THE HELION UNIVERSE

WAYS ACROSS THE DARK

A Reader's Guide to Travel · All Four Series



DEAN ALBRECHT

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Ways Across the Dark

A READER'S GUIDE TO TRAVEL, FROM THE DAWNSPIRE TO THE FAR SEAT

Dean Albrecht

Before You Set Out

Sixteen books, four series, and at least five different ways of getting from one star to another. This guide sorts them out.

Each part says where the idea first turns up. Most of what follows is safe for anyone. Where a paragraph gives away a little more than the opening chapters of a book would, it carries a small mark, ◆ LIGHT SPOILER, and names the series. Nothing here gives away an ending.

The four series, in reading order:

- **The Helion Ascendancy** (Books 1–3). Lyra Ardyn, the Dawnspire, and the first war with the Kharuul.
- **The Chronarch Cycle** (Books 4–6). New leads, Mira Solen and Vess, and the first real look at what the vanished Chronarch left behind.
- **The Aurora Cycle** (Books 7–11). Lyra, ten years on, and the long way home to an Earth that is not friendly.
- **The Lantern Road** (Books 12–16). The ancient road of gateways beyond the galaxy, and the people who keep it open.

The whole thing on one page

1. Under ordinary space lies a field that some people, some species and some machines can feel. The books call it **resonance**, or **the lattice**.
2. The universe began with one event, **the First Cascade**. Its echo is still folded through everything. Where the echo has creased over on itself, two distant places nearly touch. That crease is a **fold**.
3. A fold big enough to take a ship is a **seam**. A seam you can actually pass through is a **door**.
4. **Every door takes two.** A door opens only when somebody holds it at both ends at once, and closes only when both ends let go together.
5. People have built **drives** to cross ordinary space on their own power. Nobody built the seams. The vanished **Chronarch** built machines onto chosen seams to make them permanent, and those are the **gateways**.
6. Anyone who can feel folds directly is a **hearer**. Hearers can find doors, open them and close them, which makes them the most valuable and most hunted people in the setting.

1. The Ground Under Everything

First appears in *The Dawnspire Accord*

The field. Resonance is not gravity and has nothing to do with mass, but it behaves like it. It spreads out from a point and falls off with the square of the distance, the same arithmetic that light and gravity obey, and for the same reason: whatever radiates from a point has to spread across the surface of a growing sphere. The strongest source anyone has found is **the Dawnspire**, a range of crystalline mountains on Vespera. Every Chronarch site is a weaker source of the same field. That is why the Chronarch built where they did. They built where the physics was strong enough to work with.

The Ascendancy's hulls are grown, not welded: crystal lattice held together by a resonance current. That is why Kharuul weapons work by knocking a hull out of phase rather than punching holes in it.

The world puts itself right. Time in the Helion universe is self-consistent. A paradox cannot happen; reality corrects it by force. Where a door or a Chronarch machine misbehaves, the world can **double** things for a blink (two copies of a ship on the screens, a man seen twice in one chair) and then resolve the doubling by deleting one copy. A ship lost to a **correction** has never existed. Nobody remembers it. Only handwriting survives, which is why the people in these books write things down by hand, and why their keepers chalk their own names on a slate.

The First Witness. What remains of the First Cascade's first moment, bonded to Lyra Ardyn at the Dawnspire. It is why seams answer her the way they answer nobody else.

2. The Drives

The cascade drive from *The Dawnspire Accord*; the crest drive from *The Aurora Seam*

Two humanities, two ways of crossing ordinary space. They are good at opposite things.

The Parallax Cascade Drive (the Ascendancy)

Three hundred years ago the Earth survey ship *Aurora* struck an unstable fold and fell through it, four minutes that no two survivors ever agreed on the length of, and came out above Vespera, on no chart she carried. Her crew founded the Ascendancy. Their descendants learned to repeat the crossing on purpose.

A cascade crossing needs **two resonance sources** held at a precise offset: the ship's own generator, and something outside it. The outside sources are the **Anchor Beacon** towers on Vespera, the **Frontier Nodes** strung along the Ascendancy's border, the **Solenne Array**, and chains of **marker beacons** laid across empty space. A star's own resonance will do for a short hop. A beacon makes a hop long, fast and safe.

- **What it looks like:** short and sudden, "like a stone skipped across a pond." Each hop leaves a small **flicker** in the sky at both ends, which a patient instrument operator can read.
- **What goes wrong:** let the offset drift and the crew get **cascade desync**: déjà vu, echoes, doubled perception.
- **Where it fails:** inside a door, a cascade ship cannot hop at all; it crawls at walking pace. And in the **Long Dark**, the starless space past the galaxy's edge, a hop goes nowhere, because there is nothing to hop to.
- **Where it shines:** battle. A squadron can hop and reappear kilometres away with its guns already firing.

The crest drive (old humanity, the Terran Hegemony)

Earth's ships never learned to hop. A **crest projector** in the bow, "like a great dull eye," reaches ahead for the next fold and finds it by its long low note, which you can feel in your teeth. The ship passes fold to fold, door to door. Trained hearers called **projector ratings** sit inside the housing to help it find the way.

- **Where it shines:** inside a kept door, where the note is everywhere. A crest ship can close at four times the speed of a cascade ship there.
- **Where it fails:** everywhere else. Between doors it crawls, for months. Its ships are huge and slow to turn, and their great spinal guns are fixed, so the whole ship turns to aim.
- **What it costs:** the Hegemony's whole road network is doors, and doors need hearers. That is the root of the chairs (see part 5).

	Cascade drive	Crest drive
Who	The Ascendancy; Dominion couriers on the marker chain	The Hegemony; the *Aurora*
Needs	A second source: beacon, node or star	A fold or door ahead
Between stars	Fast, hop by hop	Slow crawl
Inside a door	Walking pace	Fast
The Long Dark	Only along a marker chain	Only along doors
Tell-tale	A flicker at both ends	A long low note, for days

3. Natural Seams

From *The Dawnspire Accord* on; named and explained in *The Aurora Seam*

Folds of the First Cascade's echo lie scattered through space with no plan. Nobody built them and nobody owns them. Most are too small or too quiet to use. A few are big enough to take a ship.

- **How they're crossed:** carefully, by somebody reaching at each end, or by blundering through.
- **Why they're dangerous:** with nothing gripping it, a natural seam can tear, catch, double or close on you. Or it can carry you somewhere off every chart. That is how humanity reached Vespera.
- **Why everyone wants them:** a natural seam can open a road between any two places. The hunters can feel them, and the Hegemony needs hearers to find them.

Some you will meet: the fold the *Aurora* fell through; the door the Skerrow fleet escaped through a thousand years ago; **the Hush**, a small quiet seam off Lamplight Station where Lyra's students practise listening; and the **cold steps**, unkept folds a fleet can cross carefully without a hearer.

Pried folds. A fold can be forced open from one side, wrongly, by somebody who doesn't care whether it closes. It stays torn, every use widens it, and it points back at whoever made it.

4. Chronarch Gateways

First glimpsed in *The Helion Ascendancy*; central from *The Chronarch Cycle* on

Long ago (longer than anyone in the books first guesses) a people called the **Chronarch** built a network of doors across the galaxy and beyond it. They did not make seams. They built machines onto chosen natural seams, at both ends, to grip them and make them permanent. Those machines are **holders**, and a seam with holders is a **gateway**.

A holder is a squat dark mass, smooth and faintly seamed, as if it had been poured. Its seams glow amber while it lives and is kept. It grips its door the way a hand keeps a door from swinging shut. Left alone, a holder lasts about a thousand years and then dies. Visited, it lasts. Different peoples call them relays, lanterns, keepers. And a holder notices people: it turns toward whoever stands beside it, and warms under a resting hand, even for somebody who cannot hear a thing.

Gateways you'll travel through

The Threshold. A colossal ring of dark Chronarch metal standing alone at the galaxy's edge, kept by an order of Kharuul monks, the Keepers. Its key, the **Ember**, is in two halves, one at each end; nothing opens on one. On a **crossing day**, every sixteenth day, both halves are held at once and the ring opens onto **the yard**, where the Chronarch made their doors. And for half a breath before it settles, the ring **leans**: it tilts toward somewhere else, a different direction each time. A Keeper can hold it at the lean for a few minutes. Whatever goes through while she holds it goes where the lean points. ◆ LIGHT SPOILER, THE CHRONARCH CYCLE The Keepers' scripture called it simply the Gateway, and for generations nobody could open it.

The relay hubs. ◆ LIGHT SPOILER, THE CHRONARCH CYCLE A Chronarch site can be more than one door. Mira Solen's team finds a relay hub of more than forty nodes, and, behind the walls, rows of alcoves that nobody wants to explain.

Hollowmarch and the far keeper. One long door with a holder at each end: a dead relay turned pirate haven at the near end, half of a Chronarch ring behind the Hegemony's lines at the far end. The door **breathes**, opening and narrowing slowly and regularly, and two hours in it pinches almost shut at **the narrow**, where a big ship goes through a third of a hull per breath, "like a long boat through a lock."

The lanterns and the Lantern Stair. Small Chronarch relays, about three hundred metres across, each keeping one fold open on its far side, alone, as it has for a thousand years. A chain of them, each door a **step**, runs out from the Threshold across the Long Dark like lamps set on the stair of a tower. At least thirteen of them. Some are dark, because their holders have died. Somewhere along the way is **the Hinge**, a waystation left unvisited for so long that it has started to defend its door.

The Throat. A Chronarch relay the size of a small moon beyond the Hegemony's frontier, with three doors. For a long time the Hegemony held it with hearers in chairs.

The Junction. ◆ LIGHT SPOILER, THE LANTERN ROAD A Chronarch waystation in the starless dark beyond the galaxy: a wheel thirty kilometres across, where thirty-six roads meet, each with a holder at its mouth, nearly all of them dead. From its rim the whole galaxy hangs across a quarter of the sky. At its centre is a domed **lean room** with a ring of lying-places worn into the floor, one for each road. A hearer lying in one can feel where that road goes, and what is at the far end.

Kept doors. Once a gateway is kept from both ends, it no longer waits for a crossing day. A ship can go through whenever there is a hearer at each end to widen the door for it.

	Drives	Natural seams	Gateways
Made by	People	The universe	The Chronarch
Where	Anywhere a ship goes	Everywhere, at random	Fixed sites on a network
Range	Short hops, or a slow crawl	Anywhere, unpredictably	Long: across the Long Dark
Needs	Beacons, stars or folds	Someone at both ends	A holder at each end, visited
Risk	Low in charted space	High	Low when kept; deadly when held

5. Keeping a Door Open

The chairs from *The Aurora Seam*; the round from *The Far Chart*

A holder needs company, not force. There are two ways to give it company, and the difference between them is the moral heart of the later books.

The round (keeping). People take turns standing beside a holder in worn alcoves called **niches**, two at a time, palms flat, doing nothing but being there. Sixty breaths, then the next pair. That is a **round**, and its roster is chalked on a **slate**, each keeper writing their own name, because handwriting survives a correction. Anyone can stand a round. Hearing isn't needed: a baker, a farmer, a Kharuul shipwright deaf to every fold, an old Skerrow pilot. The holder feels the room change. The door breathes. Nobody stands alone. The Chronarch cut the niches themselves; they built their doors to be **visited**.

The chairs (holding). The Terran Hegemony found Chronarch gateways near Earth and never understood them. Instead of walking past its holders, it straps its strongest hearers into seats beside them and makes them **lean** on the door, for life. The holder grips the leaner back. The door **catches**: it stutters, ships show doubled on the screens, and the correction comes. It works, until it uses the hearer up.

Terms and the home half. ◆ LIGHT SPOILER, THE LANTERN ROAD A keeper stands for a **term**, with a date going in and a date for going home, both in their own hand. Some keepers split a tally lengthwise down the middle of every word, wear one half, and leave the other with somebody at home. A term can be lengthened only with both halves together.

6. Hearers, Knocks and Closing a Door

Throughout

Hearing is feeling folds directly, "like the sound of water under a floor." Some humans can do it, rarely; Vespera's people have been drifting toward it for generations. Some Skerrow are born hearing, and hide it. Some Kharuul hear. The Hegemony tests children and grades them on a scale.

Listening, not leaning. A beginner pushes on a fold, wanting something from it. That wears the hearer out, makes the door catch, and announces the hearer to anything in the dark that is listening. The skill is to stand still. Lyra's whole teaching fits in three lines: *Don't push. Stand still. Nobody holds it.*

Opening a door.

1. Somebody has to be at both ends. Usually that means going the long way first, by drive and seam and step, to put a hearer at the far end.
2. Both ends reach at the same time, by agreement on the hour, because there is no other way to talk across the dark.
3. A hearer reaches along **the groove**, the smooth empty bed a closed door leaves behind, "like the bed of a river gone dry," and **knocks**: three taps, and three. The other end knocks back.
4. Both rounds keep standing. The door opens kept.

Closing one. Both ends let go together. A closing carries whoever is inside to the other side. And the trick nobody knew until a young keeper worked it out: *You don't close. You turn round.* A hearer who stops reaching outward is no longer holding anything open.

7. The Hunters' Roads

From *The Aurora Seam*

The **Ninefold** are a people of castes who steer by resonance. Their **Kethra**, the Pack, hear folds with a great crest of blades that is always half open, and they are drawn to doors and to hearers the way sharks are drawn to blood. To them every open door, and every hearer leaning on one, is **a light in the dark**.

- **Hunt-ships** are grown from bone, each from the bone of the ship before it, and built to follow a trail through a seam.
- **A Listener** is a lone hunter boat that sits far off and listens through a small fold before a hunt. When it stops blinking, the hunt is days away.
- **The Ashrak**, the Reavers, raid. They pry folds open and don't care whether they close.
- ◆ LIGHT SPOILER, THE LANTERN ROAD The hunters have roads of their own on the Chronarch network, and they lead inward.

That is why the oldest law of the Skerrow, who have been hunted for a thousand years, is *Do not let them know you hear.*

8. Messages and Maps

Throughout

There is no faster-than-light radio. Messages travel physically: by courier, relay by relay along a marker chain, in a packet carried through a door on a crossing day, or in small cascade-driven **dispatch buoys**. A letter across the frontier can take weeks.

- **The knock.** The only signal that crosses a closed door: three taps and three, along the groove.
- **Hull-tap.** The Skerrow's oldest language, palms on a ship's plating, carried hull to hull along the tethers. Their elders carve their routes into their own shells, so a Skerrow back is a map.
- **The far chart.** The Hegemony's three-hundred-year map of every door its hearers ever felt, written on the underside of glass in rings like a tree's.
- **Beacon chains.** A road built behind you across the Long Dark: a beacon dropped at every known place, so the drive can jump from one to the next. Laying one takes months. Using one takes days.
- **Survey nets.** No hearer? Spread ships across the dark and watch the instruments like fishing floats for the faint curve of a fold's edge. Then send the smallest ship in first.

9. When It Goes Wrong

- **Catch.** A holder that stops trusting the people beside it grips, lets go, and grips again. Its door stutters.
- **Correction.** Doubled ships, doubled people, and then one copy gone, from the world and from every memory. Go round a doubled mark. Write everything down.
- **Firing in a door.** Both holders flinch. "It won't care who."
- **Unvisited holders.** They catch, and in the end they defend their doors.
- **Leaning.** Gripping, catching, a hearer worn thin as paper.
- **The Long Dark.** No stars, no beacons, no hop. Only a chain of doors, or a chain of beacons you laid yourself.
- **The cold.** ◆ LIGHT SPOILER, THE LANTERN ROAD Something from outside the network that the first Helion books called the Silent Echo. It is drawn to a single note sung alone, and to a hearer in a chair, and it has a long history with the network.

10. What Each Series Adds

Series	Ways across the dark it brings in
The Helion Ascendancy	The cascade drive, Anchor Beacons and Frontier Nodes; the Dawnspire; the first hints of the Chronarch; the self-correcting world.
The Chronarch Cycle	Chronarch sites up close: stewards who visit them, a relay hub of many nodes, the yard where the doors were made, and the Threshold.
The Aurora Cycle	The crest drive and the Hegemony's chairs; natural seams named and explained; Hollowmarch's door; the Lantern Stair and the long way round; the round; the hunters.
The Lantern Road	The Junction and its thirty-six roads; waking dead gateways from both ends; kept doors without crossing days; beacon chains; terms; great seats; and the longest road of all.

11. The Longest Road

Every door takes two, and the farther apart its ends are, the harder it is to put somebody at the other one. On the Junction's wheel there is a road that will not read, that Lyra lay beside for three nights and came up saying *It isn't anywhere I know.* The Keepers' oldest roll marks it with a sign that means a going away by choice.

Where it goes is the end of *The Lantern Road*, and the beginning of whatever comes next.

Keep Reading

Every series is a fresh starting point. *The Chronarch Cycle* and *The Lantern Road* need no earlier reading.

Start at the beginning: *The Dawnspire Accord*
amazon.com/dp/B0HHPC68WT

Two more free gifts
Join the readers' list for *Eleven Minutes*, a Helion short story, and *A Reader's Guide to the Doors*, with the full glossary of the words of the road.
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