

# Episode 10

## Seth Dickinson

From set *Edge of Eternities*  
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### Revision 15 (Space War for the Voyeur)

The *Seriema* falls through the dark toward Infinite Guideline.

The dark is full of teeth.

Sami sees the first one through their telescope, nearly as cold as space. “What is that?” Tannuk doesn’t know. “Alpharael, what’s that?”

“Myzoformine,” Alpharael says. “A mass leech. Sometimes they just point you out for investigation. Sometimes they kill you.”

“How long’s their range?” Sami asks.

“I don’t know.”

Sami points to the *Seriema*’s situation display, where the vectors and wakes of nearby ships look like angry unicorn horns kissing tip to tip. “Then we’ll watch what happens to them and steer accordingly.”

A shell of civilian shipping is fleeing Infinite Guideline. The fast, fusion-powered ships are long gone, and most of the slower traffic has climbed through the eternity column out of Sothera. But some stubborn plasmadynes and sailships are still headed out, riding Sothera’s bitter black winds. Even a dowdy drumship, banging along on a chain of nuclear bombs, heads for Uthros.

“If they make it out,” Sami says, “we’re probably okay. If not, I hope the Metalman has a spell against mass leeches.”

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*“This space is under Pinnacle guidance. You are in violation. Withdraw at once or your access to the eternity column is forfeit. Any action that endangers traffic in guided space will lead to Pinnacle sanctions against your polity, up to and including interdictions on interstellar travel.”*

They are falling toward the Infinite Guideline, glittering all alone in the dark, at a handsome fifty kilometers a second.

Stopping is going to be a problem. The moment they fire their newly repaired fusion engine, everyone will see them. And if they wait too long, they’ll irradiate Infinite Guideline when they brake, which Sami could never do. They’re a liar and a thief, not a bad pilot.

“How long?” Haliya asks from the back of the darkened cockpit.

“About an hour before we brake.”

The *Seriema*, for all her charms, is a civilian ship. She's got inertial-mass desist to make her a little lighter, but she doesn't have combat crysfields for the crew. They're going to feel every last crushing second of this burn.



Art by: Borja Pindado

"I'm picking up some unencrypted battle traffic," Tannuk says. "Why would anybody be broadcasting unencrypted?"

"They're saving bandwidth and time," Haliya says. "They need as much of the spectrum as possible for weapons and sensors. It doesn't really matter if the enemy hears. Battle traffic means they already know where you are and what you're doing."

"Put it on," Sami orders.

A soft chant fills the cockpit: "*Faller, O, Faller, I derive from thee coordinates, I witness three, I witness seventy up the bore, I witness it urgently, alive, align, ad nihil, O, Faller Who Falls, rattle, blister, augury, twelve, six, hailstone seven three, I witness nine, I witness nothing, I witness—*"

"No idea," Alpharael says from the opposite corner Haliya's taken. "Maybe it's a message to sleeper agents."

The Monoist ships they've seen—when they see them at all—are in two groups: the smaller vessels coming in from Susur Secundi and other scattered vectors and a central group near Infinite Guideline, commanded by a gravliner. Smaller Monoist ships are not so different from the *Seriema* or a Free Company frigate, but the Monoists' gravliners are different, voracious space-eaters that leave trails of ruined chronology where events decay into eternal simultaneity. The gravliner is dark and massive. So far, the Free Company's attacks have been focused on killing it.

Ships are falling toward Infinite Guideline from all directions like knives thrown out of the dark. They come in faster every hour—some moving hundreds of kilometers a second and still accelerating.

The Monoists and the Sunstar Company are in a bidding war, and they are paying with speed. At first, they were just trying to get to Infinite Guideline and match velocity for a proper battle. Now they've given up on braking, and they're in a race to fly *past* Infinite Guideline—to hurtle through the battle

without any chance of stopping, claw at the enemy, and hopefully do enough damage to tip the balance for following attacks.

It is like watching armored knights joust with lances over a watermelon. Nobody wants to hurt the watermelon—but nobody’s going to be the first one to break off. And the knights all have knight-to-knight missiles, too.

“This is incredible,” Sami says in a reverent hush.

“This is awful,” Tannuk frets. “If they were fighting in formation, we’d know how to get between them. But this is just chaos. If we get caught in someone’s wake, we’re all going to die as sacks of mucus.”

Sami glances to Haliya. “Can you put your people on?”

It takes some verbal fencing before Haliya is willing to align her Sunstar Company frequency-hopper with the *Seriema*’s receiver. Then they get a voice, crushed into a near monotone by compression:

*“MASTERCLASS to WHITEHOT, MASTERCLASS to WHITEHOT, chainlink. New track, your second hour, your fifteenth degree, track is a thermal bloom, ZIP LADDER reactor, probable stealthshark. Do you want lumin for viravolt?”*

“A radar ship,” Sami guesses. “They’re warning another ship about a new contact.”

*“WHITEHOT to MASTERCLASS, we have your track, call it KULA FOUR. Illuminate Kula Four.”*

An eerie chirp from the *Seriema*’s ESM block—the side lobes of a fission-powered targeting radar, like a lighthouse narrowing its eye. Then a violent eruption of static, someone spitting in the lighthouse’s face:

*“MASTERCLASS, we lost your track.”*

*“WHITEHOT, Kula Four is strobing, trying burnthrough—”*

*“MASTERCLASS, striga, striga, striga! Count six, phototax, in your eye—”*

Haliya flinches.

*“—have track, reflex away, FRAMEUP released for intercept—”*

*“—saber Kula Four, cutting—”*

*“—epee striga, two down, FRAMEUP crossing, two down. Two striga, reflex tracking—”*

*“—scratch Kula Four!”*

The inspectral shows them distant lights. First tiny points like satellites, then a violent green glare dancing from one to the next. The points open into shotgun scratches as they die. One of the tiny white points explodes differently—becomes a fiery stab. It strikes something reflective and glares. Little fireflies scatter in all directions: fighters, debris; it’s impossible to tell. Someone was hit, and died, or lived.

A few degrees of dark sky away, a cherry-red ember bruises the dark: the radiators of a warship shedding the heat of its own laser fire.

“Ever been in a space battle?” Tannuk asks the hushed cockpit.

No one answers clearly.

“They’re spooky,” Tannuk says. “A lot of quiet narration about things traveling very fast. You sit in a cool chair. Maybe you’re under hard thrust and you feel heavy. You can’t breathe. The machines make

little noises. There's a lot of radio howling. Someone fires missiles at you. You watch icons move closer and closer on a screen, and then suddenly your ship is moving fast, throwing you around, roaring. Then you get hit, or you don't. And you die, or you don't. It's like taking a long flight on an airliner, but you don't know if you'll ever get to land."

"I don't know if I can take an hour of this," Haliya says.

>But she has to. They all have to. (go to Revision 15 (Three Pleas))

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### Revision 15 (Three Pleas)

The battle gets worse. Missiles and laser pulse trains cut ever closer to Infinite Guideline. A pair of Sunstar patrol ships try to brake too close to Guideline, and Pinnacle shows its teeth—lasing off the palestars' shadow shields, the tiny blades of metal that protect the rest of the ship from its own fusion engine's radiation. It would be a politely nonlethal way of forcing the palestars to stop burning, except that the Monoists kill them a minute later.

The *Seriema* falls closer and closer. Fifty minutes. Forty. Thirty-five. Thirty-three. Is the clock slowing down? Is Sami?

Radar crawls over them like snuffling wolf nose, wet and dark, coming ever closer to the fatal threshold of detection.

One of the radar noises pauses. Changes. Becomes a rapid, suspicious clicking.

"Something's looking at us," Tannuk reports.

"Time to MEST?"

"Still twenty minutes."

"Damn. Damn. Okay. Give me the lasercom."

"You're on."

Sami fires the first programmed recording. Their own voice goes out:

"Infinite Guideline, this is the *Seriema*, echo seven, babel five-nine-zero. We are inbound. We offer gifts of information and request your guidance."

"Last chance to ask for mallowmass," Tannuk says.

"No," Sami says. "Not when we're going to steal from them. I won't do it. Put the lasercom on the closest Monoist and send Alpharael."

There's a *snick* of an electroplated nickel switch: "Sending."

Alpharael's voice sounds out: "*I am Alpharael of Secundi, kamu-shiku, chosen by the singularity. My twin is in Sothera, in her plummet. She will meet HIM. I am aboard this ship. I have a thing with me sent by INEVITA, by the purpose at the end of time. It delivered me here. Now help it bring me safely into the warp where it desires to go. Nothing tests our faith.*"

"Haliya!" Sami shouts. "You're up!"

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She can't do it. Can she?

Out there, they are dying. Her comrades like Walker and Quinidad. And the only reason they are here, dying, is that she failed to return the stone to Vondam on Kavaron. She caused this battle and all its deaths.

“But they took oaths,” she mutters out loud. “They accepted the chance of death. They’re *glad* to die for their duty.”

But she broke that oath.

No! She *kept* the oath! She kept to the litany. *Praise the dawn light, spark of creation / As it rises, so we all rise.* All of us, all of us, there are no exceptions. The Kav cannot be excepted on suspicion of some—abstract contamination.

But the crews of all those ships in battle, they didn’t see what she saw. They aren’t to blame for Vondam’s excess. How can she draw them into this? Wouldn’t turning the Endstone over to the Company end the fighting, and in the Faith’s favor? Wouldn’t she then be able to say, *Syr Vondam, I left you, but I did not abandon you; come home, be healed, the hole in your head is to blame for everything?*

And then she could go home to the world after the winter, in the armor of a Sunstar knight, and crack one of those deep bunkers open to show the parasites within exactly what *solidarity* means—

“Haliya!”

Alpharael is shaking her. She could crack his spine with her forearm. The thought is present but not tempting: just an awareness of the power in her armor.

“I have two bombs on the ship,” she says. “I set them when I came for you. One in the airfoil, which doesn’t matter now. And another one on the shadow shield for the main drive. I could set them off, and then we couldn’t stop. We’d just fly out into space until someone won the battle and picked us up. And then I’d have done my duty. The rest would be out of my hands.”

His hands clench, and then, with the force of choice, relax. “You said you’d help us. You said you’d take on my case, beg my pardon. Aren’t you a squire of your word?”

“Is it that easy for Monoists?” She’s genuinely curious. “You make the choice and it’s made, forever? You fall into it like a supervoid and never regret?”

“I don’t know,” Alpharael says, breathing hard. “I don’t know if my sister had any regrets. She fell into a supervoid. So I can’t ask her.”

She cues up the detonation code in her armor’s signal buffer.

“But what I don’t regret,” Alpharael says, “is losing my faith. Because I hesitated on the brink of the Next Eternity, I lived to doubt, to regret, to wonder if I’d made the right choice. Now you get to do it, too. Don’t quit.”

“A Sunstar knight would never let this happen.”

“Maybe you aren’t cut out to be a Sunstar knight, Haliya. Maybe you aren’t cut out to be certain of everything.”

“Haliya!” the intercom bellows. “*We need you!*”

“You want to be a knight?” Alpharael pushes himself around her, hits the wall she’s facing, and tries to genuflect. “Squire, I beseech you. I am an apostate from my faith. Now all the great powers of the Edge are hunting me. Help me reach safety. Help me understand what has happened to me. My life is in your hands.”

“Oh, come on,” Haliya groans. “Really?”

He’s just a man. A cowardly man who lies, weighed against the fate of the cosmos. He’s only pretending to appeal for help.

But she has agreed to take on his case. To beg his pardon.

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When Haliya and Alpharael pile into the cockpit, Alpharael says: “Did you know she has two bombs on the ship?”

“Yeah,” Tannuk says. “We found them while the Illvoi were refitting the fusion engine and threw them out.”

“Oh,” Haliya says.

Sami waves: “Not to rush you, but this plan only works if *both* sides think they’re about to get the Endstone!”

“Yes. Okay. Put me on.”

“Live?”

“Yes, live.”

Sami nods, respecting the showmanship, and works at the lasercom: “Go.”

“This is Haliya, squire to Syr Vondam of the *Candela*. I am aboard this ship. There is an anathematic artifact here, contained in stasis. I have been exposed only for a short time. I have witnessed intolerable breaches of the Sunstar Company’s code and crimes against innocence committed in the name of the faith. For this reason, I have detached myself from Syr Vondam’s command and placed myself on errantry. I cannot give up the anathematic artifact until I have spoken directly and privately to a coronal. Disengage from the enemy, fire only to defend yourself or my ship, and I will deliver the artifact to you aboard Infinite Guideline.”

Sami watches her carefully. She looks calm and strong.

The radio produces a neutral synthetic voice: “*Squire Haliya of the Candela, challenge. Book of Masers 405, aya 751.*”

While Haliya recites the correct verse, apparently from memory, Sami jabs a finger at Alpharael. “Do you know what you’re going to wear?”

“Wear?”

“You’re not going over there in your black robes, cultist. You need armor.”

“Do you have a spare suit of ... er ... mold? Anything that would fit me?”

“No,” Sami says. “But we’ve got some that won’t fit you. Tan, go get him set up.”

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The fighting doesn’t stop.

Salvos of missiles chew through counterfire and jamming to kill. Fighters arc like the tips of sabers, delivering their payloads and racing away again, dying or escaping as cold math and hot fluid test each other to the end. Mechan wingmates hurl themselves into beams or disintegrate into sacrificial decoys. Radars scream at the dark, begging for an answer: Where is death? How fast? How soon?

But the fighting does not touch the *Seriema*.

After all, the enemy's not the one in control of the Endstone. We are. The True Faith.

Is this what it was all about, Sami wonders? Has the Endstone moved them all to this place—Sami delivering a ship, Alpharael delivering the Monoists, Haliya delivering the Free Company—all so the Endstone can pass through the eternity column without either faith or Pinnacle catching it?

Sami is going to have to figure all this out later.

They negotiate rendezvous with Infinite Guideline. The controller is a viy, but it still sounds pleased to do its job: "*Seriema, cleared for post-periapse retrofire. Do you want mallowmass?*"

Sami exhales slowly. This is an unencrypted channel. Everyone is listening.

The damned thing is that they *could*. They could ask for fuel and safe passage through the eternity column. And Pinnacle would probably grant it. That is the purpose of Pinnacle. To be there, to offer aid when no one else will.

But if Sami does that, the faiths chasing the Endstone will know that it's going to be taken from them. And they will intercede. Viciously.

All the Kav in Taro-duend rose up to protect Sami and Tannuk and Alpharael from the Free Company. All the Kav in Taro-duend died for it.

Sami will not ask that of everyone aboard Infinite Guideline.

"No," they send. "We are under other protection." Let the listening combatants read that as they will.

They shut off the broadcast and sit back. Haliya is the only other one in the cockpit, and she looks like she wants very badly to be given a job.

"Could you toggle that switch?" Sami asks.

"This one?"

"Keep toggling until I say stop. I think we're going to make it to Infinite Guideline. The next big problem is breaking the encryption on the warp ferries."

"Will Tezzeret do it?"

"Alpharael will do it. You'll keep him safe, like we planned. And I'll go talk to Pinnacle."

"Do you have a plan for that?"

"Yeah," Sami says. "I'm a con artist. A crook. Pinnacle's an entire society built on giving people what they need, which makes them—"

"Easy marks?"

"Exactly the opposite. They're *really* good at spotting fraud. So, I'm going to tell them the truth. All of it. And that should give you the time you need to get the ferry under control and mate it with the *Seriema*."

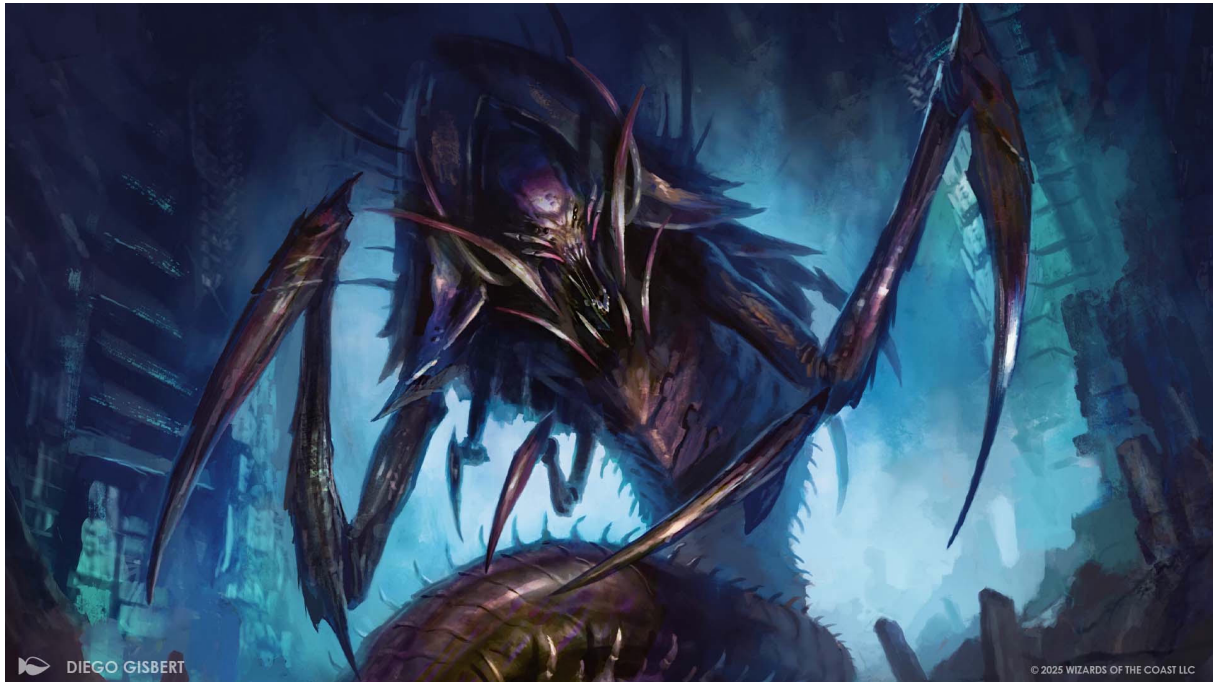
"This is where I came into Sothera," Haliya says, snapping the switch crisply up and down. It is a solid titanium blade with a bulb of membrawn on the finger end. It makes a lovely sound. "Through the eternity column. Did you?"

This sounds like an odd question, if you understand the eternity column as a two-way gate. But it's not. The column is a ramp for ships to *leave* Sothera into the warp, but only a beacon for ships returning to

sidereal space from the higher lamina. You don't need an eternity column to *dis*engage your eternity drive. It just helps you know where to do it.

This is important, because if Sami ever wants to come back to Sothera, they may not want to pass through Infinite Guideline.

"Yeah," Sami says. "On the *Wurm Speaker*. There was a meeting here. I remember all kinds of people, Illvoi, Eumidian, human, Kav. Before the ship set out for the edge of Sothera and ... you know."



Art by: Diego Gisbert

The *Wurm Speaker* did not return from its voyage.

"I actually don't know," Haliya says. "Is it important?"

"We went to talk to the voices in the Wurmwall," Sami says. "I was kitchen help. Not a lot of people came back. You can stop switching now."

Haliya stops. "What does it do?"

"Counts how many times it's been switched," Sami says. "Feels great, though. Doesn't it?"

"Yeah." Haliya smiles at them. "It does. I like your ship, Captain."

"It's a mess," Sami says. "But it got me this far. Hear that, *Seriema*? *Just a little further to go* (go to Revision 15 (The Art of Speaking to Eumidians))."

## Revision 15 (The Art of Speaking to Eumidians)

They make it to Infinite Guideline.

The Monoist myzoformines are taking victims. They only attack when a target is both close and slow—they do not reveal themselves when a Hopelight or a Chromion streaks past at a hundred KPS, radiating like a pulsar, trying to provoke their attack. But when a palestar slides up to settle alongside Guideline and claim some space—suddenly it is shrapnel in an angry fist.

The Summists cannot force the strongpoint and take total control.



But the Monoists cannot hold the space firmly enough to guarantee their own primacy.

Under cover of a ceasefire—to retrieve survivors, make repairs, and limp away—both sides crowd in toward Infinite Guideline, waiting to receive the Endstone from the *Seriema* and destroy its pursuers.

Stevedore mechs fit data and power umbilicals to the *Seriema*’s waiting adapters. The ship greets Infinite Guideline and politely refuses to be taken over. Fuel trunks and water pipes kiss their thirsty counterparts—but refuse to open.

The *Seriema* is under tacit arrest.

“*Combat armor*,” the Pinnacle dockmaster viy transmits as Sami and Tannuk cross the bridge into the stationside dock. “*You’re not dressed for a polite meeting*. “

“There’s a war on out there,” Sami sends back. “Both sides want what we’ve got. I’m not going anywhere without protection.”

“*You are aboard Infinite Guideline. Pinnacle guarantees your safety*. “

“I guarantee no one’s safety. I haven’t claimed mallowmass. I could be here in bad faith.”

“*I will inform Checkmate Mantis accordingly*. “

A ceiling of teal aurora light waits for them. Rows of atmosphere tanks, mixed for every species in Sothera, march away beneath the vaulted ceiling.

Outside the airlock waits a Eumidian with a phalanx of war drones. Sami’s breath catches at the sight.

She wears black Pinnacle formal attire that’s pinned up to the femurs of her four saltatory legs. Her slender tibia and tarsals are a deep jeweled violet. Raptorial forelegs wait politely folded against her thorax. Her eyes are small, wide-set, and iridescent. She is, by plurality of population, the image of classical beauty in Pinnacle space. Although Sami is not part of that Eumidian plurality, they are still stirred by the sight of her.

Most of the stories humans tell about themselves—diverse, self-reliant, pragmatic, loyal to their homes—turned out to be false, or at least incomplete. But many of them are true of Eumidians. This makes humans and Eumidians natural enemies, or admirers.

“You must be Checkmate Mantis,” Sami says, sketching out a curtsy. “What a relief to set eyes on you.”

“Operation of a fusion spacecraft without a valid flight plan,” Checkmate Mantis stridulates. Her voice is like a violin: played by her arms on the strings of her body. “Overdue for inspection and workup. The *Seriema* is a reckless ship, and a danger to the well-being of the commons. Do you come here as a guest or a thief?”

There is an art to speaking to Eumidians. They are quicker and more rational than humans, but their minds are a collection of autos—little specialized selves, grown through symbiosis with the environment. If you can learn a Eumidian’s specialty, you can parse which topics her autos handle well and which require her to invoke a more painstaking logical model. It’s like asking a human to walk by conscious movement.

There is an art to speaking to Eumidians, but unfortunately, there is no time for it.

“I have not claimed mallowmass,” Sami says, waving Tannuk forward, “because I am not here as a guest. I have come into possession of an artifact unearthed from the clay of Sigma. This artifact has a will of its own. It wills its passage through the eternity column. I have been employed to complete that passage and to deliver the artifact to its maker. The warring parties outside your impeccable station—may its stability and justice radiate to the furthest orbits of Sothera—want the artifact for themselves.

In its pursuit, they have already committed terrible crimes against the common weal. Will you receive our witness?”

Tannuk takes a knee and presents, in an outstretched claw, a quartz memory crystal. Inside it is the *Seriema*’s complete recording of everything that happened on Kavaron.

“Tannuk,” Checkmate Mantis muses. “Exiled from Kavaron after a transgression against Kav ethical norms. Sighted at more than a hundred forty-four incidents of dangerous or fraught activity. If I take this data, will it try to addle the viy and give the *Seriema* control of a warp ferry?”

“Checkmate,” Tannuk says, “this is honest testimony. We saw the Free Company kill innocent Kav. All in pursuit of the artifact we’re carrying.”

“The Endstone.”

Sami blinks in surprise: “You know—?”

Mantis cannot blink and does not nod, but her sharp strike of the forelimbs must be a *yes*. “We know everything that happened on Kavaron. Syr Vondam came to us to confess his crimes and warn us to evacuate Infinite Guideline. He said there would be a battle over the Endstone. He told us how it functions. We reviewed our data and found signs of its influence.”

“The price of moxite,” Sami says. “The colony on Sigma.”

“Among others.” Mantis’s forelimbs scratch at her legs, drawing a low, long wail. It sounds eerie and sad in a way that *must* be tuned to humans. “An artifact of this power must be delivered to the only agency that can be trusted to contain it.”

“You mean Pinnacle.”

“I mean the Drix.”

That actually ... makes sense. The Drix gave star travel to Pinnacle to avert war. But with that power came a famous warning:

*All these worlds are yours  
But they are older than you  
Older than you know*

“So where are they?” Sami asks.

“Here. On Infinite Guideline. A Drix seamed in two days ago. It plays the qalib of *Sentinelle au Batardeau*. Its emblem is bones buried in layers of fat in a golden urn. It will hear the name Tumulus, or Barrow.”

Sami is aghast. A Drix? Here? What will they say, what will they wear? Not one in a billion ever has a chance to meet a Drix. “I can’t meet a Drix. I’ve got to—I’m not—oh, Walls.”

“You are right,” Mantis glissandos with a note of, perhaps, frustration. “You cannot meet a Drix. Barrow has expressed no interest in the Endstone. Instead, it has spent the past two days preparing an arsenal of what I believe to be weapons. Nonetheless, you should give us the stone. You have an opportunity to transfer a terrible burden to those qualified to control it. And for all I know, Barrow plans to take it from you by force.”

“I know, I know. I can’t trust any of my own desires. I need to hand it over to an organization so large and opaque that it’s beyond the Endstone’s power to alter. Like Pinnacle. Like you.”

“Just so.”

Sami eyes the war mechans carefully. Sami doesn't think their whole life has been rewritten to prepare them for this moment, to turn them into a weapon for the Endstone. If that had happened, they would be a lot more prepared. "Checkmate Mantis?"

"Yes?"

"Did Syr Vondam persuade you that, given the Endstone's power, it might be appropriate, even imperative, to use lethal force to take it from us?"

Checkmate Mantis draws a long, low drone from her legs. "Yes."

"Then why haven't you?"

"Because I am a good person," Checkmate Mantis says. "And I believe that you will—"

Something makes a very soft, very high sound. It passes distinctly from Sami's left to right, as if crossing the dock and leaving again.

The lights go out. The air pumps stop. The dock plunges into darkness. Emergency lighting flushes the causeway with lobes of deep red and pale violet.

"Mantis? What's happening?"

Soft chitter of echolocation: "We have been attacked. A penetrating impact. Did you do this?"

"No," Sami says, crouching slowly. "I didn't. I'm going to turn on my suit sonar now."

"If you must."

The sonar goes on. Checkmate Mantis makes a shrill of discomfort. Lobes of sound reach out into the dockside dark—and detect an air current. The dock has been holed in several places.

Just little pinpricks, so tiny they haven't triggered the pressure alarms yet, so precise they've snipped the power and data cilia. Like needles pushed through by a vast scientist's hand. Like an injection.

Something is coming in through the holes. In from outside. It doesn't have a definite form or mass or shape. It is visible to the sonar only as a pattern of interference—a waveform of *potential*, spreading out through the dock.

The war mechans rattle and hiss with threat displays.

"Potential matter," Checkmate Mantis says. "An artificial preparation of unobservable states. Someone is pumping it into the station. Why?"

Tannuk takes a deep breath. Whatever his armor flehmen picks up makes him sneeze. "It smells incredible," he says. "Like—everything."

"It triggers every possible chemoreceptor in your sinuses," Mantis says. "Is that significant?"

Sami remembers the kitchens on the *Wurm Speaker*. A cook telling them: "You can't find a flavor every species likes, kid. So you get two kinds of cooks. Cooks that use no flavor, and cooks that use every flavor at once."

*"I think we're being seasoned," Sami says. (go to Revision 15 (Eld))*

## **Revision 15 (Eld)**

*"I don't want to declare defeat too soon. But the ferries are gone. "*

Haliya adjusts her grip on Alpharael, who is not shaped like Alpharael right now. "Say again?"

They are two slow bullets, floating from the *Seriema* toward the tug quay, where the warp ferries wait like roosting bats to mate with ships. Alpharael is crammed into a suit of Kav Memorial Navy risk armor. To avoid detection, Sami coated their armor in foam insulation—which means they can't move and can't cool down.

Haliya is very sweaty and very itchy.

As they drift, they tumble slowly, and on each rotation, Haliya goggles at the view. Infinite Guideline is a structure on the scale of the *Dawnsire*, a gleaming blue-white starfish with the blade of the eternity column jabbed through its hub. It's easy to imagine the column as a cannon, pointed sideways of everything, into the superstructure and the warp. But it's not a cannon. It's a wedge, or a ramp, or a screw, or a lever, or a pulley—the most complicated simple machine: a device for getting from sidereal space into the eternities.

If there weren't a war on, this would be a bustling hub, alive with commerce and exchange—and possible collisions. Thus, the ferries.

But they're gone.

"We saw them on the way in," she says. Her voice passes through her armor, pressed up against Alpharael's. "Pinnacle must've moved them inside."

"*Think they know what we're up to?*" Alpharael says.

"I think they're not stupid and they took precautions against our most obvious escape plans."

"*We need to get inside the dockmaster module and—Haliya. Check your spectral.*"

She's already seen it.

Infinite Guideline has just sprung leaks. A *lot* of leaks. Spectral detects at least fifteen separate jets of atmosphere erupting from the station's pearly hull. And all at once, the sweeping turquoise aurorae that decorated Guideline's arms and central domes go out.

Someone has snipped the station's arteries.

"You did this," she says. "That was a strike with singularity beads. It must've been."

"*There's a mechan docking with the nearest puncture. It does look like a monastery guardian from Susur Secundi ... but it's got a tank of something. Pumping gas inside?*"

Golden fireflies ignite on the far side of Guideline. Haliya recognizes the dark shapes at the tip of each light—lightbridges, boarding craft hurled at their targets by a boost laser. The Solar Knights are making a play for Guideline. "My people are going after the *Seriema*," she says. "We're running out of time."

"*I've got a bad feeling about this*," Alpharael mutters.

On their next rotation, Haliya catches a dark spot crossing between them and Guideline. She takes it for a Monoist boarding pod at first, something like an ineivitor.

But the way it moves—that squidlike pulsation—

She transmits the footage over to Alpharael. "What's that?"



Art by: ノツツオ/Nottsuo

*“That’s a myziformine. Your boarding ships are probably attracting them.”*

*“How many limbs do they have?”*

*“Limbs?”*

*“Arms. Legs. Tentacles. Appendages.”*

*“None ... are you seeing antennae?”*

She catches the dark shape again. It twists across her vision in a direction that is hard to name. Slipping through space.

It has a lot of limbs. And it’s headed straight for Infinite Guideline. Headed straight for the dock where the *Seriema* is moored.

“I think we should break radio silence,” she says.

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“There’s something coming in,” Tannuk whispers.

Sami fires sound into the dark, trying to reach out, trying to touch something. Crazy angles return—sonar pulses self-interfering, creating an image of overlapping benches, pyramids of columns, cables looped back on themselves—nonsense.

Something comes in through the hole in the hull.

A narrow rushing sound, like a centipede hurrying down a pipe. A sense of expansion, of growth—One of the mechans ignites a floodlamp.

The light catches a thing.

It is beautiful. It is a loop. It has no inside or outside. Its mantle is rich with topology—fourfold sphere eversions, triply symmetric immersions like knots of ears, crushed spheres. It flushes pale violet,

ultraviolet. It speckles the sight. The atmosphere around it twists warpwise, rushing up and out, a cyclone in wrong dimensions.

Beneath its mantle grows a nest of arms.

Above the mantle, white shards stand like a henge, like crushed porcelain masks, supported by nothing.

It twists around itself. Plunges down and to the blue: a direction Sami recognizes only from the motion of ships entering warp.

As it moves it leaves the world *bubbled*—latticed into foamy cells, like old film burning in a camera, like blisters on skin.

From up and to the red, it passes through the dock concourse, auguring toward Mantis, Tannuk, and Sami.

“The mechans have it,” Mantis glissandos. “Attempting communication.”

The mechans strobe light and sound at the thing. It does not stop coming.

“Tan!” Sami shouts.

“Yeah!”

“Get ready!”

They don’t have weapons—they came to parley—but Tan deploys his armor’s work claws, and Sami draws their favorite non-weapons: a rapier antenna and an autobola smart-tether that hums to life, looking for debris to grapple or limbs to tangle.

“Sanctioned self-defense!” Mantis orders, and the mechans open fire.

Whatever *it* is, it can be hurt. It can be hurt *bad*. The mechans shred it with a volley of Pinnacle effectors. The topology of the thing collapses, and it bleeds rods, triangles, deflating ripped spheres full of fluid. It flinches like a salp, its top pushing up and out so that its white plated faces flow outward, then around and down, then up again to gather within its looping squid arms.

Either this refreshes it somehow, or the damage, no matter how spectacular, was superficial.

It passes around and through and over and behind the nearest mechan. Its arms grapple at the mechan, plucking, advancing, each hoop of purple flesh whirling like the blade of a saw but somehow changing with every *other* spin—

It doesn’t destroy the mechan. It doesn’t disassemble it. It doesn’t pass on some fleshy corruption that subverts the mechan’s procedural mind.

It licks the mechan clean. Like the war machine is dusted in sugar or sweet pollen.

In its wake, the mechan is left—exploded.

But not exploded like a boom. Not detonated or deflagrated or vaporized.

The mechan’s components have been *graphed*. A lattice of white chalky stuff that connects plates, joints, weapons, sensors—even the mechan’s computer brain has been erupted into a dense fuzzball of chalk. Like each quantum well and junction has been pinned to a node of the graph.

On twists the alien. For surely this is an alien: not merely a thing that isn’t human, or Eumidian, or Kav, but a thing that is strange to all life.

“Tan!” Sami shouts.

“Yeah,” Tan says, very relaxed.

“Run!” (go to Revision 15 (Entropy and the Knights))

### Revision 15 (Entropy and the Knights)

“Captain,” Haliya transmits. “Captain Sami. There’s something coming inside.”

No reply.

“Thirty seconds from impact,” Alpharael calls. The tug quay is built into the dockmaster station, a white sphere at the tip of Infinite Guideline’s arm, clasped between four converging plates of hull. Antennae stab out into the night beyond. Any one of those emitters could probably fry their suits.

But the power is out. The entire vast station has gone dark.

And now, from all directions, the myzoformines that are not myzoformines pulse like jellyfish through the vacuum. Headed for the holes the Monoists shot through Infinite Guideline— as if drawn by scent.

“What have you done?” Haliya asks him.

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like them. They’re not Illvoi, are they?”

“If those look like Illvoi, we look like slivers.”

They crash into the tug quay and stick. It takes clumsy minutes to peel the insulating foam off their armor—it’s supposed to dissolve at a signal, but the foam’s expired and they have to paw and cut at each other instead. Then they scramble inside. With power and data cut off, this part of the station has reverted to emergency mode and is eager to help them. “This security is terrible,” Alpharael complains.

“It is,” Haliya admits. “I feel like I’m breaking into a public museum.”

“The Puzzle Club would not be happy here.”

“Who?”

“Some people who died on the *Dawnsire*.”

“‘Died,’ or went to paradise?”

“Paradise. I guess.”

“You guess?”

He doesn’t answer.

The interior of the dockmaster station is half-hollow: a hemispherical hangar overlooked by control decks, medical and rescue facilities, offices, and observation points. But the hangar holds the real prizes. Warp ferry mechans—hundreds of them, folded up around the darts of their eternity drives and slotted into hexagonal docks.

“So many,” Alpharael breathes.

“It makes sense,” Haliya says. “Pinnacle originally came to this system to help evacuate the Kav. The Kav didn’t have eternity drives. So they’d need a lot of ferries to help Kav ships leave the system.”

She pushes him across the hangar toward the traffic control deck. The Kav armor doesn’t have thrusters, was never meant for space—he must be overheating even worse than her. “If you pass out,” she warns him, “I don’t know if I can get you back.”

“I thought you’d try to leave me here.”

"No. I need you along."

"Yeah? For what?"

She pushes the crouched Kav armor into an emergency airlock. There isn't room for two. "If we run into those squid things—"

"You need someone clumsy to feed to them. I've heard it all before."

"No," she says, meaning every word. "I *need* somebody to protect, or I don't know what to do."

From the emergency airlock, it is not two hatches to the deserted control deck. Alpharael calls "Viy? Hello?"

*"Hello. I'm on emergency local power. An organized attack against Guideline is underway. Are you the attackers?"*

"No, we're here to get a warp ferry and flee through the column. Can you transfer a ferry to our ship?"

*"Do you have clearance for transit?"*

"No."

*"Then I can't help you. There are emergency shelters across the station to which I can direct you now. Pinnacle will make any material losses whole. See to your lives."*

"There are codes to override control of the ferries?"

*"Yes. They are 512-bit lattice-based secrets restricted to members of the Strategic Corps."*

"Okay," Alpharael says, squirming around inside his suit so that it rocks. "Ready for the code?"

He then recites numbers, continuously, for just a little over a minute. Haliya loses count at around seventy. He stops somewhere in the hundreds.

*"Code rejected,"* the viy says. *"What were you thinking? If you keep trying this, you might randomly guess the right code—trillions and trillions of years after the stars go out. That's a rhetorical approximation. It would be longer."*

Even through a ton of Kav armor, Alpharael looks stricken. "What? I was sure—"

"You thought you'd use the Endstone!" Haliya realizes. "You thought you'd guess randomly, then, in the future, you'd get the Endstone and make your guess correct!"

"That's exactly what I thought," he says. "Walls, I should've brought it with me. Now we've got to go back to the *Seriema* to use it."

"That's not how it works! You'd cause a paradox, because if you got the code right, you wouldn't have to use the Endstone—"

"But I *know* I'll have to use the Endstone to get the code right, so I'd still use it, there's no paradox, there are never any paradoxes—"

"The Grand Cosmocordance is right!" she declares. "See, the future hasn't happened yet, it's not real! If it *had*, you'd have already gotten the code right! But when we get to the *Seriema*, the future will be the present, and you'll use the stone and remember getting the code right, because it can affect the past when it's in the present, but it can't affect the present when it's in the future!"

Alpharael starts to laugh. "You sound like you're having a stroke!"

"I bet you know all about having a stroke, monk!"



He laughs harder. She starts laughing, too.

"Fine," she says. "Fine. All right. Go."

"Yes. Let's go."

"No. You go back, use the Endstone. I have to stay here."

"No—look, my suit doesn't have thrusters. You need to carry me back."

"You'll have to climb along the outside of the station."

He makes a sound of unbelievable frustration. "You're not seriously going back to your militant church of laser death."

"I am," she says. "I told you. I'm going to make my report and beg your pardon."

"Listen, vapor brain. The stone is lazy. It takes the simplest route. If you're not there with me when I use it, maybe it'll find a reason you were never here at all. Maybe you'll have died on the crossing, hit by debris from an exploding ship. Maybe the stone will make it so you're *gone*."

"Like it made your sister gone," she says.

He is silent. She cannot see him through his armor.

"Sorry," she says. "But that's what you think happened. Isn't it? You think the stone made your sister jump into a black hole, so you'd volunteer for a suicide mission to rejoin her, so that you'd have a crisis of faith, so that you'd flee to Kavaron, so that I'd pursue you, so that we'd both be on the *Seriema* to get her through the blockades to the eternity column, so the stone can leave Sothera. That's what you're thinking."

"You make it sound ridiculous," he says. "I wouldn't make it sound *so* ridiculous."

"It is ridiculous. The stone wasn't there when she made her choice."

"But the stone touched me. And her choice was in my past."

"Alpharael," she says, as gently as she can, "you're inventing paradoxes to explain things that ... don't need explanation. You never believed in the Next Eternity. That's why you didn't take sekhar."

"I do believe—"

"And I chose not to give the Endstone to Syr Vondam because ... I guess I don't really believe in the Sum. I don't believe that it's worth doing *anything* to maximize the Sum, long-term. Not killing innocents, at least."

"Well, yeah. Obviously."

"But Alpharael ... some people *do* believe. Maybe your sister believed. Maybe the stone had nothing to do with her choice. Or with my choice, right now, to stay here and face the consequences. That's what I'm doing, you understand? I'm going back to the Free Company. I have to present myself and be judged."

He stares at her. "Haliya ..."

She's startled by how frightened he sounds. If he actually likes her, it would be a truly ridiculous degree of trauma bonding. "I have to know, Alpharael. I have to know if Syr Vondam was influenced by the Endstone, or by the hole it put in his head, when he slaughtered Taro-duend and let me go. Because if he wasn't—if he was obeying the Sum—then the Sum commanded something I *know* to be wrong."

“Let me answer you,” a voice behind her says. “I did act in accordance with the Sum. Except when I let you go. I did that out of love. Because I know you, Haliya. I know you didn’t deserve to be shot down dead for my weakness and my failure. And I knew you’d come back.”

Golden light rises in the control room.

He is here. Standing on the far side of the control deck. Between them and the airlock.

His helmet is open. His twin bladiators shine with coherent threat.

“We can take the Endstone now,” Syr Vondam says. “You and me. And then we’ll make ourselves right with the Sum.

*“Come home, Haliya.”* (go to Episode 11)