

Sami dumps the *Seriema*'s remaining fusion drive reaction mass straight into the pursuing Hopelight's face.

The Hopelight jinks vertically on a stab of thrust, reacquires the target, and—

Light.

The Guns of Kavaron fire.

The laser emitters are on Kavaron Before, but they can bounce off winged mirrors waiting in the stratosphere, reflective angels cruising forever on enormous nuclear-powered jets. In a stroke of wonderful irony, the mirrors have recently been upgraded with materials gifted by the Summist colony on Adagia.

The Hopelight, callsign *Flare Three*, flashes up white. The airfoil burns away. The ship's viy locks the pilot and systems operator in a crysfield and commands an emergency maximum-gravity evasion, but the fusion engine, fatally exposed by its angle, misfires and destroys itself along with the fighter's entire tail. This serves to throw the fighter out of the beam but also renders it incapable of any further service to the Sum. The viy blows the crew capsule clear and broadcasts out its last stanzas of telemetry with gusto. It has always dreamed of crashing into the face of an alien world.

Tannuk roars in furious vengeance.

"Now get the big one," Sami says.

The Guns stab down again. But this time, they miss. The *Sundog* has jammed the radar.

Sami keeps the *Seriema* straight and level and hugs the ground. The *Sundog* is going up, so her horizon is expanding—she can see more and more of the planet every moment, more and more of their escape—but there are storms in the way, and windblown glass. Anything to make the laser shot harder.

"Go up," Tan urges. "Get us into space!"

"Not yet." The world falls away beneath them, but Sami keeps the nose down, keeps them low. Ten times the speed of sound. Eleven. Twelve.

The *Seriema* roars and shudders.

"What's happening?" Alpharael shouts. Haliya seems frozen in place.

"We're escaping," Sami says. "Where's the rock?"

"She made me leave it in the hold!"

"Good. Wouldn't want the damn thing taking all the credit."

Escape is still fundamentally impossible. The *Sundog* knows it, the three surviving Hopelights know it, and the *Seriema* has no fusion drive. Give the *Seriema* two weeks of headway and the *Sundog* would still catch them. All it has to do is get rid of the threat of the Guns.



But Sami doesn't need days. Or weeks.

Sami just needs two quick hands, Tannuk at their side, and a hundred kilometers of altitude.

"Here we go," Sami breathes.

And they let the ship do what it wants: *go straight*.

The world falls away beneath them. The *Seriema* lunges up into space. Blue becomes deep black.

They cut thrust. Everyone drifts. The Mordraine Ring is ahead of them, and below—they will pass above its thickest equatorial bands.

Sami reaches down under their flight console and yanks on a control covered in sticky tape labeled "DO NOT TOUCH."

The *Seriema*'s puller sail unfolds from its stowage and opens before the ship. It is a blossom of carbon mesh covered in an atom-thick sheen of mirrored film. With the help of fancy electronics, the sail can capture the energy of nuclear detonations and use them to pull the *Seriema* along—but the fancy electronics are broken.

That's fine. What Sami needs is the mirrored *interior* surface of the sail. The perfect reflective shine of knit carbon.

"Ready," they call.

The ESM block "blorps" urgently. The Guns of Kavaron are locking on the *Seriema*.

But the Guns are, first and foremost, not weapons. They are movers. Lifters. *Boosters*.

And when their beams converge on the *Seriema*'s sail, carefully diffused to avoid melting right through it, they push the little ship. The sail glows a cheerful cherry red as the *Seriema* crosses the Mordraine Ring and glides out into the interplanetary dark.

The palestar and its fighters are still faster. On fusion drives, they could catch up.

But by now, every ship in the Kavaron Memorial Navy is swarming out over Kavaron That Is, looking for the authors of the atrocity captured on the *Seriema*'s cameras.

So, the *Seriema* glides away into the dark, with two new passengers, an item of cargo, and a busted fusion drive. A bullet fired into space. *With no way home* (go to Revision 14 (Mallowmass)).

## Revision 14 (Mallowmass)

Captain Sami declares that all their new passengers are guests under the protection of mallowmass. That stops Alpharael and Haliya from trying to kill each other. You can't just violate mallowmass.

Haliya still punches through a wall and trips a lot of circuit breakers, microwaving the others when they try to stop her. This is not very good mallowmass behavior.

Their thrusters stop. They float.

Tannuk roars. Blood spatters from his stripped spines. "Stop! The boost lasers have gone out. If we can't repair the fusion drive before the Free Company catches up to us, we are all steak. So, take your gangly human spines *out of my cockpit* while I talk to the *Seriema* and inventory the damage. I suggest the galley. It's got plenty of room since the rest of the crew quit."

"She's going to kill us all," Alpharael says. "She's done it once already."

"We're under mallowmass, you nihilist!"

"I can't leave them unsupervised," the captain says. "But you need—"

"Yes, I need you here," Tannuk says. "But right now, I don't want you here. We just saved *ourselves*."

"Yeah. I get it."

Haliya doesn't get it.

On the way out. Sami looks back and says: "Hey, Tan. We saved these losers, too."

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Haliya keeps mumbling the "Litany of Dawn." "Praise the dawn light, praise for the morning. As it rises, so we rise. Praise the dawn light, burner of families. As the Kav burn, watch their smoke rise—"

No! Stop!

She feels, against all reason, that as long as she can remember the litany she is still herself and not anstruth, not amended by the object to suit its purpose.

*Why didn't Vondam kill her?*

How could he kill all those Kav in the name of containing the object then let her fly away carrying the object? Is she worth more than thousands of Kav? No. She can't be. The Sum just can't work out that way.

So either Vondam is wrong or the Sum is wrong. Or *she* is wrong.

She has to find out which one. That is her new objective. She must discover if this catastrophic breakdown in alignment between her morality and Vondam's choices is *her* problem, *his* problem, or a problem with the entire faith.

Did the object arrange all this to allow its escape? Did it cause *her* to go down in pursuit of Alpharael so that Vondam, with a hole in his brain, not thinking clearly, would be unable to kill her? Is she now part of INEVITA's scheme to feed the universe into black holes?

Shouldn't she immediately destroy herself and all those about her by the most violent means available? That's what the anathalmanac says.

Instead, she sits in her armor on a beanbag in the *Seriema*'s galley. The beanbag is strapped down. She uses her armor to generate a gentle downthrust.

The captain rummages through a tipped-over refrigerator for something to drink.

The nothing worshipper stares at her.

She will never recite the "Litany of Dawn" with Syr Vondam again. She will never clean him and dress him in his himsaries and arm him for service.

She will never wake up aboard the *Candela* to eat in the refectory with her bind. She will never speak to any of them again, except perhaps at a summary court martial, where they will give testimony to her character.

She will never stand on the observation deck and search for the gleam of Adagia's mirrors in the dark.

She will never be a Sunstar knight of the Free Company. She will never be commended to the Regent Maximum or return to the world after the diskwinter to show the bunker-dwellers what a shut-out, written-off child left in the cold to die can achieve.

She will not receive the illumination of the Astelli, like Coronal-Captain Dark Fringes Upon Bands of Light Through a Narrow Slot—

“Captain Slats,” she says.

“Sami,” the captain says. “It’s an Isojo name. Never gotten Slats before.”

“No, not you. The captain on the *Dawnsire* —”

“What’s the *Dawnsire* ?”

She stares at Sami. “The greatest feat of engineering in Sothera?”

“Aside from Sothera itself,” Alpharael says.

“No,” Haliya snaps, “the power to undo sekhar is obviously a greater feat than crunching up a star into a hole—”

Sami waves them to a halt. “Wait. Undo sekhar? Are you talking about turning Sothera back into a real sun? Alpharael, I thought you made that up to frighten the Kav.”

“It’s real. These luxatics have a superweapon that can destroy black holes—”

“Reignite them into healthy main-sequence stars—”

“Healthy? The star that was about to nova? You sure about that?”

“Obviously, we wouldn’t let it nova,” she snaps, although really she has no idea. “But at least those create something!”

“Dead Kav? Is that what you’re here to create?”

She has the urge to microwave him.

Captain Sami has found a pouch of something and is now sipping at it while watching them with fascination.

“Mallow?” Haliya says, a bit archly. “If you’ve heard of it?”

“Yeah,” Alpharael says, “I’m parched.”

“Sorry! Oh, sorry. I’ve been alone on this thing too long.” Sami leans over the refrigerator and tosses a twenty-second stream of packaged food and drink at them. It’s all old. Haliya snatches a pouch of cometary water. Alpharael snags what looks like licorice-flavored throat medicine. The stuff they don’t catch bounces around the galley in zero gravity.

Sami drifts upside down and sucks on an unlabeled pouch. “So. What about Captain Slats?”

She had forgotten and has to run back along the miserable track of her thoughts. “He let Alpharael go.”

“Alpharael was a prisoner?”

“He was a suicide commando sent to destroy the *Dawnsire* .”

“Which is the supervoid destroyer?”

“Sun resurrector,” Haliya says, just as Alpharael says, “Yes.”

Sami makes a decisive chop with their hands. “No more bickering at my mallowmass table. You are under guest right, so respect your host. Now, Alpharael, I am assuming, from your failure to die, that your mission did not succeed?”

Together the two of them explain to Captain Sami how they came to Kavaron. Alpharael's aborted sekhar, his capture and release; Syr Vondam's brief death and partial recovery; Syr Vondam's belief that Alpharael could only have been released under the malign influence of an object. The object now in stasis in the *Seriema*'s hold.

The object that Haliya was supposed to contain at all costs.

She gives her pendulum a flick. She barely cares any more. What's the object going to do to her? Make her into someone who has no regrets about what she's done?

"You may have murdered a lot of Kav on your way down," Sami tells Alpharael. "Your ship irradiated them."

"I'm sorry," Alpharael says. "The viy said it was the only way I could survive. A suicide burn to stop the ship, and a crysfield to survive the crash."

"This is ridiculous," Haliya says. "Alpharael didn't murder anyone. We shot his ship down. If it irradiated someone on its way down, ultimately that's our responsibility. He's not responsible for the dead Kav at Taro-duend, either. We are."

They both watch her quietly, a little nervously, as if she may be about to detonate. Maybe she is.

She is working the Sum in her head. Laying the situation out cleanly and adding it all up.

"I haven't seen this object do anything sinister at all," she says. "I saw it, maybe, save your life—you, Captain, and your first mate. I think I remember killing you. Just like we killed everyone else in Taro-duend. If we hadn't intervened, all the Kav in Taro-duend would still be alive, and you'd be off to—what is it you're doing, anyway? How did you find the object?"

"Long story," Sami says. "It involves a wizard."

She is still figuring out her own story. Her new perspective on it. "Vondam was obeying the Sum. At every step, he obeyed it. He didn't trust himself, so he made himself a vessel for the Sum. The Sum commanded him to obliterate that settlement.

"And I can't find a way, by the Sum, that it was wrong. But it was wrong. I know it. I know it. Even if those Kav had all been rendered—ontologically wrong, malign, subtractive—so what? What could they do against all the power of the Celestial Palatinate and the Free Company? We are great, and they were small. We could've waited until they did something actively evil to destroy them. We could've found a better way. It would've been right to spare them. How can that be? How can there be something that's against the Sum but still right?"

"How can it be wrong to save four million lives?" Sami asks, looking toward the cockpit.

"If it weren't for you, I'd never have come here," Haliya tells Alpharael. "You."

"Wait," Alpharael says, suspiciously. "I thought you'd just realized everything was *your* fault."

"If it weren't for you, I'd never have seen the Sum call for something I know is wrong. So I wouldn't have seen—I wouldn't know—but maybe I only think this because I'm anstruth—oh, Walls!"

She throws a can of frozen tomato juice, but she's still wearing her armor, so it goes through the bulkhead and lodges in a storeroom. Sami hisses like a cat. "Stop knocking holes in my ship!"

Alpharael, still staring at her, raises his tiny pouch of black licorice drink in toast. "Two makes twins," he says. "To failing at our sacred duty."

She microwaves him. Only for a moment. He yelps.

"I've reached a decision," she says. "We need to destroy the object. It poisons everything."

"Oh no you don't!" Sami cries. "Then I'll have nothing for the Metalman and I'll be finished. He'll kill me. Or worse, send my ship to the scrapyard!"

"What is it *you* do?" Alpharael asks.

"Me?" Sami presses a finger to their tight-vested chest. "I look for my cat."

"Your cat?" Haliya repeats.

"Yeah. Mirri. I've got a picture here—have you seen her?"  
linebreak

They crowd in to look. "No," Haliya says, "I'm sorry. There are lots of cats on Adagia. They like the sun ..."

"Cute cat," Alpharael offers. "Where'd you lose her? How long ago?"

Haliya doesn't like how ordinary he sounds. People who turn stars into abscesses in reality should not be permitted to care about cats.

"Several years, on Uthros," Sami says, staring at the picture. "Something startled her. She weftwalked. And she just went—further than I've ever heard of a cat going. We couldn't find her locator. Not on the station, not on the stations nearby ... She must still be in Sothera, right? The Drix can walk between stars, but a cat? Not a cat. Right?"

"I'll help you look for the cat," Haliya says. "It's what knights do in—in stories."

She looks defiantly at both of them. But they can't see her face. She feels stupid and alone.

"Yeah," Alpharael says. "Why not. I don't have any plans. I'll help you find your cat. Maybe the rock can help find it."

"We're destroying it," Haliya says. In the span of a few days, it has utterly seized control of her life. She has wasted her chance to be a Solar Knight, but she will not waste the chance to at least destroy the cause of her fall.

"No, we're not," Sami says with surprising force of command. "We're giving it to the Metalman. Then he'll help me get the ship fixed up and I'll find a new crew and look for work to do everywhere in Sothera. From the Wurmwall all the way into your houses on Adagia and Anuki. And Mirri will be at one of those places. She *has* to be."

"I don't think they're going to stop chasing it," Alpharael says. "The Free Company."

He's right. The *Seriema* may have slipped away from the *Sundog*, but she's adrift in space. it's only a matter of time before a telescope picks up her heat.

"We could ask for sanctuary with my people," Alpharael begins—

"No!" Haliya barks.

"—but I did flee from a suicide mission then fail to report to the monastery."

"We destroy it! I'm wearing the armor here, I have the monopoly on force!"

"Yeah, if you're barbaric enough to violate guest right—"

"We're not doing any of that," Sami says, stretching fetchingly. Haliya suspects they are doing it on purpose. "The Metalman will take care of everything."

"Who is this Metalman?" Alpharael asks.

“He’s a human made out of metal.”

“A cyborg?” Haliya supposes.

Sami wobbles their hand. “I thought he was a cyborg. But he disagrees.”

“So?” Alpharael says impatiently. “An android? A viy who thinks it’s an android? A mechan with illegal programming?”

“No,” Sami says, ticking options off with their fingers, “no, not that, not that either.”

“Well?” Haliya demands.

Sami smiles a slow, secret smile. “I told you. He’s a wizard. “

>*GO TO THE FINAL ACT* (go to Episode 9)