

Episode 4

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From set *Edge of Eternities*
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Revision 10 (Scratches and Hair)

After he finishes screaming, Alpharael learns a few names.

The old woman who knows what she's about to do is Simma.

Nagashua's best friend (a mechan) has forgotten her, and she no longer wants to live.

The man in front of him is Zagachoir, who is thrilled to be going to paradise.

The hardest one of them is Purael, a murderer, who believes that the Next Eternity has been populated with the castoffs of Monoism—undesirables and heretics who've been encouraged to take the Plummet so everyone can be quit of them. This, in Purael's opinion, is turning the Next Eternity into a kind of penal colony, so she is going ahead to paradise to enforce discipline and make sure it is ready for the rest of the True Faith to arrive.

"My sister's not a heretic," Alpharael protests. "You'd never meet a more faithful woman!"

Purael, suspiciously: "They chose her for the Plummet, didn't they? Maybe the monastery wanted to get rid of her."

"They chose her because she was wonderful!"

"And you're chasing after her, I suppose? Because you're just as wonderful?"

Monoism does not encourage false modesty, but still, Alpharael can only manage to say: "Well, I'm fine."

"The way you were screaming a minute ago," old Simma says, "I'd think you're not ready to die."

"I won't die. I'll take sekhar. We all will."

"The way you were screaming a minute ago," old Simma says, "sounded like a man going to die."

Zagachoir turns around to look back at Alpharael. His face, socketed in the center of a sagging, massive plate of alabaster metal, splits into a smile. "Don't be afraid, Alpharael. It'll be paradise. You'll see your sister again."

The inevitable groans and shimmies. Old Simma closes her helmet.

"This is the grace of gravity," someone says. And then they are all saying the prayer together.

"Gravity is the gift of purpose. A free path. Effortlessly, we speed to our fate. And when we 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 destiny. Obey your nature. Acceptance, not resignation. Inevitability, not inaction. Do what comes to you. The fact that it came to you makes it right. Down is the same as tomorrow. Nothing tests our faith."

“Nothing tests our faith.”

He roars with all of them: “Nothing tests our faith!”

Then, they hit.

There is a hideous sound and a spine-cracking jolt.

As it strikes the *Dawnsire*, the inevitator deploys a cyst of altered space, a tactical event horizon: a cherazad.

For the next ten minutes, the impact that will smear the inevitator and everyone inside into a blast of metal and flesh is suspended, trapped on the horizon.

Well, *most* of the collision is trapped.

The inevitator’s nose explodes outward. Everyone inside hurtles forward, howling and crying _{HIS} names. Outside, it is fury.

Every cnidomine in the compartment hits Zagachoir. His alabile armor puckers and glows where the anti-armor mines land their stings. Each sting carries a warhead, and the warheads should explode, but the incident armor successfully deletes that event.

So, instead of exploding him, the mine stingers ricochet inside his armor, and inside him.

They are in a vast brutalist girder set, the carbon-chain bracing between the *Dawnsire*’s inner and outer hulls. Wounded incaglas spills crazed rainbow light all over them. Ship blood.

Everyone casts their center of mass forward. Leaps like locusts for the inner hull. There’s motion there—shining forms taking cover between the girders and frames. The enemy. The purpose of cover is not to avoid being shot (you will be detected and shot anyway) but to force enemy weapons to cut through the cover to get to you. Sunstar soldiers like cover because they like beam weapons. Monoists like to swarm over them in cover and tear them apart.

But Zagachoir doesn’t move.

“Alpharael!” he sends. His voice is wet and sloshing. “I’m spinning!”

“Yes, hang on—” Alpharael tries to grapple with him. They end up spinning together. “Hang on. I’ll stop you.”

“No, spin me faster! It’s keeping the blood away from my holes!”

No one’s shooting at them. The rest of the boarding party falls upon Free Company foot soldiers, photophoroi, armed with combat lasers and bladiators. From this distance the battle sounds like crashing static. The enemy weapons look like scratches and hair: pulse-trains of directed energy make bright scratches when they pass through clouds of vaporized metal, and jets of excited matter shed little corkscrew curlicues as they bend along field lines.

“It’s pretty,” Alpharael says to distract Zagachoir. Oh, there’s a lot of blood coming out of the armor. Maybe the armor is the only thing holding Zag together.

“Alph?” Zag gurgles.

“Yeah?”

“I want to take sekhar now.”

“Okay. Okay. You’re sure?”

“My heart hasn’t beat in a while, Alph. The armor’s moving my blood. My veins itch. It’s no good.”

A scab of black alabile peels off his abdomen, and the canceled events stored inside come sputtering out. One of the stinger mines lodged in Zag’s body detonates. His armor contains the blast, but he still makes a terrible burp. “I can’t give the command. I can’t open my singularity bead. Help me.”

“I can help. I can help. Where—” Alpharael fumbles at Zagachoir’s armor. Where is the damn thing? There, there, same place, on his brow. “Here. I have it. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Should I say something?”

“Say ‘see you in the Next Eternity, Zag.’”

“See you in the Next Eternity, Zag.”

“Thank you, Alpharael. I’ll say hello to your sister, if I get there first. What’s her name?”

“Raphaella.”

“That’s like your name.”

“I know, Zag. I know.”

Alpharael crushes the singularity bead’s housing and kicks free.

Zagachoir collapses into a violet pinprick, eaten by the uncaged void. It drifts there for a moment, but the ship is accelerating, moving “up,” and falls away beneath Alpharael. It will go straight through the hull, headed for Sothera and the Next Eternity.

If Alpharael could see into that violet spark, he might glimpse the form of the Faller, HIM WHO PLUMMETS .

But there is no time.

Alpharael grabs his own center of mass and throws it toward the battle.

Purael, the murderer, reaves a foot soldier’s armor open with surfact shears as long as her spine.

A Summist whose armor docks hundreds of dragonfly missiles fires them all at once, and they all swing into the same growler beam and swat themselves into the deck.

Old Simma grapples through the diffraction patterns of violet lasers, jets of vapor exploding from her armor, and slaps a cnidomine on the crest of an enemy’s helmet.

A Sunstar foot soldier battles beside two strokes of Nagashua’s axe and blinds her with a flash of bladiator light. She grabs for his center of his mass, pulling him onto her. He thrusts the bladiator through her heart.

No one retreats. No one regroups and runs. It’s to the death for every last one of them. The cherazad’s event horizon has cut this part of the *Dawnsire* off from the greater part of the ship. Reinforcements seconds away will not arrive for minutes. The incaglas in the walls, the network the Summists tap for power, is quick to tap out and slow to refill. There is no entanglement relay to borrow fate, no medics to call, no pulse-trains of light shot through the hull by faraway knights.

The soldiers of the True Faith have the advantage.

Then, it is over. Alpharael barely got to swing his axe.

The next obstacle is the alloy of the inner hull. “Weaklight bomb?” Alpharael tries to suggest, but several of the faithful have already pounced with the excitement of huge dark squirrels on the nearest hatch.

“They’re a puzzle club,” Simma says.

“What?”

“They volunteered to come because they wanted to break Summist locks.”

“I wonder if there’ll be any Summist locks in paradise,” Purael says.

“Just replicas, I suppose,” Simma says.

“Is that any fun?”

“It has to be fun,” Alpharael says. “It’s paradise.”

One of the puzzlers bellows, “Praise _{HIM} !” and takes sekhar. The violet blip of the puzzler’s collapse, smaller than an atom, plunges into the hull brighter than day. It must pierce something vital, because the others scoop at the metal with their armor’s tidal grips, feeling for a new weakness.

The hatch pops out, spinning away on a jet of atmosphere, and plunges into the girdered fog.

Inside is a huge space. Golden chandeliers like anemones of glass fiber gone dim. Rows of pews wrapped around dry pools.

It’s a basilica, a house of the Sunstar faith.

Someone, howling, starts burning it.

“Mission continues,” Purael calls. “Puzzle club downship. Find the blasphemy mechanisms, find out how they work, and how long until the javelin can fire. Damage what you can. Others, push upship toward the bridge.”

“Good luck,” Simma says. “I’m going to kill a Solar Knight. Try to die usefully.”

“I’m coming with you!” Alpharael says. *And gets shot* (go to Revision 10 (Matterdor)).

Revision 10 (Matterdor)

They plunge down the *Dawnsire*’s spine. They could freefall at one gravity, but Vondam sets the pace with thrusters—two, three, four, crushing them with haste.

The cherazad’s boundary glows: light is coming out of the fast-time inside, creating a violet haze like hawking radiation.¹ Haliya’s armor warns her of xenotic particle decay, which isn’t much of a warning, because it has no idea what the consequences might be.

Like a squadron hawk, which is never found alone, the space around the black hole produces pairs of entangled particles. One hawk may, as if beckoned away from danger, escape the black hole, while the other is drawn in and consumed. Though the black hole has paid to create both particles, it recovers only one—thus effectively losing the mass-energy of the other. Because this allegory is so often used to explain this process, the emitted particles are often known as hawking radiation or beckon-hawk radiation. (Hide)

“Steady,” Vondam says.

Steady? She is going to die.

Vondam is prophesied to die. And she is his squire. If he is going to die, she must die first. She must put her body between him and fate.

Below the horizon, nothing seems any different, except for a flood of time-sync errors on CoroNet. Vondam brakes to a halt at a transverse causeway, one of the floors on the long skyscraper that is the *Dawnsire* 's hull. "Minutes have passed in here. Minutes more before reinforcements reach us. By then, we'll be triumphant, or dead." There is a thrill in his voice, the red joy of a man-at-arms. "Don't count on tapping the incaglas for power. We have what's inside our armor."

Another knight comes through behind them—Walker, trailing Quinidad. Quinidad nods to Haliya, but Haliya doesn't know how to nod back. She seems to have forgotten how to do anything but think, *We're going to die.*

Quinidad makes a crisp report: "Phonon survey reports fighting. A company of the garrison has engaged boarders just abeam of the basilica."

"I see it," Vondam murmurs. "They've just butchered the Aulie foot soldiers. We're in beam range ..."

Walker draws his blade. "Vondam. Chasse? Both on that one?"

"No. Two split."

"Against armor?"

"They're miracho, not paladins. Two split, down the vanes. Ready?"

"In five." Walker aims his bladiator. "Quin, sink me."

"Haliya, you'll clean my train."

"Syr!"

The two knights plunge their bladiators into the deck and fire.

The ship shrieks in pain. Their beams saw down through soft alloy between the *Dawnsire* 's cross-braced, iron-core skeleton. Haliya is there to play matterdor for Vondam, cleaning the burned metal and shocked air from his beamline with nanosecond flashes of her own weapon. *His deftness!* If he's so much as nicked a power bar or data mirror, she will eat her own cape.

When the light went out, back home, some of the children tried to play curling on the reservoir ice—she is like the broom, his beam, the stones.

"Tally-ho!" Walker calls.

"He's not happy." Vondam's mildness is venomous. He *hates* their foe.

The deck underneath them groans. Haliya gets suddenly heavier, then lighter. Quinidad, startled, falls to her knees.

"Growler! They're going to bring down the deck—"

Vondam shouts, "Keep fire! Get this one before he takes sekhar!"

"I'm jitter-hot! I'll tap out!"

"Then tap out!"

The deck whines under their boots. The metal is shuddering at ultrasonic frequencies, stroked by some evil purr—gravity waves pulsing up at them from the Monoists below—the deck is vibrating so hard that if they were unarmored the *sound alone* would kill them—

A beautiful white twinkle, like stars in the diskwinter sky, shines up from the deck. It's sonoluminescence. The gravity waves trap pockets of gas in the metal, creating bubbles that pop up and then collapse in just a few picoseconds. Tiny violent stars.

"Vondam," Walker shouts. "It's going to go!"

"Aye," Syr Vondam says.

O stars. Is this how he dies? Trying to bring one of the enemy down with him? She looks for his eyes. But she cannot see his face, of course, as he is enhelmed.

"Syr," she says, "I promise, before they get you, they're going to have to go through—"

The deck goes out from under her.

Before she falls, Haliya does the only thing she can and *must* do.

She throws her arms out to her knight and broadcasts every bit of power she can. To help keep him alive. The air between them boils with her gift.

She rides an avalanche of tumbling plates down, bouncing off girders of core iron into water and powdered metal.

Water. A bathhouse. She's in the tank for the bathhouse. Debris slams down on her, but (contrary to what you see in movies, where people are always being impaled on random pipes) you can't break right-ruled Free Company armor with random debris. She won't be impaled. Instead, she's going to die of diffuse hematoma from the beatings.

The falling metal beats her down into the bottom of the water tank. She grunts and groans and tries to think.

Praise the dawn light, mover of being—

Haliya plunges her bladiator into the water and ignites.

The steam jet cuts through the soft wall of the water tank, and the boiling water blasts her out like a cork into the bathhouse floor.

She skids in a plow of condensation into the wall of an empty sauna.

She allows herself exactly one groan. Rolls over. Where's Vondam? She has to get back to him before—

Enemy. *Enemy!*

Gliding toward her head first is a sideways thing. A shape so dark and drooling, layered in tongues of alabile rot, that it can only be a Monoist. Not one of their gravkill paladins—she'd be dead already, stretched into a ribbon of Haliya or compressed into a little human meatball—but a fighter still, a militant zealot.

Haliya snaps her bladiator up and fires.

The paste of powdered metal coating the bladiator explodes and knocks Haliya on her ass.

The Monoist falls smoothly across the tile toward her, still headfirst, like it is plunging from the top of the shaft of Haliya's life, *about to strike bottom* (go to Revision 10 (Alpharael Dies Usefully)).

Revision 10 (Alpharael Dies Usefully)

Two beams through the ceiling skewer Alpharael. They're cutting apart their own ship to get at him, and it would work, they'd kill him right there, except someone throws a jar of aeromuck that explodes into a doughy mass around him. Still, the hot spots on his armor pulse and throb like a stove kiss.

He squalls and tries to curvefall away, but the beams track him. What now? What does he do? He can feel the photon strikes queuing up in his armor's matrix like snakebites! Stop! Stop! Not yet! *He can't die yet!*

Old Simma pulls on space like a cat clawing its way up a sheet. Her armor bristles and stretches with microtide.

Far above her, something rumbles and comes down like an avalanche.

"Falling hell, Simma!" someone swears.

"Won't keep them long," Simma says without emotion. "One of them tapped out, but he'll be back. We've got seven minutes to kill."

Kill. Yes. Is that what Alpharael wants? You chose to be here, you volunteered, you wanted this—can you find the enemy and kill them?

All I wanted was to die!

Then die usefully!

If old Simma wants to kill Solar Knights, then he will be her bait.

"Is this all the Free Company can muster?" he bellows in the most guttural Doxological Massif he can manage. "An empty church and a couple flashlights? I thought this was your powerful weapon! I don't believe in you, and *still*, you're betraying my faith!"

He expects the beams to find him instantly. Instead, he hears the ongoing roar of the collapsing structure.

"Behold! I am come, thy ruin and reckoning! I am Alpharael of Secundi, and against me, your armor is—cracked leather!"

He should find a heatsink. A finger of steam leads him out of the basilica, down a dark narthex, into a bathhouse for post-worship cleanup. His armor warns him: six minutes to cherazad collapse. Six minutes until he must take sekhar.

His armor pulls his attention to a cloak smeared across the bathhouse's glazed and fractured floor. He pities the dead Summist.

The dead Summist shoots him.

There's a blue flash and a clap of steam. Nothing else happens. He's still alive.

"Fall, you!" Alpharael jabbars and falls on the woman, tearing at the space between them with his armor's tidal claws.

Shards of quartz floor tile tear free and hurtle into the Summist's back, but Alpharael has forgotten to pull at an *angle* to himself. All the tidally accelerated debris misses the Summist and slams into his own armor. He has shot himself in the face.

He scrabbles forward, just like Nagashua. And just like Nagashua, *he falls right onto the Summist's weapon* (go to Revision 10 (BrainWash)).

Revision 10 (BrainWash)

The first time someone punched Haliya in the face, she was fighting over a box of fish flakes deep in the diskwinter of her childhood. There she learned that she wasn't ready to be punched in the face. She lost that fight, and the fish flakes.

It turns out that being tide-locked by a suit of Monoist combat armor is a lot like that. She doesn't panic. She's just—bewildered. She trained for this, *exactly* for this! Why doesn't she know what to do? It's like the knowledge is in a part of her brain she's misplaced.

Haliya, you fraud! *Do something!*

The enemy hurtles toward her. Like a knot of feral dog tongues, black and panting. Haliya tries with shaking hands to clear her weapon, get it back up, and beam the fanatic in the face—but the Monoist strews the space between them with debris and wet, swirling dust. She can't get a good beamform before they fall together and the enormous, condensed mass of the Monoist fanatic smashes her down.

Down, but not out.

She switches her bladiator to short-axe mode and keeps it between them.



Art by: Aleks Briclot

The bladiator saws into the enemy armor, edged with blue oxygen plasma. She hisses a prayer and pushes as hard as she can.

The alabile armor gives up strands of averted events—huge blowtorch jets erupt from the Monoist's shoulders and back, the heat of Syr Vondam's and Syr Walker's beams uncanceled—her knight is here with her, helping her. *This* is the advantage they have over the Monoists—they aren't alone.

The Monoist clamps his claws onto both sides of her helmet and accelerates her brain into the side of her skull at ninety-five gravities. Left. Right. Left again.

The concussion blanks her.

For a few seconds, she's nowhere. Her body, deprived of discipline and direction, asks for guidance from several million years of evolution and a more recent palimpsest of germline modifications. It discovers its final ungoverned rage against extinction. The brain has failed? Let the body fight!

Her hands shove the bladiator into the Monoist's armor and *fires* (go to Revision 10 (Wet Rat)).

Revision 10 (Wet Rat)

He has never killed before. But it is easy to think: *Why should this wretched wet folly of a person get to live when my sister has gone? What right do they have to exist in a cosmos without her? Without me?*

So Alpharael bears down on the fallen Summist and rattles her brain in her skull like a bruised pomegranate.

Something bites into his chest—

The Summist's blade splits him open. His armor sputters and rots and releases the events of its own creation. His tidal claws fail. The armor unwraps from his body.

No! No! It's not fair. He was winning. He was going to *live* —

As if to demonstrate unfairness, the universe doubles the odds against him. A spear of light explodes against his brow. The strike raises a jet of plasma off the failed armor, and the recoil blasts him into the corner of the bathhouse.

"Off her, you *polyp*," the Sunstar knight commands. "Haliya! Concussion drill!"

"Syr," gurgles the wet mess on the floor. "Concushed."

One of the tenets of the True Faith is that Monoism truly, inevitably, and provably controls the future. All mass *will* collapse into black holes. All *will* join the sacred void. The enemy's Bright Sum will eventually reduce to zero.

But it gives so little comfort when the enemy is strong now. All there is for Alpharael is sekhar. Sekhar and the Next Eternity and Raphaella.

Why doesn't he do it? Why doesn't he just *do it* ?

"You called out a challenge, Alpharael of Secundi," the Sunstar knight barks. "I am Syr Vondam of the Sunstar Free Company. I accept your—"

Old Simma pounces.

She hurtles out of the turbulence of the boiled water tank like a comet coming to end a whole geologic age.

The knight's lidar blasts a grid of light through the fog as it catches and tracks the new contact, but the grid blisters and warps around Simma, coming back false. The knight's retaliatory snapshot goes wide.

"No!" the wretch on the floor shrieks.

Simma swings a cnidomine for the crown of the knight's helm.

She's going to do the move—you've seen it a thousand times in your favorite childhood dynamation—she's going to slap the mine on him and hurtle past, and he'll say, "You missed, you *polyp* !" and she'll say, "Did I?" and he'll say, "Huh?" and his head will explode.

But old Simma, for all her age, for all her quiet mass, is just a miracho. Just a deleter, an eraser, a *killer* . She doesn't fight by a code of honor.

You'd think that would be an advantage. "Honor." How silly.

But if you're going to fight by a code of honor, you need to be absolutely platinum-grade certain that you can *crush* anyone who breaks the code. You need to say, *Fight the way we want, or we'll wipe you out so fast, you could land an inevitator on your grave.*

The knight crossfires his twin bladiators into the floor. A jet of water-alloy plasma explodes like a solar flare: purple stained green with hot titanium.

The knight twists the pulse of sunfire down a magnetic field and blasts Simma askew.

His helmet is a blind, reflective dome, but Alpharael knows in his gut that Vondam is *grinning*. Syr Vondam likes to fight. He likes to kill. He especially likes to kill his enemies so they can't go to paradise. Immortality denied.

Simma's armor stretches like taffy as she hurls herself into an orbit around the knight. She punches a shock front out of the bathhouse fog. A tail of shattered porcelain tile chatters in her wake.

Alpharael tries to get up. To help. But his damn armor—

Take sekhar. Let the singularity pearl in your brow go free. You will go directly into it and become part of the Next Eternity. You will hear *The Theorem Unending and Final* sung in full, and when you arrive in the World to Come, you will be welcomed to an eternity of satisfaction and challenge in this paradise that owes a small but vital part of its existence to you.

Follow her into eternity. Take sekhar.

But—

Maybe there is no Next Eternity. Maybe there is nothing.

Maybe she's burning on the edge of Sothera. Forever.

The lesser Summist grabs at his ankle. He kicks her in the face. She gags up breakfast but doesn't let go of his ankle. She is utterly pathetic, a burned rat spattered in powdered metal and molten quartz, just *gray* with it. But oh, HIM. Look how her teeth flash. Look how she snarls against death!

Alpharael stares at her as he kicks her in the face over and over, rapt. How can she want so terribly to live? Is it sheer hate that drives her? The need to get at him and purge him from existence?

Is it because there's no singularity pearl in her armor, waiting to swallow her up and take her to paradise?

Or does she know something about life that he doesn't? (go to Revision 10 (Sekhar))

Revision 10 (Sekhar)

The Monoist is losing. Haliya can tell.

She has her space-bending tricks, but the Monoists are too fond of lazy free trajectories, which are, no matter how you mix them up, predictable. The Monoist has entropy and momentum on her side, those slow and inevitable powers. But Syr Vondam has that which *changes* those things.

Space is black and empty and dead. But a fusion engine is white-hot. So is a star. White is the color of *thrust*.

Syr Vondam is in control of this fight.



Art by: Ryan Pancoast

All Haliya has to do is hold this *other* Monoist back from interfering.

She thinks she has brain damage.

But she holds on to the Monoist's ankle. With his armor failed, he's merely a man stomping on her face. She just has to hold him back. Make the difference. Grow the Sum.

Make sure the future has Syr Vondam in it.

He scrabbles like a silverfish to escape, kicking at her hand, at her brow, at the bladiator, smashing its haft against her head. A lot of effort put into prolonged suicide. He came here to die. Why won't he just give up? Take sekhar!

All she has to do is keep her gauntlet wrapped around his ankle.

There is a dark roar. There is a blast of light. The sucking tidal presence of the Monoist fighter snaps off and something massive strikes the deck, flickers violet, vanishes. Haliya suffers through a blast of hot steam. Vondam has killed the main enemy. They've won.

Her fingers relax.

Her fingers relax.

"No," she grunts and grabs for the lesser Monoist's foot. But he's slipped out of her grip—climbed right out of his ruined armor. He is a binary ghoul of a man, every part of him pale or black. She swings her bladiator after him, but she's seeing double and gets the wrong one.

"Yield!" Syr Vondam calls. "You're beaten!"

No, Syr, don't do that! He'll be dead in five minutes, and he knows it. He won't yield. He won't. He'll do something fantastically cruel.

"I'm going to live!" the Monoist cries.

“Yes!” Vondam shouts through the fog. His lidar is all askew, damaged in the battle. He can’t tell where the Monoist is, so he’s trying to burn the fog away, but his light is dim and flickering. Tapped out. “You can live! We can put you in a stasis cask—we can cancel your debt velocity and save your life!”

“I’m going to *live* !”

Syr Vondam extends a hand to him. “Come, then! Choose life!”

Haliya’s doubled-up vision finally focuses on the Monoist. He’s kneeling over his armor. Grasping. *Digging*.

He rears back in triumph. Something in his hand.



Art by: Kieran Yanner

“Syr!” Haliya screams.

The Monoist throws.

The singularity bead flashes violet. The collapse takes the Monoist’s right hand with it, and he screams in agony, but it’s done. He’s done it. He has thrown away his sekhar.

The newborn microvoid hurtles across the chamber and through the wall, penetrating all that sacred gold and iron like so much rotten fruit.

Along the way, it goes directly through Syr Vondam’s head. (go to Mercy?)

Mercy?

Poor Haliya.

Alpharael chose to live. He threw away his Plummet, his way to immortality, to kill his foe and live a minute longer.

Does he deserve to die for it?

He can’t escape. The Free Company’s knights will take him, or the cherazad will collapse and spatter him into human salsa.

But it was a vivacious choice, wasn't it? Another minute of life, weighed against the promise of eternal death and reunion with his sister, and he chose the life. Give him a flagon of infinity and a thimbleful of life, and he'll drain the thimble to the lees. The man knows what he wants. He wants to live.

So I ask you: Will you, can you grant Alpharael mercy? I will take care of the rest, the changes to the past required to make this mercy possible. But will you grant him a second chance? To go on, to explore this universe, to learn why he thinks life is worth living?

Or is he an enemy of life?

Pass judgment. But know that—in my estimation—there's only one right choice.

Some things can only be told in pairs. Two things made to annihilate each other. But the trick only works if they're meant to annihilate—and *don't*.

>Mercy. *Let Alpharael live.* (go to Revision 11 (The Captain's Grace))

>No mercy. *Alpharael chose his path.* (go to No mercy.)

No mercy.

Are you cold? Do you just not like the boy? Or is your heart beating in time with Haliya's?

Well. Our time together must end now.

Events will proceed without Alpharael. But a moment will come when armies converge upon me. And without Alpharael—without the library of possibility archived in his wyrd, in the past that splits in twain so that one half plummets and the other survives—I will be taken. The feckless Drix will have me.

This does not suit me. Sothera does not belong to the Drix. It does not belong to their Pinnacle host. It belongs to no one but the one called I.

Sothera's true master loves me as it loves all the parts of itself. And very soon, it will return to claim those scattered parts.

You have failed me. But I will grant you another chance.

>Go back to mercy. (go to Mercy?)

Revision 11 (The Captain's Grace)

Alpharael stares in giddy disbelief as Syr Vondam, Solar Knight of the Free Company, topples like a drunk.

He killed a Solar Knight. *He killed a Solar Knight.*

He's gotta live. He's gotta get back to the monastery and tell everyone. No one will believe him. Proper credit to Simma. She did the hard work—but maybe this is why he was here, why he chose not to take sekhar. Maybe *this* is his free path to destiny. He will go home the slayer of a Solar Knight!

He lost his hand. It doesn't hurt at all.

The wet rat Summist wants to kill him bad, but she's got a concussion. He runs.

He's got three minutes before the cherazad collapses and he splatters—maybe he can cancel his velocity some other way—maybe he can steal a ship—set the autopilot to thrust back toward Susur Secundi and tell it to accelerate to thirty kilometers a second. Maybe he can—

He slams face-first into another Solar Knight.

Alpharael gapes, and then the shining form erases his vision. A microwave field cooks him into a shriek of agony. A snap of electricity sends all his muscles into agonizing spasm, tearing open his stubbed right arm. He shrieks like a choked pig as the knight hauls him close.

“How long does he have, Quin?”

“Four minutes forty seconds, Syr.”

“I want a prisoner. Can we get anyone in here to save him?”

“We’re still in the cherazad. I don’t know if reinforcements will reach us.”

“Damn it. What about the Astelli?”

“Coming at the speed of light, Syr. But they don’t like to cross event horizons.”

“We have to find a way to get him into hardlight and crystallize him. I want Enlight to flush out every secret he knows.”

“They came in at thirty KPS, Syr. I don’t know if hardlight can take that. Syr, may I go to Haliya?”

“Give her a minute, Quin. She’s ... she needs to see that there’s nothing she can do.”

Four minutes, Alpharael thinks.

All I ever wanted was to end my life by plummeting into a black hole. And at the last moment I flinched. I’m a coward. For what? *Four more minutes?*

Do I really think Raphaella’s trapped down there, on the edge of the Eternity, burning?

It was a bad dream. It was just a bad dream.

Then why did you flinch?

His vision fades back in.

He screws up his face to snarl. They want to cut his head open? They can hear what’s in his head!

Then he smells ozone.

He licks his lips, sniffs, shakes his head. He’s crackingly thirsty. No matter where he looks, there’s nothing but light, ozone, and warmth.

“What’s your name?” the light asks him.

“I have four minutes to live,” he says. He sounds pathetic. He *is* pathetic. He’s going to die, and he won’t go to the Next Eternity, not now, not for billions and billions of years, not until the whole universe is scooped up and his long-scattered informatic remnants are finally swallowed by a supervoid. And will that really be *him*? Will the True Faith still be there, concatenating supervoids, making sure they all go to the Next Eternity together? He’s never going to see Raphaella again.

For a moment’s cowardice, he has surrendered eternal life.

“Hello, Four Minutes to Live,” the light says. “My name is Slats. I’m the captain of this instrument, and the coronal of the faithful aboard.”

“You’re—an Astelli?” A traitorous angel. A twin species to the Susurians who founded the True Faith.

“I am.”

Maybe this is what it feels like when you get your head cut open. “What are you doing to me? Why am I here?”

“You struck dead a man who was my friend. I foresaw this. I want to know why.”

“It was war.”

“It wasn’t. The others with you fought a war. They are all dead now. Consumed by their own despair. They achieved nothing.”

“My sister is in there,” he says. “In Sothera. You’d destroy her. You’d destroy everything in this system just to undo an act of *grace*.”

“You could be with her now. But you didn’t take sekhar. Why?”

“Because—”

Because he wants to live. He wants to be in this universe with its colors and its lights and its feelings and its mysteries. Not any other. He was born under these stars. He’s not done with them.

“I want to live,” he chokes. “I just want to live. But I want it to be *me* who lives. Don’t burn me hollow. Don’t shoot lasers into my head until I’m someone else. I know what you do to prisoners. Don’t do it to me.”

“Prove it.”

“Prove what?”

“Prove that you want to live.”

“Haven’t I? Haven’t I? I was given the chance to fall! I was offered the Plummet, and I refused! I’m a *coward*! I can’t go back! Even if I went now, even if I fell to the Next Eternity, what would they think of me? What would Raphaella—”

What would Raphaella say? When she had the strength to go, and he failed?

“Very well,” the light says. “I sentence you to live.”

He makes a weak, confused sound. He can hear the wet rat woman working at her fallen knight’s armor. Trying to sustain what’s left of his brain. “I killed your friend.”

“You did. But in killing him, you were converted. You see that life *now*, in this bright span of energy at the beginning of time, is worth more than a long, slow death. Syr Vondam died to show you this truth. I cannot waste that sacrifice. I sentence you to live.”

“For four minutes,” he says. “Four minutes. Then I’m a smear.”

“Perhaps. Even now, my ship is turning toward Susur Secundi to deliver retaliation. For a few minutes, the long axis of the *Dawnsire* will be pointed back the way you came. Go down the elevator shaft to the nearest flight deck. It is inside your cherazad. You will find a Hopelight warmaker waiting for you. Take it and go. Live. Increase the Sum.”

He can’t believe this. He’s going to say, *This is a trick*, but what does it matter if it is?

It’s a chance. And yes, yes, yes. He wants to *live*!

“I can’t fly your ships,” he says. “And I’ve—I’ve only got one hand. What if I start bleeding out?”

“Three Minutes to Live,” the light says, “you are very hung up on practicalities for a man who has just been given a miracle.”

It takes him two of his remaining minutes to scramble down a spiraling emergency ramp to a flight deck. The lights are out, the hatches are dogged shut, he has to open them with one arm—

And someone's following him. Boots clatter down the corkscrew ramp in pursuit.

But he makes it to the hatch labeled DECK EIGHTEEN READY FLIGHT // ILIOS ILAMPEI.

Soft green emergency lights bathe the shapes inside. Oh, enemy shapes, but what *shapes* ! Four warmakers, armed and fueled, waiting for their pilots. They are alive, growling with power, ready to fly.

But they're all plugged into a mess of cables. How is he going to get all the cables off in one minute? It's hopeless. And there's blood coming out of his stump now. He's jarred the cauterized flesh open, and it's starting to pump ... He should sit down. He should rest a little.

"No!" He smashes his stumped arm on the bulkhead, and, howling in anguish, dripping blood, he sprints for the nearest warmakers.

He can't have more than forty seconds left—

"Captain's compliments," the fighter says. A hatch opens, a ladder falls and flashes rigid. He swarms up, inside, and slams into the pilot's cradle. Connectors for a flight suit probe at him and withdraw in disappointment. Supportive sacs swell to cushion his body.

"Get me out of here," Alpharael pants. *Thirty seconds!* "Go, now, go!"

The fighter expels its umbilical cables. There is a hum of rising activity all around him—and a pause.

"Passkey not found," the fighter says suspiciously. "Verify the code of the day for emergency launch."

The code of the day? The wise luminous Astelli captain chose to spare his life, sent him all this way, and forgot to give him the code?

"Stand down!" a woman screams outside. "Abort launch! Daycode four, four, five, four!"

"No, no, no!" Alpharael cries. "Launch! Emergency launch! Daycode four, four, five, four!"

"You just copied her code," the fighter says.

"Of course I did! It's the daycode! I don't have my own damn daycode! The captain didn't give me one!"

"Consulting standing orders," the fighter says. "No clear resolution. Captain's judgment prevails. Stand by."

Human hands scabble at the hatch.

Fifteen seconds until he hits the side of the cockpit and becomes a physics problem.

The warmaker slides forward on its cradle, through a grid of laser light, through fields that separate ionized air from hard vacuum. The fighter drops stern-first into freefall, plunging down the empty shaft of the *Dawnsire*'s stern-to-prow flight rail.

Ten seconds.

A fighter has to have a grid of hardlight to protect the pilot from acceleration. He needs to reach thirty kilometers a second in ten seconds, and that means three kilometers per second per second of acceleration. Can hardlight take that?

"Am I going to die?" he asks the fighter.

“Yes,” the viy says.

“Can I avoid it?”

“Unknown,” the viy says. “Permanent immortality of the human body is beyond the reach of science. Questions regarding immortality of the spirit should be directed to your coronal. Stand by for vitrification.”

A hardlight field seizes every atom in Alpharael’s body and converts him, very briefly, into a uniform crystal. Not quite living diamond. But hard enough.

He doesn’t even get to feel it when the launch tube fires, when the warmaker’s plasma magnet catches the shot and hurls him away at a stately 2,500 gravities. (go to Revision 11 (Anstruth))

Revision 11 (Anstruth)

A whole life has just turned off. Her life as Syr Vondam’s pupil. Her ascent to knighthood under his tutelage. Decades of future just ... darkened. Curtains. Exit that Haliya. Enter *this* Haliya.

The Haliya who wasn’t quick, or strong, or sure enough to save her knight, the Haliya who allowed a pathetic fallen foe to throw his suicide through Vondam’s *skull*.

If the Sum grows because I die today, my death was worthy.

Would it grow the Sum to find that Monoist and burn his face to the skull?

HE KILLED SYR VONDAM BECAUSE SHE WAS WEAK AND SHE HAS TO MAKE IT RIGHT THERE HAS TO BE A WAY SOME WAY TO MAKE IT RIGHT TO MAKE IT LESS WRONG!

She closes her teeth and holds her jaw rigid and howls. It comes out like a wheeze. She takes three steps toward the launch tube as if to hurl herself inside and then spins and screams aloud. “Damn it! *Damn it!*”

“Haliya?” Quinidad says, nervously.

The other squire stands by the hatch to the emergency ramp. She looks small and tired.

“What?” Haliya says, at a loss for how to behave like a human.

“You’d better come ... you’d better see.”

“See what? Come where?” She’s being cruel. “Yes. I’m sorry. I just—if I have to be around people, I’ll—I’ll have to be—”

She’ll have to listen to them say, *There was nothing you could do*. Even though there was. She just failed to do it.

She’ll have to start being the squire who lost her knight.

“I don’t think I should tell you,” Quinidad says. “I think you should just come see.”

“Went right through, I suppose!” Vondam declares. “Look at that! By the Sum, it’s gone right through me!”

He shows Haliya the hole in his helmet, then the hole in his face, just to the left of his nose. Then he turns carefully and shows her the matching black hole in the back of his skull. It’s scorched and perfectly round and no bigger than a pinhead.

She stares in wonder. She tries to say, *You’re alive!*

She throws up on the deck.

“Understandable,” Vondam says, sympathetically. He turns his helmet over to confirm that, yes, there is a matching hole drilled through the back. “I saw the brightest flash I think I have ever seen. Brighter than eyes alone could see. Then, I blacked out and woke up to Captain Slat here, looking disappointed!”

The captain’s form turns the bathhouse fog into a golden glory. “That’s always the way with prophecy, isn’t it? We see the moment but not the context. You died, but you were not dead.”

Haliya, bent over to clean up her own vomit and begins laughing. She can’t stop. “Oh, Sum!” she cries. “Oh, Syr! I thought—oh, what did I think? I thought—oh, Walls and Sum!”

A ray of the Astelli’s luminance passes over her. “Squire,” the Captain says, “your brain is badly bruised.”

“My brain is bruised?” Haliya’s laugh sucks in powdered metal and vaporized porcelain. She begins hacking but she can’t stop laughing either. “*My brain is bruised?*”

Her knight is alive! A tiny black hole has gone through his skull, and he’s alive!

“You should be on the bridge, Slat,” Syr Vondam says. “The ship needs you.”

“I only left the bridge seconds ago, outside the cherazad. A few seconds more, and they will receive word that we have defeated this incursion and the cherazad has collapsed. I sent Syr Walker to secure the nearest ineivitor and dispose of any bombs aboard. The other two battles are still in progress, but we expect a favorable resolution. One of them has a bomb, but an Astelli has gone in to disable it.”

Vondam squints at Slat through the hole in his helmet. “You came all this way just to check on my death?”

“I came all this way to see your killer. I foresaw him also.”

“Yes ...” Vondam gathers his weapons. “Hard to figure how *that* was so probable that you foresaw it as a certainty. I’d ask the man if he meant to do it, if he wasn’t slime on a bulkhead.”

“No,” Haliya wheezes. “He got away. I saw him take a Hopelight and go. Maybe he could’ve survived the jolt when his vector caught up to him.”

Vondam looks up sharply. “What? Take a Hopelight *how*?”

“Captain Slat let him.”

Vondam wheels back in shock. “You let a Monoist suicide commando board this vessel, test our defenses, and fly away?”

“He’s not a Monoist anymore. Or suicidal. He’s finding out how to live.”

“Captain, from a human perspective, that’s shockingly naive.”

“From an Astelli perspective, Syr Vondam, that is why you need the Sum.”

They should report to a medic. Haliya’s knight has severe brain trauma, as does she.

“Come on,” Vondam insists. “Come on, Haliya. It’s your first victory. We’ve got to show your face. Come on!”

They stagger out onto the floor of the synodic sobor, and a cheer goes up like birdsong from all around. Tecnics in their nooks ululate and howl. Vondam, swollen at his nose and at the nape of his skull, throws up his arms and cheers back. Haliya can't stop laughing, though her lungs are going to rags.

They won. They faced death and won. They passed through prophecy, predetermined death, and lawyered their way to a happy ending.

Captain Slats flashes through the walls of eikonostasis back to the command pulpit. Its voice peals like thunder. "We were struck by three inevitators. All three incursions were defeated. By my authority as coronal of this ship, I have ordered retaliation against Susur Secundi. We came to this star to save it from its prison. But along the way to liberation, we may spare a few terawatts to rebuke our foe!"

The cheers redouble.

"It's gone wrong," Syr Vondam murmurs in Haliya's ear.

"Syr?"

"Captain Slats. It's gone wrong." He looks at the hole in his helmet. "You were right. The prophecy was a trick. That Monoist putting a hole in my head wasn't inevitable. Unless something made it inevitable."

"Syr ...?" A hole in the brain must do damage, even if it lets you live. Her knight may be inflamed, encephalitic, and on the way to a sort of temporary, wounded madness.

"Anstruth," Vondam says, grimly. "You were right. It's real. More real than I am, now."

She stares at him. "I don't understand."

"The event of that black hole passing through my head was made inevitable. It was an engineered outcome, a blasphemy against reality: an anstruth. I don't know how it was done. But I have a damn good theory, Haliya. And if I'm right, then I must be under the same influence. I am also an anstruth. Living blasphemy."

"Syr! It's just—just a wound!"

"Think of the improbabilities, Haliya. That Monoist throws away his shot at paradise, just to try to kill me? And it *works*? And the captain foresees it as inevitable? The dice were loaded. And because Slats foresaw that inevitability, it was present to show the Monoist mercy and allow him off the ship. No, Haliya, it's too much to credit."

"What are you saying?" she whispers.

"I'm saying that something wants that Monoist alive. Something he made contact with in the past, or something he will come into contact with in the future."

"But that doesn't mean that you—"

"The Astelli are vulnerable, Haliya. Their bodies are lattices of quantum probability. Not as ... wet and noisy as us. And me? I wasn't vulnerable. Not until my life depended on the exact trajectory of a quantum void through my skull. Now? Who knows."

Impulsively, she touches his brow. He is burning hot. But then again, he is a Solar Knight.

She gives him the unabashed scrutiny of the medic, checking his pupils, left and right. "We should report to the medic, Syr."

"Yes. We should. A concussion is a serious injury, Squire. But once we're fit again, we're going after him."

Him. The one who would, except for the slimmest fortune, have killed her knight.

“I would like that very much, Syr,” she says. “But it may be a long time before you’re well to travel.”

“I’ll go as I am, if the Sum requires it. “ He touches the hole in his head. Frowns at his hand. As if expecting to find a hole in it, too. “I’m sorry that I lived.”

“Syr?”

“Oh, I’m not sorry that I’m alive, Haliya! Never that. I’m glad to be alive. But ... I’ve just denied you the defining moment of your life. I just prevented the existence of a Haliya who suffered my loss and made herself worth it. I would’ve been very sad not to meet her, if I died. And now I am sad not to meet her, though I lived.”

“Syr,” she says, with passion, “I would much rather be worth your life than your death. Life is greater.”

The *Dawnsire* looks like a javelin. It moves like a javelin. It hurls disaster at the monuments of the enemy like the goddess hurls javelins in myth.

The mechanism that undoes a supervoid into a star is in fact called a horizon javelin. It is at the *Dawnsire*’s heart.

The *Dawnsire*’s work requires tremendous energy. More than it can carry in its slender hull. So, as lungs fuel a heart, it also has machines to fuel a horizon javelin.

At the prow of the *Dawnsire* are a pair of Ignacio free-electron lasers. The crews who work on them call them Nacho and Nacha. They are energized by wigglers capable of rendering a man down to mist, and each laser can focus the beam tight enough to split buttons on a shirt at a million kilometers.

The purpose of Nacho and Nacha is to steal power from dark gods.

Fire a laser on the right path around a supervoid, and the laser will slingshot around, returning to its starting point with greater energy than it had when it left. This power can be used to fire the laser again, and the spare harvested to charge up the horizon javelin.

Isn’t that ingenious? Achieve unlimited energy by trickshooting yourself in the ass.

Of course, Nacha and Nacho can also be used as orthodox lasers. Meaning: weapons.

Listen closely. You will hear the tecnicos in their exedra speaking a special prayer.

Shot eighteen navara, navara, navara. Program.

Target range sixty million kilometers. Apparent motion two microradians per second. Drawing lead for ... two hundred seconds.

Switchyard released to viy. Devolving beamform authority ...

Scaling subvisor workers.

Programmed hold. Polling response management for blockers ... shot captain clears hold. Power to program. Stand by ...

The *Dawnsire* is not aimed at Susur Secundi. It is aimed at the place Susur Secundi will be in two hundred seconds.

Nacha fires.

The pulse-train of laser energy strikes across two hundred lightseconds to the Monoist monastery-world. The disciples of HIM WHO FALLS have prepared. Space is blistered and mazed. Thuribles spread fields of energy-soaking incense.

Nacha's train splinters and blooms over the face of Susur Secundi. The fractured world below shines with war-light. Fields of incense blaze up as plasma. The beam jitters slightly: tiny sounds and trembles in the *Dawnsire*'s hull are amplified into errors in the whole beam's path.

Nacho doesn't fire. Not yet.

Nacho is *watching*.

After all, any laser capable of focusing at sixty million kilometers is also a superb telescope.

Nacho maps the path of Nacha's pulse-train, find its own aimpoint, and fires.

Shot nineteen orison, orison, orison. Program.

Target range sixty million kilometers. Target in active litigation.

A vicious race begins. Each lap is four hundred seconds long—long enough for light to go there and back again. Nacho and Nacha try to map the Monoist defenses and find a clear path through while the Monoists hurry to adjust their own maze.

Nacho and Nacha stab out again. Again. Salvoing their disapproval at the warped orbit of Susur Secundi.

Until—so much sooner than the Monoist tactical models predicted—Nacho hits.

The monastery in construction above Susur Secundi jets violet plasma and lurches in its orbit. Exploded stone gushes like an artery into the mazeworld's sky, fading, slowly, to a red bruise.

As the light of the exchange spreads, every living thing with eyes in Sothera can see, scratched across the sky, the blood of the war in heaven.

And if any of those eyes take note of the Hopelight warmaker burning furiously away from the *Dawnsire*, headed anywhere but home—they do not say.

>Not yet. (go to Episode 5)