
Episode 3

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From set *Edge of Eternities*
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NOTICE: PDF contains clickable links (starting with > symbol) to jump between options.

Act Two

Revision 10 (BEAT)

BEAT

BEAT

BEAT

ECHO

ECHO

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BEAT

>*Echo?* (go to Revision 10 (SINUS RHYTHM ESTABLISHED))

>*ECHO* (go to Revision 10 (SINUS RHYTHM ESTABLISHED))

Revision 10 (SINUS RHYTHM ESTABLISHED)

SINUS RHYTHM ESTABLISHED

INC ENTROPY CATENA

STANDBY TO READ

>*STANDING BY* (go to Revision 10 (V ZCZC01ATO#124AF1B4C32BED526BBCABC8D642435D))

Revision 10 (V ZCZC01ATO#124AF1B4C32BED526BBCABC8D642435D)

V ZCZC01ATO#124AF1B4C32BED526BCCABC8D642435D

RR SSSMONAST SINGUL CLOUDWRACK

DE MESPRIME SINGUL FALLWATCH 0 29890990001

ZNZ ZZZZZ

O 0001MPC099

FM 01ATO MESPRIME SINGUL
TO SSSMONAST SINGUL
XMT SSSMONAST SINGUL DOUBTPOOL

BT
FIREWALL MOST SECRET
SUBJ/YOUR IMPERATIVES IN SOTHERA

1. YOUR GOAL IS TO MAINTAIN THE SOTHERA SUPERVOID UNTIL ENTANGLEMENT WITH POINT PRIME IS COMPLETE. LINK BY LINK INTO THE NEXT ETERNITY. TOGETHER.
2. PRIMARY THREAT TO GOAL IS SUNSTAR INTERVENTION BY SFC SOLAR KNIGHT COHORT. SOLAR KNIGHTS ESCORTING DAWNSIRE. PRESENCE OF DAWNSIRE IS GREATEST THREAT AND BLASPHEMY MOST INTOLERABLE.
3. AGREE YOUR CURRENT FORCES INADEQUATE TO DIRECTLY CONFRONT DAWNSIRE.
4. IMMEDIATELY DEPLOY INEVITOR SURVEILLANCE AGAINST DAWNSIRE.
5. IF INEVITOR SORTIE SUCCESSFUL DEPLOY CADRE TO BOARD DAWNSIRE AND DELAY JAVELIN ACTIVATION BY ANY MEANS.
6. LARGER STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO SUMMIST CHALLENGE IN SOTHERA NOW UNDERWAY.
7. NOTHING TESTS OUR FAITH.

#END
NNNNN

Have you ever had a dream about falling?

>No. (go to I have never had a dream about falling.)

>aaaaaAAAAAAAAA (go to Revision 10 (Two Fallers))

I have never had a dream about falling.

Your loss. They're divine.

>Choose the other one. (go to Revision 10 (Two Fallers))

Revision 10 (Two Fallers)

Alpharael is falling!

He looks up, he reaches up, trying to grab whatever he fell from—but there are just stars. Stars and swirling nebulae. No wind, either. He's not naked, but he's not dressed properly.

How did he get here? What's going on? Is this space? How is he breathing?

Now speaks his sister, fondly but sadly, with worry for Alpharael's wits and prospects: "Stop asking so many questions, Alph. It makes you sound like you can't think for yourself. And I won't be around to hush you anymore."

"Raphaella?"

Alpharael looks around wildly, and then, finally, straight down.

He sees infinite black nothing at the center of everything: the holy mystery of his faith.

He's plunging into Sothera.

Between him and the black hole mystery falls his sister.

Her tattered robes drift in freefall. This transforms the fraying fabric and twisted alabile metal from something weary and worn into a kind of life, returned to its natural habitat. She looks like a great dark kelp.

They are on the Plummet. The sacred transit into a supervoid and the Next Eternity, the World to Come. The Dweller went first, the One Who Sounds in the Deep, HIM WHO FALLS, and now they will follow HIM.

“Wait!” Alpharael shouts. “Wait, Raph, wait! Wait!”

“Wait for what?”

“We’re not sure! We’re not sure!”

“Of course we are,” Raphaella says. Her face is a sour little circle surrounded by wrinkled alabile, the tidal metal, hammered out of condensed events—raw coordinates in space-time. She always looks a little raw and hammered, too, a little sour and pinched.

It means nothing. She is the most joyous alive person Alpharael knows. The truth of people is not in what you see, it is inside them, it is in their singular heart and will. Monoism teaches this.

“Of course we’re sure, Alph. We were always going to do this. All of us are going to do this, inevitably.”

“But you’ll die!”

“Yes. Monoism is a messianic death cult. We’ve never denied it. Not you, not I, not the faith. But it’s also correct.”

Of course she’s right.

All matter in the universe between the Walls will eventually gather into supervoids. The brief chaos of the beginning—what the enemy calls the Bright Sum—will soon end in crushing blackness.

Inside each black hole, a new and better universe will be born. The World to Come. *A world without walls.*

The mission of Monoism is to entangle these newborn supervoids into a single grand ensemble, to tend and nourish their growth, to defend them against the fanatics who worship the chaos flame of the dying dawn.

And, above all, to observe the descent of the Dweller, the Immortal Faller, the Seeker in the Well: to glean from HIS transmissions new elements of *The Theorem Unending and Final*, the description of what is and what will come.

During that mission, sometimes individual Monoists are called upon to go ahead. To follow the Faller into the holy void.



Art by: Cristi Balanescu

So, Raphaella and Alpharael have been called.

His breath shallows. His eyes dilate until the light from the supervoid's photon collar draws tears. What's happening to him? Oh, don't be naive, Alpharael, you know what's happening!

You're afraid. You're *terrified*.

He babbles:

"But—but—Raph! Raph, wait! Sothera isn't catenated yet. It's not entangled. We haven't seen the Faller here! You, uh, you—" he's desperate to make himself understood, so of course he stumbles, "you could end up in a *different* Next Eternity, a different one from the rest of us ..."

"Then you'll have to make sure Sothera's concatenated, won't you? You and the rest of the monastery will see to it. So we all end up in the same forever. Don't worry, Alph! It's done. I've chosen. I'm happy."

He shouldn't say it. One of the tenets of Monoism is absolute respect for individual will.

But it just comes tearing out of him.

"Raph, come back. Stop. Don't go."

She blinks up at him. Behind her there is nothing at all. "Why?"

"I want you *here*. I want you in my universe. For a while longer, at least? Please?"

"You never said anything like that when we were awake." Raphaella frowns. "You said you were happy for me. You said it was my choice, and so it was the right choice. You wished me a safe passage. You said you'd see me again soon."

She is getting taller. Her feet are stretching away from her head. Sothera's tides are pulling at her. This is a danger of small young supervoids, the steepness of the approach, the way their appetite comes on so suddenly it gets your lower parts before your upper and tears you apart. The alabile metal around her groans and moves like taffy. She grimaces in discomfort.

“Come back,” Alpharael begs. “Don’t go yet. Not yet. I didn’t say it, but I should’ve. I don’t want you to go.”

“Live without regret!” she cries. “You are the sum of your choices. You are the line shot by your past. Live with that. Be the strongest future of your now.”

“No, no, I don’t want the future of this now. I want to change this choice. I want a different choice!”

“It was my choice! Not yours!”

“I want to change your choice, Raph!”

Now he can feel the tidal forces, too. They’re supposed to be intense, in a transcendent way—your body rushing ahead of you to the Next Eternity.

This is not what Alpharael feels. He feels like there is a clamp on his feet and a clamp on his head and they are tied to opposing engines.

Raphaella groans. “Something’s wrong.”

“Raph, come back!”

“I can’t. We’re on the horizon, Alph, where the future tips over and *tomorrow* is the same as *down* — I’m in. I’m plummeting. I can’t come back. Oh! It hurts!”

A wall of light races up to meet them. Sothera’s firewall, the burning event horizon. The last chance.

Alpharael reaches out for his sister. But they’re in free fall. He cannot get any closer to her. He cannot get any further away. His motion is ballistic—inevitable.

Blood springs up from Raphaella’s face. Her alabaster armor constricts and squeezes around her. The fabric of her vestments tears. She croaks, “*Alph—*” and blood comes up out of her like toothpaste. She gurgles—

And freezes.

Caught on the horizon. Burning. Tearing apart. Forever.

Alpharael realizes:

There is no Next Eternity. There is only hell.

>It’s just a dream, though. (go to Revision 10 (all creation in a point))

>Did that really happen? (go to Revision 10 (all creation in a point))

Revision 10 (all creation in a point)

•
*All
All creation
All creation in a
All creation in a point
the point of all
creation in
all in
all*

Raphaella of Secundi. Final transmission. Approaching the horizon.

These will be my death poems.

The purpose of the universe is to create supervoids.

We all agree on this. It's not just an article of faith but a cosmological fact. When all else is gone, when the stars go out and creation freezes in half-light, only supervoids will remain. **The purpose of a system is what it does, and what the universe does is convert everything into supervoids.**

Inside supervoids are new universes. That's the great chain of being. We call them *supervoids* not just because they are massive but because they are *above* us, super catenam, at the top of the chain.

We, the Monoists who know the single truth of existence, help achieve that purpose. We saved Sothera from its ruin.

Now we must protect the newborn void from those who would destroy it: the Summists, the Sunstar zealots sent by the Celestial Palatinate, the Free Company.

By plummeting into Sothera, I am going to the purpose of the universe.

Because I am part of the universe, I am going to my own purpose.

But along the way, my inevitator will fly by the *Dawnsire*.



Art by: Jaime Jones

I have seen it! I have seen it through the telescope. It is awful in its beauty and its hubris.

Now I turn my telescope to what lies below.

If we protect Sothera through its birth and entanglement, defend it from the Free Company until its union with the greater body of INEVITA and finally glimpse the shape of the Faller plummeting toward its heart, then Sothera will vouchsafe all of its devoured children into the Next Eternity.

Unless the *Dawnsire* fires and the Sunstar knights unbirth what we have made.

We cannot let that happen, and the end of my life in this universe is no great thing against that mission.

•
*Pierce
the lip of
infinity and
draw out the
bloody thread.*

Look at the *Dawnsire* and what it says about our enemy.

Nothing can be saved, nothing can be allowed to run its course. No cosmic purpose can go untroubled by the frantic selfish desecrations of the small. If destiny makes a pyre, the Summists would suck the air from the world to put it out. If God strides toward you, send Saint Sunsolde out to lay some caltrops.

Who, seeing the miracle of a supervoid, turns to his cronies and says, “Give me some moxite and a special ship, and I will reverse that! Make the void vomit up the sun, undie itself to life!”

Regent Maximum Taman IV and the buccaneers of the Free Company, it seems.

I can’t imagine it! What do they think will happen if the *Dawnsire* succeeds? Will Sothera be restored to the day before we gave it sekhar? When the reborn sun then explodes, will the pawns of the Regent Maximum praise the incineration of all these living worlds as a tribute to the brief fury they worship? Imagine explaining that to Pinnacle. “We felt it was our duty to increase the Bright Sum by blasting all life in Sothera into radioactive dust.”

They’d do it, too, if it greatedened the Sum.

Perhaps the *Dawnsire* will do even worse. Perhaps, in remaking Sothera, it will change the star’s destiny entirely, leaving it to burn long and cool, until it cinders away into a white dwarf.

Where would I be, then? Forgotten? My entropy would go ... where?

Information cannot be destroyed.

Perhaps I would remain in the miscarried star and burn forever.

Friends, faithful fellows, I know that you will succeed, that we will succeed—that we will destroy the *Dawnsire*. I know that, in making this flight, I have played my part.

The *Dawnsire* is a needle of tremendous outward strength. Its construction is intended to survive the firewall of a supervoid. Thus, it is immune to all but the mightiest of our tidal weapons. Even had we the strength to assault the *Dawnsire*, it is escorted by the *Candela*, a shieldship of formidable heritage and warcraft.

They make a colorful pair, the unholy spear and the flying city.

•
*I
will
never recur
in all the zettaquettameters
of space and all the aeons
of time*

I feel quite sure of it. There are more possible shuffles in a deck of sixty playing cards than can be counted with all the atoms in all the universe. And how much greater am I than a deck of cards?

There will never be a thing like me again. When I go, I will be gone forever.

Yet all that I am will be wholly known and carried into the Next Eternity. If we succeed. If we succeed!
Do not tell my brother I ever had doubts. When the monastery asked, I agreed instantly—for if I refused what would it say of him? He who is my equal and better part. Thus, my doubt is equal to his doubt. If I hesitated, it would mark him forever as a shirker. So, I go.

Whatever he chooses, respect his will.

Goodbye until the next forever.

I feel the tides beginning to pull at me. I stretch to meet them.

Nothing tests my faith.

—Raphaella

•

>Transmission retrieved from event horizon. Redshift correction applied. Inevitor transit confirmed: enemy failed to detect/intercept/defeat. Inevitor collision with the Dawnsire is a viable insertion method. Proceed with cadre selection and attack. Nothing tests our faith. (go to Revision 10 (PARTY TIME))

Revision 10 (PARTY TIME)

Hands shake Alpharael awake.

He gasps at the slap of sensation—humid air—the perfect darkness of his sleep cell—warm salt water and cold fingers on his naked skin—

Broken by a red emberlight.

And a human face.

“Raph!” He splashes upright in his sleep tank. His knees knock against the alloy, and he gets seawater in his eyes. “Raph, I thought you fell ...”

It’s not Raphaella.

“You woke badly,” the steward observes, without sympathy, without reproach. It would be cruel and condescending to pass judgment on another’s dream. “Message for you. Up from Monastery Singul. Can you listen?”

“Uh, yes.” Alpharael gets his feet under him and stands in the tank. There is no requirement for, or prohibition against, modesty in Monoism. What you feel about your own flesh, or another’s, is your responsibility to manage. “Yes. What is it?”

“Your sister’s inevitor completed its transit.”

Oh.

“She fell?”

“Yes. Her flight has proven that an infalling inevitor can penetrate the Free Company’s defenses. She will be commended to Point Prime. Because of your sister, an attack on the enemy’s terrible weapon can proceed. Message ends.”

She’s gone.

He’s never going to speak to her again.

But it all happened so suddenly. The day before yesterday, he had a sister for the rest of his mortal life. Yesterday, she was asked to go, and yesterday, she went. He had questions he wanted to put to her,

things he wanted to understand, things he wanted to remember with her for the joy of remembering together. But she was so excited to go—

Don't lie to yourself, Alpharael. One of the things you wanted to ask her was:

Why did they choose *you* when we are the same, identical but for our sex?

He makes a fearless, searching examination of how he feels. He looks up at the steward.

"I want to die," he says.

The steward looks plainly horrified. But it is not the Monoist way to question the will, wherever it points.

She says, "I am permitted to bring a reply back to Singul."

"Tell them I want to go in with the next wave," Alpharael says. "They're sending an assault cadre to the *Dawnsire*, aren't they? Send me with them."

"You are but an acolyte. The Singul will ask if you have training."

"I won't be denied!" Alpharael snarls.

The refector nods. "I respect your will."

The ember of light on her brow vanishes with her, leaving Alpharael in the salty dark. The water whispers around his feet.

There is a party.

Susur Secundi may be a twisted mass of obsidian and tides. It may blister with henges, erupt with crystal, and groan in its decaying orbit. It may look like doom itself. The Kav call it Anuki, the growler. By coincidence, this is also the name of a mass weapon favored by the True Faith.

But it is pent with potential. Things reveal their power when they come close to their end, and if Susur Secundi, the thousandth outpost of the True Faith, seems rotten with endings—then more power to it.

The air in the tunnels and the galleries tastes of ozone. On any given day, you might look up to see a gravliner sculling against the warped fire of Sothera above, falling silently down the path of its engines. You might hear the tromp of the faithful returning from their labors. And if you stand with them as they shed their dark armor and mantles for the wash, then O Faller, you want to sing, to eat, to strive, to leap up and dance! You are of the True Faith! You are part of something vast, but you are not lessened by it. This is your *choice*! The work may be hard, but it's work worth choosing!

As it was Raphaella's choice to go.

Before Alpharael was born and given to the True Faith, Monoists dug mines on Susur Secundi to feed the growing monastery in orbit. Some of this work is done by mechans, but not all of it. Mechans cannot believe, and belief is good for labor. Alpharael also thinks that labor produces beautiful bodies.

Alpharael gets messed up on shride and parties with the after-shift miners. He meets a gorgeous labyrinth composer who shows him a thread of no-hair. On a dare, he strokes the no-hair, even pushes his hand through it, laughing at the pluck and thrum when it snags on atomic nuclei in his flesh. "This won't cut me, will it?"

"Not your molecules," the composer says, watching him over slim, spidery hands. "Just your atoms."

"Luckily I'm made entirely of molecules."

“You should run it through your head and floss out your brain,” the composer suggests, but Alpharael says, “I can’t, I have something to do tomorrow!” and everyone laughs.

He lets the composer pick his brain. He talks to people. He talks like an open wound. He knows that if he had to live with the memory of these conversations, they would make him flinch and yip aloud in shame.

No one knows that he is going to die. The coming raid on the *Dawnsire* is secret. But in a society of total emancipation and enlightened selfishness, there is still empathy, because most people, Alpharael thinks, have an intrinsic need to connect. People care about each other. They read into silence and soothe frenzy. They intuit.

So, everyone can probably tell that he is about to die.

He gets passed at more than he has ever been passed at in his life and cares less than he ever has before. Several people ask him if he misses his sister. Alpharael tries to get messed up enough to break down sobbing, but he can’t. Why? Why?

Because his heart thinks she’ll be right back. She is out on an errand. Someone so important cannot leave so suddenly—if she were *really* gone, it would’ve taken at least a month, or maybe a year, for her to fall. Long enough to radio and ask her how she’s doing. Long enough to beg her to come back.

The night passes. He does not sleep.

Then it is time.

There’s no one to bark orders or drag him into line. He could turn and walk away. But the queue forms behind him, and it seems too embarrassing to leave from the front.

They strap him into alabile armor while the gray ghoul of shride comedown rides his neck. Someone gives him a banana from the gardens, but the texture in his mouth makes him gag. “Thank you,” he says and chews it anyway because he can’t find a chance to spit it up.

He keeps sneezing. It hurts. Every time, the old woman behind him says, “Clarity t’ you.”

What am I doing? he thinks.

And then he remembers Raphaella is gone.

The strike cadre is all volunteers. Most of them are frontline militants, miracho and kamu-shiku tested in war. Some are acolytes with combat-adjacent training like Alpharael. None are gravkill paladins. All are humans. None are Susurian. Only the replaceable will be martyred today. Do not resent it: you knew it would be so.

Alpharael kneels in their ranks as a monastery rahu blesses them and grants them the instrument of sekhar.

“Alpharael of Secundi, take this thing that is all things,” the rahu whispers. “It is catenated with INEVITA, the purpose at the end of time. Take it wholly, so that it may wholly take you.”

The rahu gives Alpharael a microvoid trapped in a bead.

Oh, Faller! A shiver shoots up his tailbone. His hairs prickle. In a few hours, he will take sekhar and fall *into this thing*. His hair will be stripped from his skin, stretched infinitely to meet a new world. His skin will feel ... something new. Or fire, fire forever, trapped on the margin of hell.

Through the miracle of sekhar, he will go into the Next Eternity to join his sister. If she makes it there.

Oh, Raphaella.

If he could change her choice, he would. The *less* despicable thing would be to do it because he misses her and wants her back.

But he wants the more despicable thing. He thinks it was *wrong* to leap into Sothera and give up this life. There's still living to do.

Yet here he is, about to follow her. Would *she* change *his* choice if she could?

If she cared to change his choice, she would still be here.

"Yes," he says. "I take it wholly, holy, holey." In Psimer, these three different words, sacred and entirely and hole, all sound the same. In Doxological Massif, they are each different.

The bead is so heavy that he nearly fumbles it. Does the rahu smile a little at the pratfall? Don't look at him, Alph. Look at the bead. He lifts it to his lip, gives it a kiss, and pushes it to his brow. It sticks in the alabile there. It is cold and full.

When he wills it, the bead will open. The void within will be released from stasis and allowed to feed. He will take sekhar.

The meaning of sekhar is a holy secret of the True Faith (though Alpharael has heard it means "singularity ekpyrosis held at rest," and also "shall immediately kill whoever attempts wrongly"). But its purpose is clear and true.

Whoever takes sekhar collapses into a black hole. And these tiny holes have been entangled with Point Prime. They are like many doors into one room. Whatsoever they swallow before their destruction will be vouchsafed into the Next Eternity.

Trigger your bead and go to eternity in a crush of glory.

"Nothing tests our faith," the rahu's majordomo calls.

With all the others, Alpharael sings out: "Nothing tests our faith!"

They arise and file out. Some of the veteran fighters hold huddles where they decide on plans and purposes. Others go alone. This is the Monoist way.

Alpharael, astonished by his own calm, follows the grizzled old woman who blessed his sneezes. She seems to know what she's about. He has worn the armor of moments before, but not well. He watches her test and adjust each individual tongue of alabile so that the armor grasps her like a hundred hands.

Without further ceremony, they go to their inevitators and launch.

One of the black craft refuses to move. An inevitator will not fly unless its arrival is inevitable. This one must be fated for interception and destruction—so it doesn't fly.

But Alpharael is not aboard that one.

Alpharael's inevitator falls silently out of its cradle and plunges toward Sothera. There is no thrust or sound. The inevitator just goes, plunging along its own free trajectory. He wants to be silent and effortless, too, but he gets spacesick. O Monoist, afraid of freefall! The other dead people in the pod laugh at him, but not cruelly. Someone helps him clean up.

Visible ahead, bright against the dark of Sothera's center, is a glittering white point. At first, he thinks it's the *Candela*, the *Dawnsire*'s consort. But it's Adagia, the world of mirrors, the Palatinate colony in Sothera.

Then, a while later, a smaller point becomes visible. *That* is the forward shield of the *Candela*. The inevitator will miss it narrowly.

It will not miss the *Dawnsire*.

“How do we stop?” Alpharael asks.

“We don’t,” says the grizzled old woman who Alpharael followed aboard. “We hit it at thirty kilometers a second.”

“No stasis? No hardlight field? No aeromuck?”

“Do you want to hit ready to fight,” a younger woman sneers, “or locked in a crystal?”

“Surely if we ram them at thirty KPS, it’ll kill us *and* them.”

“No. That abomination’s built to cross the firewall. A few gigajoules of impact won’t do more than tickle it.” The old woman begins to seal her helmet. “You’re going to feel a mighty lurch, though.”

“A *mighty lurch* ? We’ll be vaporized!”

“Sure,” the woman says. “Ten minutes after we hit. The inevitator deploys a cherazad—a tactical event horizon. The event of our impact will pause on the horizon until it collapses. Inside the cherazad, our clocks run fast. We hit our targets before reinforcements from outside can reach us. But when the cherazad runs out, or the enemy turns it off, those thirty KPS catch up with us. And we all go *splat*.”

“Better take sekhar by then,” the younger woman says. “Or you’re going into Eternity as a spreadable paste.”

All at once Alpharael realizes that he is really going to die. He wants to scream. So he does. He howls in raw terror and slams his head around inside his helmet.

A few others join him.

For a while they scream together, falling to their end.

>*Board the Dawnsire.* (go to Revision 10 (The Warriors of Dawn))

>*Why don’t I get another choice?* (go to Black Hole Complementarity)

Black Hole Complementarity

Some things must be told in pairs. Two things created to annihilate each other.

It is the only way for the truth to escape.

In the gullet of a supervoid, all paths lead to the center. Space and time change places. “Down” is the same as “tomorrow.”

>*Board the Dawnsire.* (go to Revision 10 (The Warriors of Dawn))

Revision 10 (The Warriors of Dawn)

Haliya sticks her tongue out in concentration.

“Your tongue,” Syr Vondam murmurs, trying not to laugh.

Haliya nods and snaps her mouth shut so hard that she bites the tip of her tongue. This makes her grunt, and almost curse, but she does *not* curse or lose her focus on her work: wrapping a three-meter-long himsary banner around Syr Vondam’s left leg.



Art by: Aaron Miller

Her knight must be wrapped in his reticulum before he can don his armor. It is her duty as a squire and aspirant.

No one will actually see the himsary banners under Syr Vondam's battle armor, but Haliya wants him to feel perfectly wrapped, covered toe to crown in knightly oaths. She knows better than anyone how to fit the fabric to his flesh—see here, how there is fat on his thighs? See how it compresses under the wrap of the himsary bandages, creating folds, which could rub together and cause intertrigo?

Do not let your knight be chafed. Press their bandages close. Let it seal against the skin, not bridge over it.

"It's fine if you stick your tongue out, you know," Syr Vondam says. "I just remind you because you asked."

"It makes me look foolish, Syr."

"It's all right to look foolish, Squire. I do it often."

He does, too. Thank stars for his foolishness, and for his fat. So many of the Free Company's Solar Knights are bold, brash, insufferable, and sweaty—walking anatomy illustrations with their metabolisms cranked to the limit, burning like candles, gulping down stoups of salted water in the sauna so they can keep "worshipping at the cellular level."

Sometimes, Haliya could swear that the beds of their fingernails smolder brown smoke. When she is a knight herself, she wishes to be like Syr Vondam, who radiates calm instead of heat and smells of argan oil rather than ketone sweat.

"It is all right for a knight to look foolish," she ventures. "You've proven yourself. A squire is unproven and must be serious."

"Hmrg," Vondam grunts, jutting out his jaw. "Very serious. Bite tongue."

She repels this teasing by adjusting the left besagew bonding strip in its place beneath his hairless armpit. Everyone is hairless on the *Candela*, except sometimes on the head. This is supposedly because

the atmosphere is always hot and frequently oxygen-rich, making hair a fire hazard. Haliya thinks the candlewax ritual used to remove the hair is the real reason. That bright harsh pain sits well with the Free Company's doctrines, its particularly militant Summism. The Free Company is a mercenary company, but it is *cause*-mercenary, fighting to provide the gift of its violence to the needful of the Summist faith.

The first time they put her up to her chin in a molten wax bath and tore off the cast of her body, she *screamed*. But all the other squires cheered for her. And she felt so clean afterward—stripped of unnecessary ornament. Even her pores felt empty, light. The other squires in her bind bathed her and dressed her like she dresses her knight, and they admired her, too: her strength, her scars, her fortitude against pain. It was the most she had been touched since—since she can remember.

This is what Summists do. Accept the calculated and necessary pain to increase the greater Sum of the Bright.

"We are going over to the *Dawnsire* today," Syr Vondam says. "There may be combat."

Haliya breaks coherence—the sameness of this ritual with that performed by all the other squires, across time and space—and blinks at him. "Syr? Combat?"

"Coherence, Aspirant. Attend to your work."

Haliya bites her tongue again. There is a little numb spot there, from how often she bites it. "Syr."

"There is a possibility of infiltration. We are going to bolster the *Dawnsire*'s photophoroi."

It seems impossible that anything could infiltrate the *Dawnsire*. She has seen pictures on CoroNet. Every last panel of the dreadnought's corridors carried the little black polyp of a cnidomine.

She ties the final bandage, the gorget around his throat. "I'm ready, Syr."

"You're not," Vondam says, gently. "No one is ready for battle except the dead. I do not think I am ready. I am in the habit of it, yes, and I admit to a taste for it. But I am not ready for it. It is an awful thing, the way we fight. Solid walls become like fog. Weapons kill as fast as sight. You will shame yourself. That's all right. We all do. Know that you won't shame me."

"I won't, Syr."

She's finished wrapping him. It's time to don his body chausse. Then his full harness. Once, they say the litany.

Vondam stretches, testing his range of motion. His skin is a grand contrast with the white himsary banners. He looks like a big fresh mummy. "Do you understand the importance of the *Dawnsire*?"

This is an incidental question, fired at Haliya to provoke the coherent response. The point is not to test your knowledge but to convert knowledge into practice and skill, into a habitual excellence, so you can cohere with the whole company and the whole faith into an incandescent ray of change.

"It works toward a longer dawn, Syr."

It really is incredibly simple. The universe will eventually run out of aether to form new stars. When stars are done forming, dawn will end, and the universe will have to run its course on the light and metal it has made ... until, eventually, it runs out.

Keeping stars alive prolongs the dawn. The more light and metal you make early in the universe—the earlier the better, like a child's game of doublestone, turning one into two into four into eight—the longer that light and metal can work to make a difference. To make *life*.

The dawn will not last forever. But that's as it should be. It is not the fault of the universe that we die. It is a miracle that we ever get to live. And that miracle should recur as often as possible.

In the end, it is all light. This is the way she tells the story to herself—all life is light, light is the animating force that stars feed plants and machines, light creates motion. Without light, matter is nothing.

Life is light.

The enemy pretends to worship void. But what they really worship is *mass*. Ugliness compacted until the universe wraps it up to hide its shame.

Like the abomination they have made of Sothera. The abomination that the *Dawnsire* will reverse.

But that's not how you say any of that out loud. No. You say it the way that thrilled Haliya the first time she heard it, when the Solar Knights brightened her world's skies, ended the diskwinter, and restored the sun.

You face the star you orbit. You speak the "Litany of Dawn." It is the orthodox version and not as exciting as the litany some knights prefer. But Haliya likes it anyway. It's the first one she heard.

*"Praise the dawn light, praise for the morning
As it rises, so do we rise
Praise the dawn light, spark of creation
As it rises, so we all rise
Praise the dawn that drives time and motion
As it moves us, so we will move

Oh—
Thank the dawn that dawns!
Thank the dawn light, mover of being
Because of its being, so we may be
Thank the dawn's first light, grace for the living—
Dawn is growing, so must we: grow the count of dawns to be!
Praise the dawn, for it is the arrow
That points to the brightness of the far sky.

Cherish the dawn, for it is unfinished
As it rises, so do we rise."*

"Syr," she says when the sacred silence has had long enough to itself, "is there time for breakfast with my friends?"

Vondam wipes a tear from his eye. His voice is quite respectfully hushed.

"If it is where you want to be when you face death, Squire? Then there is time for nothing else."

She sees them at the table, all the other squires from her bind, and walks a little faster—bumping through the reflectory crowd to get to her crew. Stars, Haliya, don't be so obviously happy to see them, you'll never live it down! But she can't help it.

They all came to the Free Company together, First-Light Aspirant squires from across the whole faith. Most hail from Palatinate stars (bless Taman IV, Regent Maximum of the Celestial Palatinate, for provending the ships and weapons and holy sanction of this Free Company). One of them, Cataphrin,

is the daughter of a Cosmogrand, though not a very important one. Haliya thinks Cataphrin would be happier as the daughter of nobody, but she is careful to keep these thoughts to herself.

"Has everyone been told?" Haliya asks, sitting down with her trencher. Squires get the bakery's stale bread to eat off instead of plates.

"Told what?" everyone choruses back at her. The incident question, the coherent response.

"Told you stuck your tongue out again?" Cataphrin suggests.

"I did not!" Haliya protests. "Well, I did." Showing it to laughter.

"I can't believe we're pretending not to know," Isidor moans. "I'm going to die."

Cataphrin throws a periwinkle at him. Isidor catches it and eats it while everyone rousts him. When he looks briefly at Haliya, she quirks a little smile at him, like they're sharing a secret. Isidor complains constantly, but he is also by far the best fighter in the bind, coming from a family of mirrorscape architects. He knows the tricks of light the way Haliya knows, well, how to wrap bandages around cold bodies.

He is also a vain man who uses bellyaching to attract praise and consolation, but she does not say this. A long, long time ago, she learned that perfect transparent honesty lets people see you perfectly. Sometimes they do not like what you show them. And then they will be transparent about their dislike.

"It doesn't make sense to me," Cataphrin muses, "which I suppose is why they're doing it—"

"By 'they' you mean the enemy?" Santaphor asks. Santaphor is either slower than the rest of the bind and makes up for it by triple-checking *or* more careful and not worried about seeming slow.

"Yes, the Monoists," Cataphrin says impatiently. "Forgotten about them, Santa? Forgotten about *that*?"

Below their feet, down the long skyscraper of the shieldship *Candela*'s hull, is the black ember warp of the Sothera supervoid. The *Candela* orbits above it, shield aimed up, protecting the *Dawnsire* while she fires her lasers in long loops around the black hole—charging up the javelin that will make the final intervention.

"Haven't forgotten," Santaphor murmurs.

Cataphrin raps out a briefing like she's already a knight, "Enlight has prepared for any strategy the enemy will attempt and any oracle they'd consult. The nihilists can't see a reasonable way to beat us. So, they need an unreasonable way, a way that makes no sense: throw people at the problem and hope one of them manages something. A suicide attack. Minimum expenditure of monastery resources, maximum possible return. Every one of them we kill today will be a volunteer. All volunteered to die. Because if there's one thing the void worshippers are, it's quick to quit." Cataphrin eats a periwinkle. "Totally selfish."

Haliya, thinking, eats a periwinkle, too. "How's it selfish to volunteer to die?"

"Dying alone," little *Quinidad* says, "is easier than getting a whole bunch of people together to agree on what to do."

"The same way it's easier to give up on the Bright Sum and fixate on turning the whole universe into black holes," Haliya suggests.

Everyone makes soft sounds of agreement.

A perverse spirit possesses Haliya. She is Vondam's squire. She feels special and strong and sure because he is so strong and sure in himself. And that makes her want to test her strength. "Do you ever

think it could be *harder* to make a choice alone? Without the guidance of the Sum? I mean, we're a faith of science. The Palatinate compiles everything we know and calculates the best course. So, whenever we need to decide, we just look to the Sum. But what if ... if there was a choice that didn't suit the Sum, that didn't point toward the most probable good in the longest term, but you were sure was still ..."

She trails off, struggling. Sure was, what, good, but not good for the Sum?

Is that even possible?

"These questions are important," little page-haired Quinidad says, sharp in proportion to her size. "But that's why we have the Sum to guide us, right? The whole point is, when you're not sure what to do, you look up and find the Sum on the horizon, and you go that way."

Quinidad is the child of an aristocrat mathematician.

"There you go, then," Santaphor says, with the pleasure of a man pretending to be slow lecturing his quicker friends. "If you ever get confused about what to do, Haliya, look for the Sum. Cataphrin, if you ever get confused about what the enemy's doing, look for the Sum. Isidor, when you're really, totally sure you're going to die, look for the—"

CoroNet lights up. You feel it like a heat on your skin.

REPORT TO YOUR KNIGHTS. PHOROCAST PREDICTS IMMINENT ENEMY ACTION.

"You'd hope the photophoroi could handle this themselves," Cataphrin mutters as they all throw their trenchers into the furnace. "Our mightiest weapon should be able to protect itself from a few boarders."

"Ah, but if the garrison handled it, there'd be no glory for the knights!" Isidor has whipped from feigned-but-actually-real terror to real-but-actually-real cockiness. "And how arrogant would the knights look, standing by as the enemy attacked our mighty weapon?"

"Yes, the Solar Knights of the Regent Maximum mustn't look arrogant," Quinidad says to laughter.

Tipping her bread into the fire, Haliya thinks about what Cataphrin said. About the enemy doing what makes no sense.

It must make sense to *them*. What makes the most sense to her, and to all the other squires, must make the *least* sense to the Monoists.

This, she supposes, is why they are fighting an interstellar war.

"One of them flew right by us," Vondam says as a lance of photophoroi foot soldiers scrambles past Haliya. She tries to pay attention to Vondam, but she's distracted by the troops trying to pay attention to him, too—a couple of them, wearing the rice-and-glove icon of Aulie Cosmogrand, slow down to listen.

"We didn't shoot it down?" she asks.

"Didn't even see it until it was down in Sothera's gullet."

Every part of the *Dawnsire* has awoken to war. Incaglas bundles shine with network traffic. A bulkhead slams shut behind the Aulie troops before Haliya can wink encouragingly at them. The ship is under thrust: one gravity steady.

They leave the armored hangar. Vondam marches ahead. His armor is heavy and nearly silent, but it makes a basso growl, a sound that betrays a huge mass in effortfully slick motion. "It was a stealthy one-way boarding pod, what they call an *inevitor*. Slipped through the *Candela*'s exclusion zone like a

mouse jumping a merlin. Enlight assumes that's what we'll be facing today: boarding parties delivered by inevitator."

"Boarding parties? Not missiles, Syr?"

"Missiles to achieve what? We built this beast to reignite dead stars." He slaps the bulkhead, with a certain rough affection. "You could crash the *Dawnsire* through its own mass in bulk antimatter, and it'd come out ahead—not happy, but ahead. There's no way to kill the *Dawnsire* unless you've gotten a look at it from the inside."

Rather beautiful, isn't it? Something so impervious to raw entropy that you can't destroy it by force. Set off the biggest bomb in the Edge and it'll do nothing, because that bomb can't *intend* to do anything, it can't direct its energies usefully.

This is the power of the True Faith. The power to make things like *this*, this wonder.

"Awesome," she says.

"In sooth."

Two Solar Knights and their lances guard the bridge. One of them is Quinidad's knight, Walker, who waves Vondam past with a glance and a dazzle of laser data traffic. Walker's tonsured head shines with sweat, skull glowing from within—he's building up his own entanglement, exciting the calcium in his bones. He looks at Haliya but sees right through her.

The bridge. Haliya tries not to gape. Fails. "Gosh," she says.

Everything is gold, gold like clouds before sunrise. There are no shadows. The light is a pale blue, shading up to rich orange, a perfect 3,535-degree color temperature.

The bridge isn't really called a bridge, except in the generic sense. It is a synodic sobor, a domed temple to the nearest star and its orbiting bodies. The whole roof—though it is buried deep in the *Dawnsire*'s hull—looks like an open observatory aimed at the stars. Some of its light is straight from outside, conveyed by incaglas wires and lightpipes. Rumor has it that you can get a suntan on the *Dawnsire*'s bridge. The edges of the dome are carved into half-domed nooks called exedra, where pods of specialists work.

All the flowing data travels as patterned light called eikonostasis. And it converges at the command altar beneath the dome's center.

Vondam walks that way. Haliya hurries after him, minding his cloak.

"Coronal!" Vondam calls, interrupting the whispering near-silence. "Coronal-Captain, report to my face!"

"You old coot," a voice booms. "You don't need a report. You just want to get toasted!"

Vondam, laughing, spreads his arms. "So, toast me, you gaslamp! What's wrong? Stuck in a mirror again?"

Rows of tecnicos in the surrounding pits stare fixedly at their work.

From the flow of coherent information around the command altar comes a shining figure, with a halo in place of a head, a body like lens flare, hands of white glory. It rushes to Vondam, and all its light pools on his armor like fire, like a sun on the tips of the sea.

"It's good to see you, Vondam," the light says.

"It's hasn't been a week, you sentimental sput!"

Someone in one of the nearby pits gasps. The knight has called the captain a sput!

"A week for *you*," the light says. "For me, it's been an eternity!"

The light and the knight both laugh like this is the funniest thing anyone has ever said.

Haliya, not sure what to do, gets down on one knee.

"This must be Haliya," the light says. A warmth falls on her shoulders, on her brow. She gasps. "Will you introduce me, or will I have to make her speak? Lide, she's biting her tongue."

Vondam touches her shoulder. "Haliya, meet Coronal-Captain Dark Fringes Upon Bands of Light Through a Narrow Slot, whose Iridiomac name is Slat."

She touches her brow. It is warm. "Coronal-Captain Dark Fringes Upon—"

"Just Captain Slat, child."

"Captain Slat, Syr. Illuminated to meet you."

"You certainly are!"

Slat is an Astelli, a being of light. Of course, Haliya thinks all life comes from light, but the Astelli are *more directly* such, being made of hard light and internal reflection. There is no matter in Captain Slat. Only whorls, wells, and fringes of self-bound photons.

The light says: "The most promising pupil Vondam has ever taught. Did you know he says that?"

She did not. She stares at the floor, overcome.

"Today will be an important day for you," Captain Slat says, not easing her nerves at all. "Vondam, you came for the impact solution?"

"Aye, Captain," Vondam says. "How will they hit us?"

"At the current phase angle between the *Dawnsire* and Susur Secundi, we expect inevitators to strike at around thirty kilometers a second. Of course, they cannot decelerate without breaking stealth. If these inevitators perform like the specimens from Maledikt, their cherazad generators can defer a thirty KPS debt for about ten minutes."

Vondam taps her shoulder. "And what happens after ten minutes, Squire?"

"Syr, the Monoist commandos will—resume their course at thirty kilometers a second. Dashing them against the nearest bulkhead at the speed of comets."

"One way or another, they know when they'll die."

"They'll take sekhar first," Slat says. "Take their secrets into the Plummet, to be scried out by some exegesis choir."

"Yes."

"You'll die, too," Captain Slat says.

"Ah," Vondam says. His gauntlet makes a fist.

What? What? Haliya wants desperately to look up at him, but instead, she stares at the floor. Luckily, it's reflective. He will die? Him? Die?

"You've seen this?" Vondam repeats, quietly. "I am killed in the battle?"

"We don't see," the captain says. Suddenly, he sounds quite alien. "We lide. The light goes out from us and returns transformed. I lide it so, just now. I phorocast that you die in the battle."

Haliya wants to say all the stupid things. *Now that we know about it, we can avoid it. No, no, the future is set. You telling us about it is what causes it to happen!*

But she remembers her childhood fascination with the Astelli. Their prophecies are almost never false. *The Grand Cosmocordance, physics as understood by the True Faith, says that only the unalterable can be foreseen* (go to Why Astelli prophecies (almost) cannot be false).

Syr Vondam will die today. No matter what he does, or because what he will do is unmoved by death.

The pride that swells in Haliya pushes the spike of anguish deeper. She bites her tongue against a cry of joy and terror. A death as certain as physical law! Because Syr Vondam's duty, even in the face of death, is as certain as light.

Unless—

"Captain," Haliya blurts. "Syr, could it be an enemy trick?"

There are other models of the universe than the Grand Cosmocordance.

"A trick?" Vondam repeats. His hand is heavy on her gorget. He knows what she's saying, but he's giving her the incident question so that she will give the coherent response, which is to clarify that she did *not* mean—

"Anstruth, Syr," she says. A word a squire shouldn't know.

Captain Slat's radiance flickers. "Squire!" Vondam snaps. "Mind your circumstances!"

Anstruth. Blasphemy against reality. A manipulation of things that cannot be manipulated. An admission that there might be a cosmology other than the Cosmogrand's.

This, of all places, this solar synod at the head of this holy ship, is *not* the place to utter Monoist blasphemy.

Or the time.

Because, at that exact moment, the light of the *Dawnsire*'s bridge darkens to blood red. And a call goes out from one of the exedra: "Captain! Phorocast detects an imminent impact! Upper spinal void space, abaft of the number-two basilica!"

"Sound collision alarms!" blazes Coronal-Captain Dark Fringes Upon Bands of Light Through a Narrow Slot. "Garrison to repel boarders, number-two basilica! Rayworking, stand by to repath around a cyst! Syr Vondam, deploy your knights!"

"At your disposal, Coronal," Haliya's master promises. "Squire, after me."

He closes his helmet for battle.

Haliya scrambles after him. "Syr, you must let me—there must be something I can do. I'm your squire. I can't just let you go into battle knowing you'll—knowing how it'll end. Syr, please!"

The great golden brow of Vondam's war helm turns to her. "Look to the Sum, Squire. It may be the hardest thing you ever do. But if the Sum grows because I die today, my death was worthy. That is all we can ever ask."

"Why can't the Sum grow *while you still live*?"

Vondam chuckles fondly. "Haliya, do you know why people have faith?"

If this is an incident question, she does not know the coherent response. “To ... to give us purpose, Syr?”

“People only ask one thing from their faith. They want to know that in the end, it will all be okay. What we do here, today, in Sothera, can make things more okay for everyone. The Monoists have declared that this star will be their thousandth sacrifice. We can avert that. We can send a message to Pinnacle and to everyone else who watches—INEVITA is *not* inevitable. They can be beaten.”

“But if you’re dead, it’s *not* okay! Why must you die?”

She can’t see his face. But she can hear his smile.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Shall we go find out?”

>*The enemy is here!* (go to Episode 4)

>*I think I like them better.* (go to Episode 4)

Why Astelli prophecies (almost) cannot be false

According to the Grand Cosmocordance of the Summist faith and the physics of sunlit reality, there is no time travel. The past cannot be altered. In fact, it does not exist. There are no parallel universes, timelines, frozen past, or beckoning future. There is only the now, the present, the space between the Walls, between infinity and nothing. And thus, no fixed future to prophesize.

But the Astelli are beings of light, beings of eerie quantum behavior. The universe is constantly in the business of deciding what to do next, and the Astelli live closer to that process than most. They can read the weights of the wavefunction and glimpse what is *likely* to occur.

Of course—like any quantum computation—sometimes they are wrong. Usually, their future sight is just a wash of interfering chaos.

But if a probability spikes high enough, it may resolve into a glimpse of things to come. And a condition of this happening is that the event will not be averted by prophesizing it. This is not a matter of free will but of the information the universe supplies to the Astelli phorocasting process. Chaotic or complexly determined outcomes simply remain too split to foresee.

Only the inalterable can be foreseen.

Or that which has already been altered.

Go back. (go to The Grand Cosmocordance, physics as understood by the True Faith)