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Ad bestias

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Chapter 1

Choice

The Pathfinder's keen gaze swept through the circle of the assembly hall. The IstuKarun¹ had arrived, outcasts who, weary of the Paths, had abandoned their Craftworld. Could any of them have dreamed of what really awaited them out there, in the longed-for freedom of the vast sea of stars? After all, so far, they had survived, and they had come back. This made them the best among their peers. When ZarAsuryan called, its Rangers returned home.

Several hundred sat on the steeply ascending steps of the elliptical hall. The Council of Seers used to gather here. Arguably only the First Farseer of ZarAsuryan, AthIdainn² Eathalvaén, had the authority – and the impertinence – to claim this venerable place for a gathering of the Outcasts.

Firondhir leaned back and tried to make out the sweeping dome of the ceiling high above him in the dim darkness. Like the filigree branches of a tree,

¹ IstuKarun = Silent Hunters

² AthIdainn = High Farseer (Title)

winding wraithbone struts stood out. Between the branches, light filtered through semi-transparent crystal sheets in every imaginable shade of blue. The sight filled him with due reverence, but even more with admiration for the artistry of this building.

Very few of the other Rangers seemed to perceive their surroundings in the same way. Firondhir couldn't blame them. Every Aeldari had an innate sense for the beauty of things. But when the Outcasts returned home from their often long and lonely journeys, their eyes were on other things. Some chatted or greeted companions they hadn't seen for a long time. Certainly, some also bragged about their adventures. But no story, no matter how imaginatively embellished, could come close to the dangers that a wanderer actually encountered on the Path of the Outcast.

Firondhir and Illurayon had probably experienced more than all the young Aeldari here combined. But the journey that now lay ahead of them was to exceed everything that had gone before. However, that's all Firondhir knew. The AthIdainn had made nothing more than vague hints when he had invited them to join him. The future of the Craftworld ZarAsuryan would take a

new turn, for better or for worse. That would depend on them now.

But wasn't it always like that when the Farseers called the Rangers home and summoned the Council of War? However, Autarchs and Exarchs were not present here and now. Nor was there any lingering tension that permeated the consciousness of a Craftworld when the avatar of Kaela Mensha Khaine³ was about to awaken. War was not imminent. Not for the people of ZarAsuryan, not for the Aspect Warriors of the Shrines of the Asurya. The IstuKarun had a task ahead of them: a secret search, a silent hunt.

Illurayon was the more prescient of the two, and more than that. Ever since they had known each other, he had always taken on something of a leadership role. That's probably why it was he whom the AthIdainn had invited to a personal conversation. But his friend had never hidden anything from him. Firondhir saw no reason to worry about the measures.

³ Aeldari God of War

Eathalvaén wandered the winding paths of the sprawling gardens in the Seers' Dome. The regular light changes in the biodomes of the Craftworld had just passed the halfway point of the dark phase. On a planet, this time would probably have been called midnight. The absence of daylight allowed a view of the stars, whose gleaming white peaks of light penetrated the wafer-thin, clear crystal skin of the dome. In the deep blue twilight, numerous night flowers had opened their large, golden, Gemand crimson calyxes and exuded a heavy, pleasant fragrance. Nocturnal moths, velvety purple and as large as songbirds, fluttered from one flower to another. Crickets chirped softly at their night concert.

Somewhere beyond this painting of the senses, a spherical sound could be heard to the sensitive mind, a silent, rising and falling melody like the sound of the sea. A sea of stars that separated and connected the far-flung islands of the Aeldari people. Nights in the gardens of a Craftworld had their own magic.

Beside the Farseer walked in silence a figure, tall even for an Aeldari, and wrapped in a long black cloak. His movements were so deliberate and

controlled that he was only noticed at second glance in the darkness.

"Do you hear the sound of the sea?" asked Eathalvaén.

"It's just the gentle waves that lap our coasts", replied the wanderer. "The wild sea is elsewhere, and may its waves never break against our walls. I haven't gone this far in a long time."

"The Sea of Stars will not be your path and your destination this time, Illurayon."

"You know, Eathalvaén, whatever path you ask me to take, I will take it."

"This time I dare not ask you. Neither Firondhir. None of you. I will reveal to you what the runes have revealed to me, and then each one may decide for himself whether he is willing to go to that place where no being enters without having been dragged there by its inhabitants."

Illurayon was silent for a moment. This enigmatic way of speaking sometimes characterized Farseers, may it be that they themselves had not been able to elicit clearer concepts from the runes, or because they did not dare to say what they had seen.

But Illurayon had known the First Farseer of ZarAsuryan for half his life. Eathalvaén was used to speak frankly, more frankly than the Counsel of Seers sometimes liked. If he used such phrases, it was not because he himself feared what he did not want to call by its name. He feared for the one to whom he spoke. A slight feeling of trepidation crept over the Pathfinder, for he knew well how to interpret the dark speech.

"Eathalvaén, do not talk to me in riddles, especially since I have already guessed part of it anyway."

The Farseer smiled.

"Little escapes your gift, Illurayon. That is why it is even harder for me to send you out, because it is the main reason you are the only one who can make this mission a success."

"What I know and what I am capable of, you have taught me, ArdIdainn⁴. You send us to the realm of the Drukhari, to Commorragh."

The Farseer paused in his steps, turned to the Pathfinder, and looked at him. Illurayon recoiled at the sight in his green-grey eyes. Nine millennia,

⁴ ArdIdainn = Master Farseer (Personal salutation by a student)

which otherwise AthIdainn didn't look, lay on his face. Out of his gaze alone, without Eathalvaén having to say a word, Illurayon knew what was weighing on his mind:

"You will not return from there."

Illurayon's insides tightened. The life of a Pathfinder was never safe. He had chosen this the moment he had left the Path of the Aeldari. But death was a risk that could be avoided with skill and caution. And Firondhir and him, they've been very good at it – so far.

Eathalvaén raised his gaze to the stars. How many times in the past centuries had he delivered this message to the Young King. Rarely, compared to other Craftworlds, and yet far too often. But Illurayon was not an Exarch who lived to abandon himself in the service of the God of War. He had opted for the freedom of the Sea of Stars. Blessed with extraordinary psychic gifts, but only a few steps away from being lost in eternal damnation, Eathalvaén had taken care of him. He hadn't been able to keep him on the Path of the Seer either, but he had taught him to keep his gift under control. For what?

"You said you would not ask me," he heard the Pathfinder say. His voice, as if coming from the other side of the universe, was composed, but the fear in it could not be concealed. "But there must be a reason why of all you approached me."

Eathalvaén looked at him again.

"Without you, the journey will go wrong. No vision I ever have had has been clearer, no matter what strings of fate I have followed."

Illurayon took a deep breath.

"You do not want to ask me. But I do not have a choice, anyway."

"You can go away," the Farseer replied. "As the IstuKarun always do."

"And never return. Because there will be nothing to return to. To wander the stars for an eternity without a home to find peace in time. ArdIdainn, I know that nothing matters more to you than the continued existence of ZarAsuryan."

Eathalvaén looked to the side for a split second.

"You are wrong about one thing."

For a while the two walked on in silence, until finally the huge dome of the Hall of Seers, shimmering blue, rose up against the starry sky.

Before they entered, Eathalvaén stopped once more.

"You are afraid, Illurayon. Of the decision, and of the consequences it will entail, no matter what you decide to do."

"There is truly no way to turn fate on a different course?"

Eathalvaén laughed softly.

"I admit, even I am not omniscient and infallible. And if even the slightest hope appears, seize it, and hold fast to it. Maybe you will find a way I missed. But I beg you: When you pass through the gates of the Great Hall, have your decision made."

Firondhir looked up. A tall, narrow arch filled with white light opened up as the vine-decorated doors of the Great Hall slowly slid apart. Two dark figures emerged from the brightness.

Illurayon entered, followed by the First Farseer of ZarAsuryan. A strange feeling crept over

Firondhir at the sight of his friend, he couldn't put his finger on it. There was something oppressive about him, about his movements, even if his face was as calm and collected as ever. He hardly noticed how it was getting quieter around him every moment, and more and more pairs of eyes were directed intently at those who entered.

Silently, Illurayon scurried through the dim darkness to the circle and sat down beside Firondhir. He looked at him expectantly, but Illurayon motioned for him not to speak and pointed in the direction of the Farseer.

Eathalvaén strode across the hall, tall and erect. His slender left hand clasped his seer staff, resting, powerful in spite of his advanced age, as if he were holding a weapon rather than a support. He stopped in the golden beam of light in the middle of the hall. The midnight blue seer cloak fell in heavy, velvety folds from his shoulders to the mosaic floor. Silver runes gleamed on the morning sky-blue lapels. His silver-grey hair falling long and open down his back, his fine, even features full of calm seriousness, he let his gaze wander around the circle.

"IstuKarun," he began to speak. His bright, melodic voice, though not overly loud, filled the entire hall. "Arrived, returned home, followed the call from the farthest reaches of the sea of stars. It was not without reason that I let you come here."

He could feel the undivided attention of all his listeners: curiosity, adventure, excitement, even worry and uncertainty with some, all imaginable colours of feelings of expectation. But a dark speck of ominous certainty clouded the picture like the emptiness of a black star. He was silent for a moment, trying to shut his mind off from these sensations before he could continue.

"Many times, you have done your part to deter threats from ZarAsuryan. How many times have you deliberately put yourselves in the greatest danger to avert a dark fate of ZarAsuryan?"

Even if Eathalvaén could hardly see it in the semi-darkness of the hall, he felt that there was not a single face that was not of the deepest earnestness, not a soul that was not filled with the highest determination.

"With nothing less, I approach you at this hour. But I cannot and will not oblige any of you to this task."

Astonished silence ensued. Usually, the Farseers predetermined those who were sent out on a mission. Mysteriously, they knew who it took for the venture to succeed. Firondhir gave Illurayon a questioning look. But his friend had only lowered his eyes and was staring into the darkness.

Illurayon had already made up his mind when Eathalvaén had submitted the assignment to him. How could he have refused his help to his master, whatever the price it demanded of him? He didn't worry about himself. He was worried about his friend. Just as the AthIdainn had guided him on the Path of the Seers, so he had long ago saved the inexperienced Pathfinder from being completely lost in the Path of the Outcasts. Since then, they have been inseparable. Firondhir would not leave his side, no matter what happened to them. But Illurayon could not and would not allow him to share the fate that awaited him.

"Nothing less," the Farseer continued, "but much more. You have sought out the farthest places and darkest corners of the galaxy. Chem-Pan-Sey⁵ and Orkead⁶, illMureead⁷ and Necrons, you have defied

⁵ Humans

⁶ Orks

⁷ Tyranids

even the servants of the Great Enemy. But this time, the path leads to where the place and its inhabitants are equally dangerous in a variety of ways. It does not lead out into the vastness of the galaxy, but deep into the intricate labyrinths of SercamBelach⁸."

A murmur went through the ranks. The first of the Rangers and Pathfinders began to understand what the Farseer was talking about.

Eathalvaén nodded slowly, letting his gaze wander over the group once more.

"The Dark City shall be your destination. And we all know that those who live there, although of our people, could not be more alien to us. What they can do to a living being of any kind is inconceivable to us. And while I know that each of you would be willing to endure even the most severe trials, I also know that this is not the true danger of the Dark City. Worse than death is the eternal damnation that threatens our souls there, and to which the weakness of our nature is only too eager to surrender. We know, the one who gets lost there, will never find the way back."

⁸ The Webway

Throughout the hall, all speech had ceased. An oppressive silence filled the dome. The dim twilight contracted into black, heavy darkness.

"Therefore, I cannot and will not appoint any of you to undertake this journey. The runes have made the decision: five IstuKarun will go to the Dark City of their own free will. None anymore. None less."

There was a long pause, as if everyone expected one or the other to say something, to make a start.

"I am already destined to go," a voice from the dark was heard. One of the Pathfinders had risen to from his seat and was looking around.

Firondhir was startled and looked up at Illurayon. Slowly, his friend walked down the steps and came to stand beside the Farseers in the cone of light. He had his hood back. The shock of almost white hair, that ran lengthwise over the middle of the head in a traditional hairstyle and was tied in a high braid, shimmered in the white-gold light. His grave features seemed even sharper, his dark blue eyes even deeper than usual.

"Who is going with me?" he said to those present.

Before he knew what was happening to him, Firondhir had jumped to his feet. For a long

moment he stood on the steps, undecided what he had wanted to do. Then he realized that he had made a decision that something inside him could not take back. Not before the AthIdainn, not before the assembled IstuKarun, and not before Illurayon. He could not let his friend, to whom he owed his life, embark on this journey alone. Not after everything they had experienced and survived since then, after everything that connected them. With heavy steps he also descended and stood beside Illurayon.

Illurayon sighed barely audibly. As he had expected. The mere wish that Firondhir would let him go alone for this only time would have been illusory. He could clearly feel his friend's discomfort. And at the same time his determination and trust. For all the gloomy foreshadowing with which he had to embark on this journey, Firondhir's loyalty was a spark of confidence to him.

The beginning was made. A few moments later, the next Ranger rose, then another, and two more.

Somewhere in the back rows, a young man, almost more of a boy, with a narrow, pale face and almost transparent eyes, stood up and prepared to

descend the steps. The person sitting next to him grabbed him by his arm.

"Ydrir, what are you doing? This is not a task for us!" he whispered vigorously.

The addressee turned to him and looked at him as if he were looking through him.

"I have to go too," he said in a tone as if this were the most natural thing in the world.

"Don't talk nonsense. This is a task for Pathfinders who are far more experienced than we are."

"It is better you stay. But I am going," Ydrir replied, breaking free and descending the steps.

"Like I am leaving you alone," the other hissed, following him.

In the end, a good dozen men and women stood in the circle of the hall.

"Thank you all," Eathalvaén said to the group. "None of those who are not standing here need be ashamed. Only those who are willing to take a risk can hope for success. If you are not, you will serve the company all the more if you do not participate."

Then he turned to the volunteers.

"Five, no more, no less. Fate has already decided two of them." He looked at Illurayon and Firondhir, and Firondhir heard the words with unease. "The other three will now have to be decided by the lot of the runes."

The Farseer opened a white velvet pouch on his belt and reached into it. When he opened his hand, three delicately branched wraithbone runes rose from it like fireflies. Emitting golden-yellow light, they circled over the group, eventually stopping one by one, each hovering over one of the IstuKarun.

"The choice has been made."

"No!" interrupted one of the Rangers. Surprised, partly indignant murmurs spread through the hall.

Eathalvaén remained calm and looked at the speaker. It was a young man with hazel eyes and hair that he had tied up in a ponytail. Close beside him stood a second, somewhat thinner and more delicate in figure, but with the same features, the chin-long brown hair in a youthful hair style, with only the upper hair tied at the back of his head. One of the runes hovered above him.

"Say your name," the Farseer demanded.

"Ydril, AreIdainn⁹," replied the Ranger. And this is my brother, Ydril. He is going to make the journey, but not without me."

The other looked down in embarrassment.

"Ydril, your concern for your brother honours you. But the runes have made the choice," Eathalvaén replied.

"I withdraw voluntarily," another voice said.

The young Ranger flinched, as if he had feared that someone would utter those words. They came from a blond woman whose grey eyes spoke of the experience of many years on the Path of the Outcast. The rune above her slid onto her palm and followed the movement as she reached out her open hand to Ydril.

"Separating twins is a bad omen. I don't want my thirst for action to be the reason this mission fails."

Ydril accepted the rune.

Eathalvaén seemed far away for a few moments. Then he nodded.

⁹ Areldainn = Honoured Farseer (formal salutation)

"So be it. May your restraint not bring about what you seek to avoid."

"Thank you," Ydril said, turning to the woman.

The fifth IstuKarun, who had been crouching on the ground, now rose so quickly that the floating rune almost caught in his shoulder-length blond curls.

"Excellent. Then the fun can begin."