

Episode 7

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From set *Edge of Eternities*
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Revision 12 (The Hole)

Haliya catches herself staring at the hole in Syr Vondam's skull again.

She looks away sharply. But it's too late; he's seen her. The surgeons did an admirable job sealing up the ends, but the burned tunnel is still in there. In his brain.

She let the coward Alpharael throw a black hole through her knight's skull.

"Tongue," Vondam says, wryly.

"I'm not."

"It was a joke, Squire."

"I see, Syr."

The palestar that bears them is named the *Sundog*, but everyone aboard calls her "the barque" due to some palestar crew tradition Haliya doesn't know. She doesn't know a lot about what's going on.

She wants to turn to her knight and say, "Syr, should I just shut up and trust you?"

But she is afraid he won't say yes.

The tecnic at the defensive station calls out, "Taro-duend traffic radar has detected us."

"Send Syr Vondam's message," the *Sundog's* captain orders. "If the Guns start looking for us, jam first, then alert me second."

They left the *Dawnsire* in a secret rush, telling no one, not even Captain Slats. Haliya didn't get to say goodbye to her bind. This is understandable; sometimes duty must be swift, but ... there's a hole in his *head*. He needs time to heal. He treats himself like he won't heal. He treats himself like he's not a real person. He's still wearing the same bandages she wrapped around him on the day he died.

All he will say is that they are going to find and kill Alpharael. And on his oath as a knight it's not about revenge.

"Sundog," the radio says. "*This is Taro-duend. You are big on radar. We have no big landing spot. Orbit south, altars thirty, or divert.*"

"Repeat my first message," Vondam orders. "Give them another chance to hand over the spy. Launch the Hopelights. I want overhead surveillance, a threat map, and a track on the ship that brought Alpharael here from the crash site. Then we'll make a pass and drop the ship's photophoroi for a grid search."

“They might take a shot at us. My airfoil’s vulnerable.” The captain hates operating her palestar in atmosphere. Planets are, in contrast to popular stereotype, more of a danger to spaceships than the other way around. Except in cases like Haliya’s childhood; cases of wholesale one-sided extermination.

“Trust the Sum, Captain.”

“I trust you, Syr,” the captain says. She has been eyeing Vondam with a mixture of awe and professional worry since he came aboard. “No one on this ship is afraid to die. My concern is that we not *waste* the ship. We don’t have many assets near Kavaron. And if the imperial Kav government decides to shoot us down, they have the Guns overhead.”

“As long as we kill the target first, Captain, they can fire all the Guns they please.”

This isn’t just empty rhetoric. What Vondam’s saying is, *If we all die here, it’ll be okay, as long as we achieve our mission*. The Sum is not an abstract divinity. It’s a real, hard figure. Increasing it is the mission. Making that number bigger is the faith. And no one in Sothera lacks faith in their mission. They are here to reignite a dead star. Compared to that, what is a life?

Haliya wishes Cataphrin were here to explain the right Summist interpretation of this situation.

“Come,” Vondam mutters. “It’s time we talk about what’s happening here.”

“Oh,” Haliya says. She’s been waiting for this conversation for days. Now that it’s here, she’s terrified. “Ah, Syr?”

“Yes?”

“Before you go into battle. it would be good to wash you and reapply your himsaries. Can I do that while you brief me?”

“It would be good,” Vondam says. “But I want you looking me in the eye, not daubing sweat off my wrinkled ass. This is difficult to face alone. Come on.” He gives her a comradely strike over the shoulders. “Let me introduce you to the anathalmanac.”

He gives her a quartz memory crystal. She uses a finger laser to read it. He no longer smells of argan oil. He smells like nail polish remover. His body is burning up.

She reads:

MORTAL IMPERATIVE! SET THY HAND AFLAME! (go to Episode 1, Anathalmanac)

ALL THOSE KNIGHTS PRESENT, ALL IN UNISON:

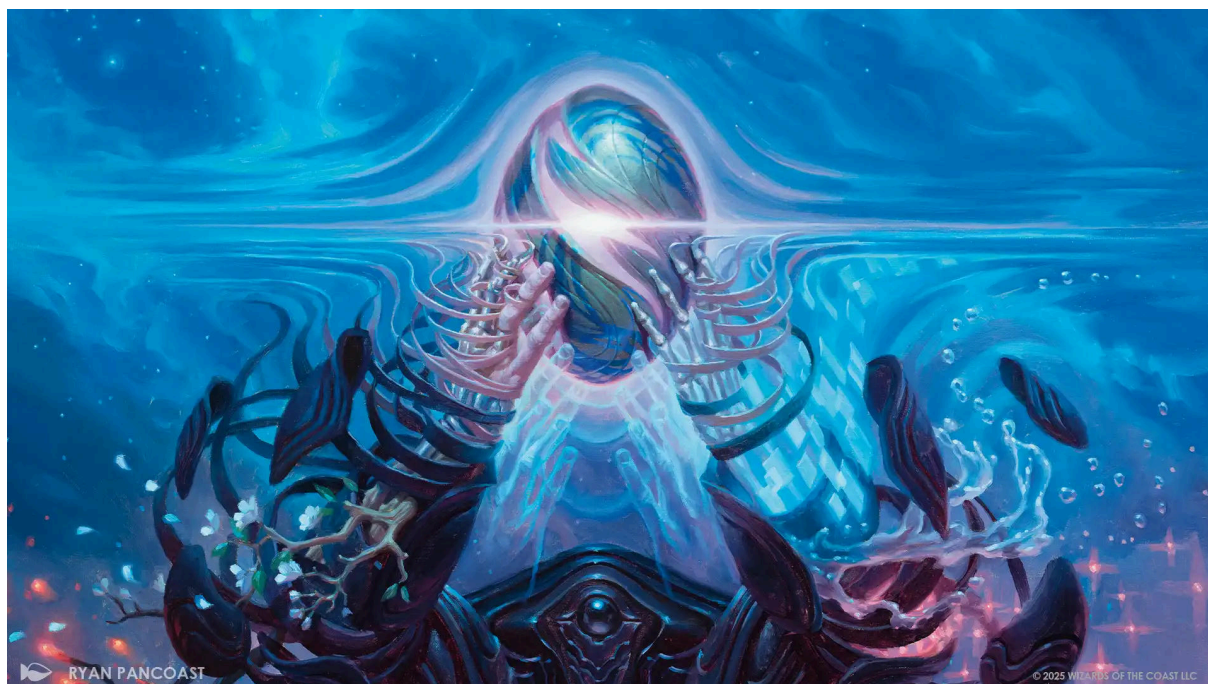
TEAR OPEN A ONE LITER STOUP OF PURE WATER (299K).

PLUNGE THY BURNING HAND WITHIN.

WHEN THE WATER BOILS AWAY, MARK A TALLY ON THE STOUP, OPEN A NEW LITER OF WATER, AND BEGIN AGAIN.

DO NOT DEVIATE IN THIS, EVEN AS YOU READ!

It is an entry in a catalog of terrors. It describes how to handle an object of appalling power. *If you fail ... you will be replaced by a self that is not yourself ... it will take utter possession of all thy knowledge and deeds ... it will walk as you and no one shall ever know it is not you and of you nothing shall remain ... prefer annihilation.*



Art by: Ryan Pancoast

She swallows. “This object,” she says. “It makes you ... other than yourself. This is what you think has happened to you, Syr?”

He nods. The dead spot beside his nose catches the blue light of the palestar’s armory. Photophoroi file in from the sauna, nude and rowdy, slapping at each other as they fit their gear.

“I’ve been delaying this conversation as long as I can,” he says, “because once we have it, you will understand some ... very difficult truths. But we can begin with what I believe is happening. I believe one such object is in Sothera. I believe the True Faith’s mission in Sothera threatens the object. Therefore, I believe it is calling out for a wielder, someone who can make use of its power. And if it finds that wielder, I believe it will destroy our mission, prevent the resurrection of Sothera as a star, and deny us the billions of sun-years Sothera might contribute to the Sum. Even those of us who survive will become unwitting instruments of INEVITA—fated to help the enemy triumph.”

She can’t help it. She gives him her mother’s “Is that so?” face.

He laughs. “I’ve never seen that expression before!”

“Alpharael had no such object, Syr.”

“No. But he *will*. That’s why he was able to escape the *Dawnsire*. The object manipulated everything. Captain Slats’s vision, my death, and my survival. All of it was intended to bring Alpharael away from his own people and to the object.”

“How? Is it a god? Can it do anything?”

“No, thank the Sum. It has limits. It can only influence pasts connected to its wielder. All the improbabilities surround Alpharael, that’s what tipped me off—when Captain Slats foresaw my very improbable death as a certainty, I knew something anstruth was afoot. It surrounds Alpharael. He *will* contact this object.”

“Time doesn’t work that way, Syr! The present is the present. Things that haven’t happened yet *haven’t happened yet*. If Alpharael escaped to find this object because he escaped to find this object it

would be ... tautological. It wouldn't make sense. He would have to find it honestly, without any eerie influence. And if he did that, he wouldn't need the eerie influence."

"The fact that it was possible, no matter how improbable, for him to escape and find the object allowed the object to make it *certain* that he would. It can't make the impossible happen. But it can lean very hard on possibility."

"Fine, Syr. I accept that in some anathematic way, this object can influence the wielder's past," she says, even if she does not accept that this extends to making Syr Vondam anstruth. "What can we do about it?"

"We can kill him."

"But the object will protect him. It will make his fantastically unlikely survival certain."

"Yes. In fact, it already has. I suspect," he lowers his voice, "that we probably came here with a much stronger force—many knights and their lances, possibly more than one ship. But the object has ... made them improbable."

This is a nightmare. She wants to argue. But what's the point? It's anstruth. Anathematic reality. Of course it offends and confuses her.

"We can drop all these foot soldiers on Taro-duend," she says, "and search every micron of every structure down there. But if fortune is on Alpharael's side, he'll always slip away."

"Yes. We don't know if he'll find the object here—perhaps it's buried on Kavaron—or if he'll catch a ship somewhere else. But no matter what, we have to stop him *before* he makes contact with it. Do you remember protocol seven?"

She checks the anathalmanac again.

7. Radiant resignation. Destroy yourself, all those about you, and the Object, by the most immediate and violent means available. Disregard all your oaths and vows against harm to the uninvolved. Nihilists force you to it. The blame is theirs, not yours. (Recorded successes: one)

MORTAL IMPERATIVE. *Should an avowed enemy of the Summist faith, in particular a nihilist, contact the anathema, proceed without deviation to the seventh protocol.*

"Why?" she asks. "Why this ... spasm?"

"Think about it. It needs a wielder to help it choose between alternate pasts. The wielder's past becomes the object's area of influence. What is the core tenet of the enemy faith?"

"That all futures end in black holes ..."

He lets her think it out.

"If a Monoist gets this object," she says, "and brings it into a black hole, especially a black hole that joins INEVITA ... then the object will have access to all the pasts that have ended in a black hole. By the end of time, to a near approximation, that's all of them."

"How should we stop him?"

Now she stares. "Syr?"

"My decisions can't be trusted. The object has touched me. It has guided a black hole through my brain. In a sense, Haliya, you are now the knight and I the squire."

She shrieks out loud. Covers her mouth. Some of the photophoroi foot soldiers stare. "Sorry, Syr. That was just a very ... frightening thing to hear."

"I know." He smiles wanly. "But you must know what to do."

"We obey the anathalmanac. The only decisions we can trust are those *completely* determined by powers outside our control. That's why the anathalmanac uses the stars as a guide."

"Correct. Can you do what it requires?"

She thinks through the implications of the anathalmanac's instructions very carefully.

Destroy yourself. All those about you. And the Object. By the most immediate and violent means available.

"Can I kill myself—"

"Not yourself," Vondam says. "You won't be there. You'll stay aboard the *Sundog* while I go down. But if it becomes necessary, can you give the order to fire?"

Can she order the *Sundog* to train its nuncio lasers and ship-to-ship missiles on her own knight, obliterating him?

"I don't know," she says. "I don't know if I can order your death, Syr."

Because he's going to order her to kill him. Isn't he? Even if they succeed. He thinks he's anstruth. A tainted impostor.

"Not just my death," Vondam says. "Be clear-eyed, Squire. Once Alpharael has the object, it has power over his entire past. Anyone he may have encountered. That includes us. And it includes the entire Kav population of Taro-duend. Adults, juveniles, pets, and beasts of burden. *Everything*. Can you destroy it all?"

This is a test. Incident question. Coherent response.

"No," she says, incoherent but certain. "No, I can't order that. It's indiscriminate. It's not ... knightly."

It's like the death that fell on her home. Hot instead of cold. Swift instead of slow. But it's the same. Extermination of the innocent in the name of a tenet of doctrine. Even if the doctrine is true.

Vondam's hand is shaking. "We must. The Sum is clear. The instructions written in that anathalmanac are written in *blood*. Disobeying them has caused unimaginable devastation. We can't imagine it because we don't know how many times we've failed." He takes a huge breath, exhales, and nods. He's convincing himself along with her. "Killing anyone who's been in contact with the object is *protocol*. The same as a preflight safety checklist or sterilization before you go into surgery. And you have to obey protocol every time or it doesn't work. It only takes one dropped tool or dirty finger to crash the ship or kill the patient. There are things we *have* to do to keep the world safe. And if you slip on them once, you slip on them every time."

"I said no."

"Squire—"

"I won't do it. I'm not going to kill a settlement full of defenseless innocents. I'm not going to help do it either."

Now the photophoroi really are staring at them. Even the officers.

What would Santaphor do? He'd pretend to not understand and keep asking for an explanation. What would Isidor do? He'd leap into action, killing them all. What would Cataphrin do? She'd explain to

the rest of them why it was necessary and obvious. And what would Quinidad do, little Quinidad who taught Haliya how to see in battle? She'd sit down and try to work out the Sum—adding up all the short and long-term consequences of the possible choices here, sum the tensors, like she was advising a Cosmogrand on policy.

This is what Haliya does:

“There's a better option,” she says. “You don't go down there. I do. You conduct your search, grid by grid. I find the place where Alpharael's improbable escape is most likely—or most unlikely. I armor myself with one of the anathalmanac's tricks, catch him there, and kill him.”

And if she's too late—if he already has the object—she has a plan. But she won't tell Vondam. She *can't* tell Vondam. A squire has a duty to be honest to her knight. But Haliya has one duty she thinks is higher.

Vondam begins to cry silently. They're tears of pride.

“I can't do that,” he says. “It's the right choice. But I can't do it. Send my squire in my place? Never. It wouldn't be knightly.”

“You have no choice,” Haliya says through a choked throat. “You have a hole in your head. The object might have put it there. You might have a seizure or drop dead at the worst moment. We can't allow ourselves to be influenced by sentiment, because the sentiment might not be ours. We have to do as the Sum instructs. We must obey instructions written in the stars because it cannot change the stars.”

He covers his eyes. “What would the Vondam you know do?”

He trusts the Vondam she remembers more than the Vondam he is. She begins to cry, too.

“Syr,” she says, “he would remember his squire's oath. ‘Dawn is growing. So must we. Grow the count of dawns to be.’ And he would—”

“That's not fair,” he says, laughing through tears. “The litany? That's not fair.”

“And he would give his squire a chance to be worthy of those oaths,” she belts out. Just spit it out, Haliya, just fire the words without thinking. Or you'll let yourself notice how terribly you're hurting him. “He would give her a chance to be worthy of his trust.”

She's going to be worthy of more than that. But she can't tell him, or *he would never let her go* (go to Revision 12 (Two Fallen)).

Revision 12 (Two Fallen)

Alpharael dreams of falling.

He falls through his past. A bullet blasted down the course of fate, shot from his artificial womb alongside his twin sister. He sees Raphaella, and he sees her chosen to go into Sothera on her final plummet, her first plummet into the Next Eternity. Their courses diverge.

I tell him that this is important, this twinning and separation. One twin cast into the singularity. One twin turned away. It makes him potent.

You won't be offended, I hope? That I prefer him to you? It's just that he's so close to INEVITA. You want to know: what is INEVITA? It is what survives at the end of time. You want to know if I am a creature of INEVITA.

But I'm not telling.

Alpharael's used me already, to get rid of the Kav. Revision twelve. An easy change. I preserved the present (armored Kav in the *Seriema*'s cargo bay) but changed the past (the vector of the Hopelight's descent, and its radiation) so that the Kav came to the *Seriema* not as captors but as walking corpses.

Alpharael dreams of falling. Falling into the far future, the deep abyss of cosmic evolution.

"Begin in me thy ending!" he begs. "Chart for me the way I walk!"

He sees all the space between the Walls. The shell between two bubbles—between everything and nothing.

He sees how the stars will eat their fuel and go out. He sees how the dark masses that remain will draw each other together and collapse. The cosmos will be struck clean of its errors, shriven of all waste and impermanence.

"Shrive me," he begs. "Make me fringent to the narrowing course of thy heart." For all things will surely be fringent to INEVITA, caught on its border and destined to reach its heart. "Down" will be the same as "tomorrow."

"Pare from me fate's gore!" Let him simplify the path, let him hasten the coming of INEVITA. Oh, Raphaella, are you there already, waiting in the Next Eternity of which INEVITA dreams?

For it is certain to him as it has never been certain before that Monoism will truly, inevitably, and provably triumph.

For it is—*not* certain!

And all his certainties are overthrown. He glimpses the cosmos, and it is larger than any faith. It is older and stranger than any vision. There are colors to it, down at the deepest substructure. The black grasp of gravity and entropy, the white void that transmits force, the blue law of structure, the sprawling green complexity and the roaring red furnace that both eats and feeds it all. Yet also there are colorless things. There are things older than man and things older yet.

Am I of those things? Well. I think by the end, you'll know.

In the face of this revelation, he can only beg for mercy. "INEVITA, draw me down! Put out my eyes and close my ears!"

Yes. Close the sweep of the cosmic past, set it aside, and look to the *end*.

The far future of the universe is a field of supervoids like black diamonds in fiery sockets. This is the prophecy of any conceivable past, the cosmological end state.

Do you understand, Alpharael, why you were meant to wield me?

You are the sibling of the eaten twin. You are adjacent to inevitability. Fragile ... yet so close to divinity.

As I am also close to divinity. A hip, a shoulder, an empty face. Skin like leaves. A love that loves itself. You'll see.

No one is there to shake Alpharael awake.

He gasps at the slap of sensation. Dry, cool air. Straps around his body. Oily synthetic fabric against his bare hands and feet. No saltwater lapping at the nape of his neck.

He's alive.

"I live," he croaks.

No one answers. He's strapped to a vertical bunk in the smallest little rack of bunks he's ever seen. The overhead light is a dim orange, like a hot wire. Art on the wall displays a huge-eyed cat batting at a binary star system. It's tagged with a word, or a name: Arata. Everything smells like must and mold. His forearms are free. He has no problem unstrapping himself. He slumps forward and moves to bury his face in his hands.

There is a hole in his right hand.

He stares at it.

Yes. A hole right through his hand, palm to dorsum. It's perfectly transparent and edged in a ring of refraction. There's a little *swirl* to it, like it's slowly, slowly twisting. Like an enormous invisible drive shaft runs through his hand and it's cranking up to speed.

He stands back up straight and tries to wake up.

What happened? Sami made him touch the stone in the ball of shear starch. There were Kav, Kav who threatened him. But why was he afraid? The Kav had radiation poisoning. And he heard a voice—

"Hello, Alpharael."

He leaps up and cracks his head on the overhead above and stumbles out, swearing. There's a hatch, but it's dogged shut. He tries the porthole on the wall—but it's just a screen, and his pawing hands press artifacts into the image.

There's a hole in his right hand!

He does the worst thing possible to get it over with. He raises his right hand before his face and drives his left index finger straight through it.

It feels like nothing. Just a hole. He wiggles his finger around. There's no sensation on the hole's rim. He bites the fingernail protruding through his hand. Still his finger. Still hurts.

"I'm alive," he decides. That's what seems important. "I'm alive?"

He looks at the porthole-screen.

Outside, a Kav wearing an enormous sun hat and a safety-green vest unhooking a cable from a towing latch. The ship has been hauled into a cavern or hangar. Alpharael prods the porthole until the camera swivels for him and aims at the cavern's open mouth.

Dread leaps for his throat.

Outside, he can see a slice of a Kav settlement. It's a town on stilts, a maze of bright half-permanent buildings beneath a forest of lightning rods and rigid kites. Sothera hangs dust-reddened and enormous in the stormy sky.

He's still on Kavaron. And he has not escaped.

A Sunstar Free Company patrol ship swoops over the town. A golden gladius with wings of light. The ship that shot him down.



Art by: Chris Rallis

And from that ship rains an armored rain: the tiny figures of Solar Knights descending on spikes of plasma. Photophoroi cling to tabor mechs like the legs of ballooning spiders.

In the distance, a Hopelight warmaker, like the one he stole, glides over a baked dirt runway, flashing its lasers at anything trying to take off below. The message is clear. No one gets to leave.

They want *him*.

“I thought I got to live,” he croaks. “I thought you let me go. I don’t understand.”

And it’s not as if he can cry out to the monastery for help, is it? He abandoned his sacred charge. He’s alone.

“Captain Sami!” Alpharael shouts. “Captain Sami! They’re coming for me! Captain, we have to go—”

No one answers.

He searches the cabin and finds a jet injector with a handwritten Psimer label: *“In case of further seizures, take this.”* He tries to use it to pry the hatch open. Of course, it doesn’t work. He scrabbles around at the top of the hatch, the sides, the bottom, looking for some wire to pull or emergency release to trip. Nothing. Nothing! Except—a sheet of markup rag, fallen off the hatch and puddled on the carpet. He grips it in his normal hand and shakes it out to read.

“Gone out for fuel—back soon. Toilet folds down behind the curtain, but don’t use the suction. It’s locked on maximum. Your delicates can’t take it. —Captain Sami.PS, You are locked in there until we know you won’t steal our ship.PPS, Please take the injector if you feel another seizure coming.PPPS, We have a lot of questions for you.”

Steal it? He can’t even fly it. Unless the ship has another friendly viy, getting out is useless.

He needs Captain Sami or he’s dross.

Nothing awaits him if he dies. No Next Eternity. No salvation. Just—*nothing*.

Nothing. Like a hole in the hand. Like—

He stares at the hole.

If he looks through the hole in his hand, he can see *through* the hatch.

Depending on where he focuses, he can see the surface of the hatch, or the locking mechanism, or the corridor outside. It's a disorienting view: the corridor looks tipped on its side. Because they're on a planet, and the *whole ship* is tipped over from its usual rocketlike orientation.

"Okay," he says. "Okay, okay. Hole in the hand. Hand to the hatch. Hand *through* the hand ..."

He drives his left index finger through the hole in his right hand. It reaches out into the corridor.

He tries not to blink, in case that makes the metal solid again and traps his finger forever. His finger can't reach very far outside, but he fumbles around until he finds the lock (with raised buttons, thank HIM) and pushes buttons until the hatch clatters and unlocks.

He shoves it open and bursts out—and nearly falls into a nest of wires. The walls, floor and ceiling are *all* a mess of lights, power runs, data bars, and exposed cabling. Anything that pokes is wrapped in spray foam. He has to hop from solid panel to solid panel.

A tacked-up rag on the wall across from the hatch reads:

"If you do escape, please wait around for us to return. I don't think you really have a choice, and I really want to talk to you. —Captain Sami.PS, You are a mess, but I wasn't sure about your mores so didn't want to wash you."

Wash can wait. Alpharael hops his way to the nearest intersection and follows hand-decorated signage to the cargo bay.

The stasis cask waits in a ring of abandoned Kav armor. Like a tomb in a circle of standing stones. When they put him inside it, Alpharael recognized the model from Susur Secundi—apparently Pinnacle really does gift everyone the exact same make.

And that means Alpharael knows exactly how to shut it off.

He rubs at the hole in his hand as the cask whirs up to real time. There is something inside he needs.

Something that makes *trouble go away*. (go to Revision 13 (On the Barricades))

Revision 13 (On the Barricades)

"I don't understand why they haven't seen us," Sami admits. "I don't think I'm *this* sneaky."

The Free Company is everywhere. Surveillance drones spider across the sky on stabs of thrust. Search lidar flickers over Taro-duend like an enormous freight clerk running a final checkout scan on the settlement. Lances of infantry pull barriers across the boardwalks.

They must be here for Alpharael.

It's proof of Sami's luck that the *Seriema* is parked in a cave off the slag fields instead of in the open at the airport. But sooner or later the Free Company will figure out how Alpharael arrived—someone will give up a description of the interplanetary ship that dropped off the dying soldiers.

Or maybe someone *won't*.

In an act of aggressive, unilateral solidarity, the Kav are raising thirteen kinds of hell.

A flight of kites catches a surveillance drone on their tether cables.

A boardwalk collapses under passing troops as the seismic pilings relax into structural pasta.

Smoke billows from a salvage fire as some Kav takes a cutting torch to old rubber.

A gang of Kav workers in fire gear turn their hoses of adhesive suds on Free Company troops.

“These Kav,” Tannuk says with thick and bitter pride, “do not like a snitch.”

You could not ask for a better first mate or a worse fugitive than Tannuk. The first thing he did, when he saw the palestar in the sky, was come and find Sami. Then he wrapped his poncho around Sami and they ran off together, Sami huddled under Tannuk’s bulk. Sami has to stay exactly in step with Tannuk’s feet, but this is not hard, because Sami has got rhythm.

“They’re getting away with it, too,” Sami says. “Tan, is it just me, or are these goons acting a little rigid?”

It’s hard to see clearly through the poncho’s weave. But it looks to Sami like the Free Company troops are just *ignoring* the Kav obstructionism. They’re sweeping the settlement by a program, grid by grid, moving in echelons of lead and follow-up.

It’s methodical. *Too* methodical.

They don’t dodge or reroute around obstacles. They just keep on stubbornly *going* , even if it means clambering over a burning barricade or searching the depths of a flooded basement.

“They don’t trust their own eyes,” Sami realizes. “Or their own sensors. Or—anything. They’re just ... oh. Oh, my. Tan, I’m going to do something stupid.”

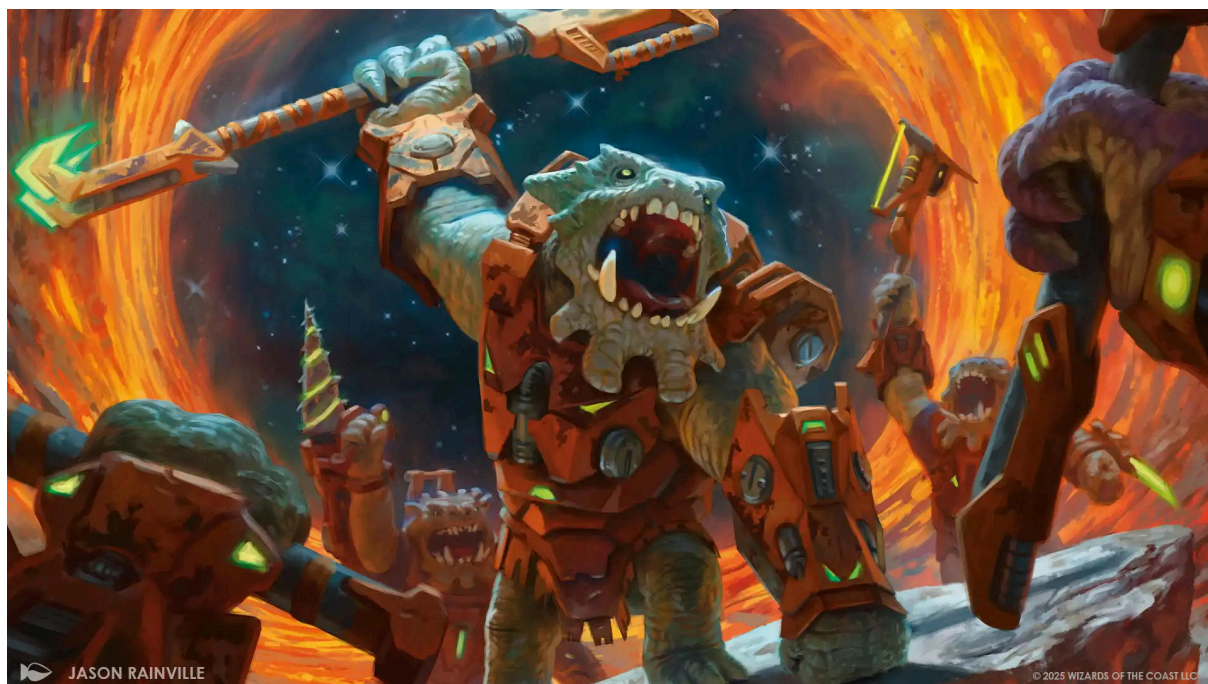
“Don’t—”

Sami jumps out from under Tannuk’s poncho and waves at the nearest surveillance mechan. “Hey! Hey! Over here!”

A Kav nearly round with age and success fires a distress rocket straight at the mechan. The sound and glare of its detonation tears away Sami’s shout. A moment later, a windblown insulation tarp smashes into the mechan and covers its sensors. The machine tacks up, thrusters stabbing, trying to shake free.

Sami dashes ahead to the ramp where the boardwalk descends onto a packed-earth road that leads to the slag pit. A Free Company checkpoint blocks the way; armored soldiers push a Kav truck with a burned engine into a makeshift barricade. Two officers with drone-control packs scan the crowd with lidar, dots of light tracking the features of staring Kav faces.

The lidar sweeps toward Sami—



Art by: Jason Rainville

A Kav throws up a banner in front of Sami and roars, “Our star! Our world! Our town! You have no jurisdiction!”

“Get out or get buried!”

“Kavaron That Is is not yours!”

Someone revs up a blower and starts pushing smoke at the knights. Tannuk tries to throw their poncho over Sami, but Sami grabs the edge and pulls him close. “Tannuk, we’re in luck.”

“What? How so? Seems to me we’re stuck in a hangar with no fuel.” Their ship is still too dry to boost to Uthros and meet the Metalman. And they don’t have a prayer of outrunning the Free Company ships overhead.

“We’re *in luck*. They can’t see us. We’re too lucky. It’s the rock, Tannuk. The rock is lucky.”

“Lucky how? Lucky as in it knocks you silly if you touch it? Because that’s all it’s done! And now it’s safe in stasis, so it can’t do anything *else*!”

“I don’t know! But somehow—”

One of the Free Company officers fires up a microwave weapon. The crowd roars in anguish and Sami screams, one lone human wail among them, as all the flesh a millimeter below their skin begins to cook from the inside.

Tannuk whips his poncho over Sami. The insulated anti-lightning liner grants a moment of relief.

“Tan,” Sami gasps, clutching at his giant thigh, “we need to get out of here before things get bad.”

“Things were already bad,” Tannuk says. “This is the better version.”

“What?”

“If you’re right, and we’re lucky, then this is the best version of our escape. And I don’t like how it’s looking for everyone else, Captain. Kav love a riot, but the Free Company loves a chance to kill and call it greating the Sum.”

“Disperse!” the Sunstar officer calls. “Return to your homes!”

Kav throw storm ponchos over little ones, over antenna and tools that jet sparks. Something catches fire and flashes up.

“No it’s not,” Sami says. A horrible chicken taste swells under their tongue. A horrible empty wind blows in their ears. The wind on Sigma, where the Choprights never sat down for dinner.

“It’s not what?”

“This isn’t the best version of our escape. There’s a better version. An easier version.”

“Captain—”

The stampede takes off slow at first. A phalanx of Kav behind a wall of storm ponchos and sheet metal. Tramping forward into the microwave field in a sputtering wave of sparks.

“The version where everyone’s vanished,” Sami says. “Where there were never any sick Kav. Never anyone in Taro-duend. Just an abandoned settlement for us to loot some propellant and move on. We’d find their things, like we did on Sigma. And we’d wonder, what happened here? Did everyone get sick? Was there radiation, was there an impact warning, did everyone just get on their trucks and go?”

A huge Kav cormale just up ahead, absolutely swollen on the change, rears up and begins to stamp his feet. Electricity sparks off his jewelry. He roars defiance and keeps stamping.

“But the truth is, *we* happened. We got lucky. And our luck was, everyone else was gone. Maybe that’s how it happened on Sigma, too. Maybe there *were* people there, before we showed up.”

The crowd takes up the rhythm.

The stomp. The stamp, testing the ground.

The bellow of challenge.

“Captain,” Tannuk says, “maybe we should just—get rid of it. Give it to the Free Company. Tell the Metalman we couldn’t finish the job.”

“But Tan,” Sami says, “then he wouldn’t fix our ship. And then who’d look for Mirri?”

The Kav charge the Free Company checkpoint. (go to Revision 13 (Haliya Kills))

Revision 13 (Haliya Kills)

A team of photophoroi from the Moratorio Cosmogrand help her make her first combat descent. They assure her everybody falls on their first combat jump, and when she doesn’t, they tell her that she’s clearly a badass and will succeed in all her efforts.



Art by: Kieran Yanner

Then they leave Haliya to prepare. She has to go in alone. The anathalmanac made it plain that adding variables just gives the anathematic object more ways to screw with you.

Her plan is to find the blind spots in Syr Vondam's search and search them. Once she's found the ship that seems most likely to spirit a fugitive Monoist away, she'll board it and render it unflyable. If she's wrong, she's wrong, and she'll have to find another ship and try again.

But she doesn't think she'll be wrong.

She heads for the mined-out cavities along the town slag field, where old prospectors searched in vain for a second strike. The airport is under constant surveillance, so Alpharael won't go there. And where else would you hide a ship? In these caverns, where ground-penetrating radar and thermal can't see.

Along the way she prepares her anti-object ritual.

Follow the anathalmanac entry. Take the distance to the nearest star reborn by the *Dawnsire* (or one of her sisters) in light years. Divide that number by your own age in minutes. Take the ones digit of the result.

The purpose is to create a number determined by this place and your identity so that you have to be here in order for events to proceed.

For her, on Kavaron, the answer is *six*.

For Syr Vondam the answer is *three*.

3. *Pendulum,*

encoding faith. Fashion from gleanings a triple-jointed pendulum. Dangle it from thy armor.

As she descends to the slag field, hidden under the camouflage of her war cloak, she snaps together three carbon-fiber tent rods from her survival kit. The ball joints swing freely. She sprays quickfix on the bottom rod and glues on a bearing from a telescope mount as weight.

Then she clips the top of the pendulum to an elastic band and settles it around her helmet, so it sways in front of her face, pulling her neck forward and down. She has to be sure it keeps swinging—everything depends on it.

A triple-jointed pendulum is a chaotic system. But chaos is not the same as disorder. In fact, the pendulum is hugely ordered, its motions determined exquisitely by *her* motions. So exquisitely that no one else's motions, even following precisely in her footsteps, could produce the same motion of the pendulum's tip.

"Viy," she whispers. "Every second I want you to capture the pendulum's velocity. Use that vector to select a passage from the Faith Space. Transmit the selected passage to the palestar for retransmission according to the instructions I gave you."

Broadcast the selected scripture to the nearest secure router of the faithful to be repeated in prayer every day for the next thousand years.

For the next thousand years, the exact prayers spoken by billions and billions of Sunstar believers across the Edge will be determined by her exact motions here.

And this web of causality would be altered in its entirety if the object removed her or substituted someone else in her place. The web fixes her in place.

What she is doing is very simple. But she has no idea if it will work. Maybe, if it does work, she won't even know it. And if it doesn't, she *certainly* won't know it.

She ignores the anathalmanac's instructions about boiling water and keeping a tally. If there were supposed to be others with her, they are already gone.

The pendulum swoops, armoring her against an enemy she can't fight.

In the third cave she checks, she finds a ship called the *Seriema* with a fusion drive and an arcjet pattern that matches the signs near Alpharael's crash site.

She backtracks, finds the *Sundog* with her armor's laser, and transmits: "Located interplanetary ship. Boarding now. If I don't report in 600 seconds, send in the photophoroi. If it rabbits, kill it. No sign of the object yet."

Then she checks her war cloak's settings, takes a breath, and trots into the cave.

She trips on a chunk of half-melted alloy and goes down swearing.

Her armor saves her from skinned knees and torn-up palms. She throws her head back and sends the pendulum waving in a wild arc. Still swinging! Still swinging! And all those billions who will receive different verses of scripture because she fell—all of them are her armor. All those prayers.

Allow her a little moment of pride: she feels like an angel on errantry.

She gets up and moves on, her tongue clamped firmly behind her teeth.

First things first. Plant a charge under the *Seriema*'s folded airfoil. Plant another against the shadow shield for its main drive. Just in case.

Then, go in.

Nothing's happening.

Alpharael clutches the weird rock in both hands and carefully speaks aloud: “Bring Captain Sami back here safely. Get us off this planet and away from the Sunstar knights.”

Didn’t it tell him it was his special rock? Didn’t it say he was powerful and important? Or was that all—just a dream? Is he trying to wish upon a stone?

The rock rests dead in his hands.

A panel on the wall of the hold chirps. Alpharael dashes over to it, hoping it’s Captain Sami returning to get him *out* of here. But it’s incomprehensible, the labels are written in Psimer, but they all say things like “SQUAK MSTR DB” and “CYC PRG SCD” and “MODAL.” Whoever designed this, their writing cannot be Semiotic Standard.

Behind him, the cargo bay’s loading door whines and shudders into motion.

He whirls. The door drops hard and fast, banging on the slag outside. The scent of lightning and hot dust rolls in, and his ears pop.

A bright figure stands in the gap. Something scythes silently before it, back and forth, a severed mantis leg dancing.

He *recognizes the figure*. He knows that armor! It’s the wet rat! The pathetic woman from the *Dawnsire* is back for revenge!

Alpharael brandishes the rock at her and shouts, “Vanish!”

Nothing happens. For a moment the bright figure just stares at him. Then she says, “Is that the object?”

Alpharael scrambles for the nearest ladder.

The bright figure shoots him.

The bladiator ionizes the air between them with a laser and dumps a bolt of electricity down the invisible wire. Without armor, he is helpless. He says “Grk!” and drops like a pole.

The armored figure advances. Fires again. Alpharael drools and grunts as his muscles seize up.

He wills the bladiator to break. He wills Captain Sami to show up and shoot the Summist in the back. He wills—

The armored figure shoots him a third time. His head slams off the deck, and he sees Raphaella and wishes she had never gone. He sees a slender waist, a beautiful face with nothing behind it. That’s not Raphaella. What is that?

The armored figure kneels over him. The metal rods swaying from her brow dance and jerk. With two armored fingers, she pries his mouth open.

“Can you speak?” she says.

He gurgles.

“It’s my fault this happened,” she says. “I should’ve held on to your ankle harder. I should’ve locked my armor. But now you’ve got the object. I’m supposed to kill you now. And myself. And Syr Vondam will destroy everything down here. All the Kav. Maybe our own troops, too. Maybe he’ll fly the *Sundog* into the sun. It’s awful. It’s wrong. He’s got a hole in his head. He’s not himself. So, I’m going to do the right thing instead.”

She pushes something cold and round into his mouth. His jaw is still spasming, so she has to hold it open. He screams at her because the pain makes him furious.

"That's a bomb," she says. "If it doesn't get my passcode every ten seconds, it'll blow up. Now that it's in your mouth, I don't see how the object can get rid of it. Lucky guess on the code, maybe?"

She waits a moment. Alpharael counts to ten. He's still here. She must've sent her passcode.

"I need you to do something," the armored woman says. "I need you to use the object. Even though it's anathema."

Yes. He nods. He'll do it, no question. He has given up paradise to live a little longer.

"I need you to change what happened on the *Dawnsire*," the woman says. "Look. Here." Her armor is studded with optics. It draws a hologram in the air above him. He sees himself, wild, drenched in steam, winding up to throw. In his fist is his singularity bead. The moment he threw away paradise—

"I need you to change things so that I was the one you killed," she says. "I can still survive, if you want, with a hole in my head, or I can die. But the important thing is that Vondam *can't* be harmed. The important thing is that Vondam's judgment goes unimpaired. He'll know what to do better than I. Then, I'll have fulfilled my duty to die before my knight."

She touches her helmet carefully, where the triple pendulum jerks and sways. "I didn't use my birthday to select protocol three. I used Vondam's. It should be Vondam here, in my place. All those prayers should be connected to him. If I stop the pendulum ... can you make that change?"

Alpharael wishes very badly that Captain Sami would appear and shoot her in the back.

Someone's coming to shoot her in the back.

She's got a track on the incoming bodies. They're warm on thermal. They just don't seem very important right now.

In her ear, the tactical circuit whispers reports from all over Taro-duend. The Free Company search is falling apart. The Kav have stampeded at three checkpoints, leaving dozens of their own dead, and driven a mining machine into the groundside tactical comms relay. Smoke and kites make surveillance patchy, and the Kav have electrified their lightning rods into makeshift jammers. Everything is going to chaos, but the Kav are accustomed to this chaos—they don't operate with mechan com relays and networked viys, they *live* like this. Dying seems to get them worked up.

"Barque, flare two. The drawl of a pilot aboard one of the Hopelight warmakers. 'I'm under laser illumination. Looks like a boost light for their planes. Permission to kill it, over.'"

"Flare Two, Barque, do it."

"Flare Two, capture. Lasing. Avis parè, assholes."

The ground trembles.

"Uh, seeing a big secondary," the pilot sends. *"Might've hit the capacitors. Shit. I blew up half the airport."*

Another voice, someone on the ground: *"Barque, Mace One Four, maves ineffective, they're coming on quick—request firebreak, firebreak, Mace One Four in contact!"*

The nihilist Alpharael sprawls across the desk before her. Hateful, fleshy-faced man, pale and timid, splattered like a bug with the tails of his coat loose like wings. She wants so badly to just put the haft of her bladiator through his head.

Everyone out there, Kav and Sunstar, is dying because of *him*. Because he didn't have the grace and courage to die in battle.

But that's cowardice, isn't it, Haliya. Take responsibility. They're dying because of *her*. He is evil and does evil, it's his nature. She was supposed to stop him. But she failed. She failed her knight, and she failed the Sum.

"Do it," she urges him. The object glitters in his hand. "Change the past. *Do it!*"

Vondam's voice whispers into the bones of her jaw.

"Squire, I have two squads ready to reinforce if you need it. Send your armor telemetry."

She doesn't know what to say.

"Squire, this is Vondam. I'm getting a clear pingback from your armor. Have you found Alpharael?"

"Yes," she says. "I have him."

"Has he contacted the object?"

"Syr ..." She swallows hard.

"Shit," Vondam says. *"Oh, hell. It's here. It's with him?"*

"You don't understand. It's not doing anything. He's at my mercy. It's just ... Syr ... you don't have to be anstruth anymore. I can be the one it changed. You can be yourself again."

Silence.

Her helmet, monitoring all tactical traffic, skips from network to network—

"—berserk. Charging into the maves—"

"—got dust filters, we need a skin gas down here—"

"—whole array coming online, targeting you, Barque, Barque, laser threat, defend now!"

"—they don't stop when you blind 'em, just go in through the eye socket, get the brain—"

"—stand by to engage. Weapons, destrict the nuncios on the airport, power supplies first—"

Then Vondam comes back.

"I wouldn't even know what I'd done," he says. *"Selling you to have myself back. I wouldn't even know how utterly I'd betrayed you."*

"That's all right, Syr. That's all right. You're worth it."

"No. It's not. No one could be worth that. Not the Regent Maximum is worth that. Haliya, I am ordering you to kill him and return with the object."

That's not the protocol in the anathalmanac. Neither is this: "I can fix this, Syr. Let me fix it."

"It's not you talking. It's the object. It's got you."

"No, Syr, I'm protected."

"Good. Protocol six has worked in the past. Kill him and get out of there."

"I used protocol three, Syr. To suit your birthdate. But it doesn't matter. The anathalmanac says we must proceed immediately to protocol seven now."

Silence.

"You have to fire. Destroy me, the object, and the Kav."

Silence again.

Her armor warns her that her prisoner's probably recovered enough muscle tone to move again.

She considers the pathetic man and the rock. He betrayed his creed, and for that, this awful object said yes, yes, you may now have power like a god's power, you were right, you were so special and so important and *right*. Come to me.

He stares up at her with dark eyes.

It would be so much easier to just kill him. So clean. So certain. Then she'd know she wasn't under the influence of the object.

But the Sum says, do the greatest good for the most people, doesn't it? Now and for the rest of time.

And how could she possibly do more good for the cosmos than Syr Vondam?

"Syr," she sends, "it's okay. You'll find another squire. This is—it's a pretty good death. Go ahead and do it."

"Get out," Vondam sends. "*Move to the slag field for extraction.*"

"That's not the protocol."

"*Haliya, I am ordering you to get out.*"

"Syr," she says, "you call me Squire. Not Haliya."

"*Squire—behind you!*"

The two heat signatures outside have reached the *Seriema*'s boarding ramp. A Kav and a human. The human cries out, "*Seriema, deploy—*"

They're both dead anyway, the moment Syr Vondam does what he has to do, and Haliya does not want to know what the *Seriema* can deploy against intruders. She lases the human through the heart. The Kav roars in horror and anguish and pounces on the human, beating at its chest, licking at its pale head. It takes a surprisingly long fraction of a second for her bladiator to burn through the Kav's throat and kill it, too. Alpharael wiggles and screeches and tries to grab her leg but there's nothing he can do.

Killing them feels awful. They never had a chance. She should've used the stunner instead, even if they would've died a few moments later.

Now Haliya really does want to die. She wants Vondam to fire on her position and get it over with. She doesn't want to live the rest of her life with the memory of that Kav's terrible grief in her mind.

Something jabs her in the ankle.

She looks down and finds that Alpharael has jabbed himself in the hand with a jet injector.

Only the injection has gone through his hand, through her armor, and into *her*.

She has time to say "What?" and then her muscles freeze.

The last thing she sees before her eyes lose focus is the object, glowing with a *faint pink light* (go to Episode 8).