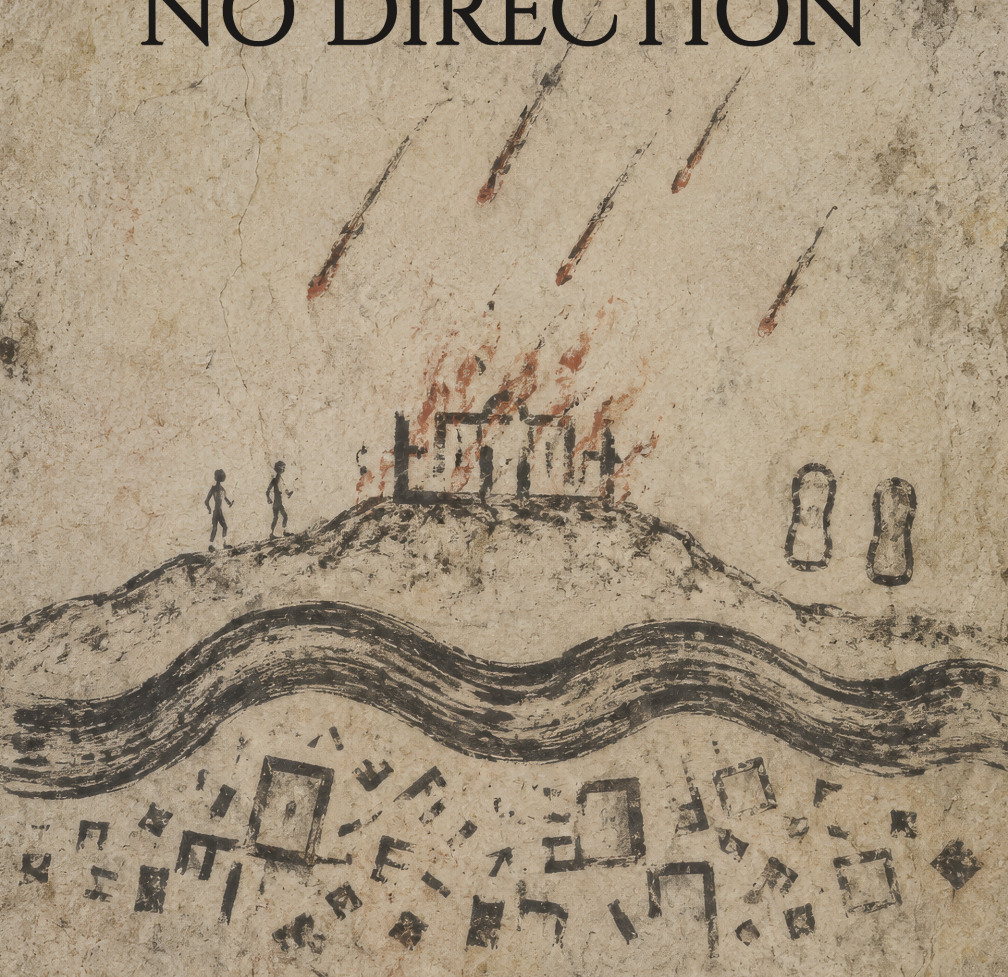


THE SEVERED WORLD: BOOK ONE

# NO DIRECTION



MAX GUERNSEY, III

# No Direction

The Severed World, Book One

Max Guernsey, III

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*This book is dedicated to my wife, Amy, and my children, Annabelle-Adora  
and Max, IV.*

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# Prologue



Blackened soil crunched under Arvand's boots. The acrid sting of smoke barely registered as his mind struggled to process what his eyes told it.

Where he stood had been the *hávarharg*, a garden temple reserved for only the holiest and most elite of his people. Its beauty could fill a starving soul. Its protected climate could soothe iced bones and boiling blood alike. Its isolation could engender the deepest meditation.

Yet, all that remained was a smoldering jumble of charred timber and melted stone. What remained of the garden was likely ash scattered as far as the horizon. Perhaps farther.

He was almost certain he had landed where the Gates of Heaven once stood. There was no evidence of the giant golden rings that told the story of the Houses of the Sun. There was no polished granite surface on which to kneel. There was no cube of solid diorite on which to place offerings. Yet it was the highest point in the Garden. That was where the Gates had been... and it still retained some of its feel: the faintest echo of what once was there.

He thought he was walking the Path of Roses, but he could not tell if what his boots struck were the melted remains of the once-gleaming white paving stones. They could just as easily have been vitrified soil.

Arvand reached the edge of the cliff and drew another shuddering

breath. For the first time, he allowed himself to see—truly see—the devastation below.

He did nothing, said nothing. He only stood there and stared.

After a time, a quiet crunch told him of soft-padded feet delicately picking their way through the wreckage behind him.

*One step, thought Arvand. I could take one more step.*

Varniva arrived at the edge of the cliff alongside him. She made no sound. Not a word, not even a simulated breath. She knew he wanted silence and dutifully gave it.

The valley below had been scoured bare. Huge scars told of where great halls, theaters, homes, and universities had been swept away. Massive erratic boulders and piles of mud told of the turbulent force that ripped through it all and carried its remnants to the sea.

“It’s gone,” breathed Arvand. The words came out as almost a whisper. “It’s... it’s all gone.”

Another moment passed in silence. He could not tell if she was really thinking that long—practically an eternity to her—or if she had decided he needed the pause before she responded.

“It is,” she said. “I’m sorry, my lord.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“I’m still getting reports, but it looks like the great northern ice broke when the low star struck it. A small ocean flowed across the land and ...” she gestured toward the valley without finishing her thought.

“‘A small ocean,’” Arvand repeated.

“It is consistent with my sisters’ final sendings: a wall of water almost as high as where we now stand, moving at incredible speed.”

If he didn’t know better, Arvand would have thought he heard pride in her voice. They did their duty to the very last in the face of a terrible fate. He did not know everything about a *varniva*. Perhaps she could be proud of them. He hoped she was.

“What...” The words died in his throat. He cleared his throat and started again. “What is left?”

Varniva pretended to take a deep breath.

Arvand had always thought that odd. Such great care was taken to make the *varniva* look not-quite-human—just on the feminine side of androgynous, limbs too slender, arms too long. Yet they had been built with artificial mannerisms that served no purpose other than to make them seem more human.

“The *andbrunn* is gone, obviously,” she gestured toward the valley. “The new one they were building was destroyed, too. According to my remaining sisters, none live with the skills to make another. They plan to convert what is left into a monument and a warning that will stand the—”

“Enough,” Arvand cut in quietly. “I know much was lost. I want to know what *remains*.”

“Not enough, my lord. Two portable power sources. Your Hunt-Temple to the south. Whatever else you have there. Scattered survivors and enclaves intent on living among the natives or surviving in fortresses.”

“So we still have some power...” Arvand began, but he trailed off in the middle because he could almost guess, word for word, what Varniva would say.

“Not enough to start over, Lord Arvand. You cannot rebuild a civilization with two small portable power sources and nobody who knows how to make more.”

Arvand forced his lungs to pull in a ragged breath. *One step is all it would take*, he thought.

Arvand straightened his back and shoulders as he set his jaw. His voice became cold, formal.

“Any of the priests?” he asked.

“No. As far as I can tell, you are all that is left of the priesthood.”

Another silence began to stretch. Only one priest left and him a warrior-priest of the lowest rank.

Not enough to rebuild. No one left who could. No one left to lead.

“What comes next, Varniva?”

“We never studied how weather changes. I would have to guess, my lord.”

“Guess,” he said more gruffly than she deserved but less so than he felt.

Incapable of taking offense at his tone, Varniva did as she was commanded.

“It will get cold. There will be rain. Black and possibly poisonous. It will be hard to grow things and hard to find animals in the hunt. The strain of survival will be great—possibly a breaking strain—for hundreds of years. Perhaps more than a thousand.”

Arvand sucked filthy air through his teeth then coughed. *Our destruction was not enough*, he thought. *Our punishment continues*.

Varniva’s manner changed. Arvand wasn’t really looking, but he could sense it out of the corner of his eye. Her hand twitched toward him and her normally impassive face—little more than a blur in his peripheral vision—wore a tinge of pain that he could almost feel.

“My lord,” she asked in what sounded like a timid voice.

Arvand turned to look at her and was taken aback. The emotion on her face was genuine. Genuine pain. Genuine loss. Genuine despair.

Why not? Arvand asked himself. *She’s lost just as much as I. Another lesson.*

“Yes?” he prodded.

“My lord, may I ask...” Varniva broke off. Then she stiffened and began again. “May I ask what you plan to do?”

Turning his gaze back down to the destroyed valley where his people so recently had thrived, he struggled for control. His hands clenched into fists at his sides until his knuckles whitened, then they unclenched, and he worked the muscles in his jaw, grinding his teeth until his hands began to form fists again.

Arvand focused on the river that ran through the valley.

It was a powerful river. Only a few stronger existed on this land mass, and none stronger emptied into the gentle ocean to the west. Yet, next to the destruction it had just wrought and at that great distance, it seemed a mere trickle.

From that vantage, the river seemed such a gentle thing: the water source that had birthed his people. Then, when the world caught fire, it had risen up and swept them into the sea like a pile of dried leaves.

“First, I will take you to the Hunt-Temple. What you carry in your head is too valuable to risk losing. I will travel to those who still live and render aid as I can. Perhaps I can keep some of their machines powered. For a time.”

“And then?” Varniva asked quietly.

“And then, Varniva, I will go to the Hunt-Temple, where I will make it my home and watch the world die.”



# Chapter 1. A Morning Interrupted



Leontios stared at the rounded glass, but he didn't really see it. His unfocused gaze drifted across the workbench as he gently rolled his left thumb over a small throwing bone.

Shaking his head, his eyes snapped back into focus, and he leaned closer to the careful arrangement of lenses to peer at the specimen once more.

Idly rolling the knucklebone in the palm of his hand, he considered what he saw inside the small containment box he had constructed.

It looked like a bee. In some ways, it acted like one. But he was absolutely certain it was not.

For one thing, it never ate or drank. In fact, it had shown no interest in consumption or location of any resource whatsoever.

The old Maker didn't know much about bees, but that didn't seem right to him. *Everything must eat*, he thought. *Surely everything must eat.*

Another oddity was the bee's longevity. It had been in his possession for over a year. Leontios, admitting to himself that he was no expert, didn't think that bees were supposed to live that long.

The bee behaved strangely in other ways. Months prior, Leontios had awakened with the feeling of being watched. A snap of his finger brought light to the room and, while he did not see anything, he thought he heard a

faint buzz. When he checked the containment box in the morning, the bee was still there.

But Leontios had his suspicions.

The bee was quite biddable, allowing him to inspect it or even gently move it with reaching and grasping instruments. Turning the bee over revealed bizarre markings shaped like angular zeroes with dots and chevrons inside. Most peculiar and oddly asymmetric on an animal that otherwise was perfectly symmetrical.

Then there was the fact that he could *feel* it was not a bee. It was like some of his own creations... and yet, somehow, not. Impossible as the old Maker knew it to be, it was both constructed *and* alive. It was at once mechanical, living, natural, and spiritual in a way that put unsettling tension between Leontios's shoulder blades.

None of that compared to the strongest piece of evidence, though: the way the bee interacted with him.

He peered through the magnifiers again and stared at it. The bee calmly stared back. When Leontios tossed the knucklebone onto the table next to the bee's enclosure and picked it back up without checking the lie, the bee was undisturbed.

Leontios was studying the bee and the bee seemed to know that. It seemed a willing participant.

But the bee also studied him. Clearly and unambiguously.

When he staggered down into his workshop in the morning, sipping his morning tea, the bee was staring directly at him. When he studied the bee, it watched what he was doing... seeming to take note of how he was doing it.

And when he worked on another project somewhere else in his workshop?

That, it watched with an intense fascination he could feel even with his back turned.

"What are you?" Leontios whispered, his deep voice cracking with the last phlegm of morning.

The bee shifted its stance, carefully taking a step to its right with one of its front legs to get a different view of Leontios, who shifted back into an upright (if a little slouched) position on the hard stool at his workbench.

*Who could possibly make something like this? He mused for, perhaps, the hundredth time. Who, and why? What is its function?*

The sound of a gong pulled him from his rumination. It was deep and resonant. And its meaning was clear: it was two octaves deeper than it would have been if an ordinary caller had sounded it.

Almost without thought, Leontios scanned the workshop. Four suits of armor stood at the great doors in the back that were used for bringing large pieces of machinery in and out, two more at the stairs that led to the upper floor of his estate house, and another two at the door that led to the receiving area. Their shields were only lightly decorated but appeared to be in good repair. Their swords were large but could still be easily handled by someone of appropriate skill and strength.

*All is in order*, he thought.

Slowly, he rose from his workbench and walked toward a grid of angled mirrors near the front of the shop.

The gong sounded again, but he refused to quicken his step. At best, this was rudeness, showing up at his lair without sending an emissary first.

*At worst*, Leontios thought before he arrested that line of thinking.

He had done nothing wrong, so there was no reason for him to have run afoul of the Council. That meant that someone who came to do him harm would not have their support. That, in turn, meant that Leontios could likely handle whatever trouble they had brought.

When he arrived at the front of the workshop, he leaned close to one of the small, tilted mirrors. It was aligned with a series of peer mirrors so as to give him a clear view of who was at his front door, calling on him.

He saw a tall man with dark brown hair and a close-cut beard that covered his flat cheeks and square jaw. He wore high boots of black leather that were turned down just below his calves. His pants were pale brown and of a sturdy-looking material. His shirt was a faint tan and also looked heavier than ordinarily made sense in the summertime.

The man's brown eyes were neither friendly nor filled with danger. The muscles of his jaw were firm but not clenched tightly. His eyes were focused but not piercing or angry. His stance was stiff and formal. He did not look like he was there to cause trouble.

Next to the unnamed man was a woman. She wore a muted blue dress cut for riding. She was not exactly beautiful, but she was pleasant to look at. Golden hair framed an oval-shaped face that held quick, careful blue eyes. Her dress was appropriately modest, but it could not entirely hide the curves of her chest and hips.

She looked almost afraid, the way her eyes kept darting about, seeming to watch for danger.

She *certainly* did not look like she wanted to start any trouble.

The pair of them looked dusty and travel-worn.

Leontios transferred the knucklebone to his right hand and began slowly turning it over with his fingers. He twisted his mouth in mild distaste as he checked the other mirrors.

Nothing. It was just the two of them. He could certainly provide some hospitality to a pair of travelers on a long journey.

And if they turned out to be renegades, he could handle them both. Certainly, in his own lair he could do that.

He spoke into a tube. "You may enter," he said in Latin. The man barely reacted, but the woman jumped and placed her hand on the man's shoulder. "I'll be there to receive you shortly."

With a thought, the old Maker set the double doors at the entryway upon the task of opening themselves and began to walk to the entry hall.

\* \* \*

Eirleida gave another little jump as the pair of oversized wooden doors creaked and began to open. She saw and heard nothing behind the square, iron-banded barriers as they slowly swung inward.

Either the owner of this estate had unseen servants, or the doors were opening on their own.

She, of course, knew what a Maker could do—she had seen their wonders countless times in her long years—but that didn't stop her from being startled upon witnessing something she didn't expect.

And she most certainly had not expected to enter the lair of a reclusive and possibly paranoid Maker on that day.

Aurelian gave no indication that he was surprised or frightened. He simply lifted his chin and strode into the foyer.

It was emblematic of their entire relationship so far. He made a decision without so much as informing her and then left her with two choices she did not care for, with the one he wanted of her being the less objectionable.

Timidly, she followed after the Hunter.

The small foyer—perhaps too small to be called a “foyer”—was decorated quite severely. Large suits of armor, seemingly for men seven feet tall, lined the walls with gleaming steel and white-painted shields.

From the ceiling hung a three-ringed chandelier, with 30 candles on the lowest ring, 20 on the middle, and 10 on the top. Little copper statues of sparrows seemed to perch all over the chandelier.

One of the copper sparrows turned its head to look at her and she yelped.

Aurelian silently turned his head to look at her, his expression completely unreadable. Then he turned his attention back to the room, carefully studying the suits of armor ringing the room.

A man who appeared to be in his early 30s appeared from a side door. His features were rounded and softened. He was not fat or weak-looking, but he did not appear to lead a life fraught with the usual difficulties.

“Shall we start with introductions?” he asked.

The Hunter nodded once stiffly before answering. “I am Aurelian of Arles, a Hunter,” he said while placing his hand on his own chest. Then he turned to gesture to Eirleida and added, “This is Eirleida, a Seeker.”

The man's eyes narrowed, and he took a half step back toward the door.

“A Hunter... and a Seeker, you say. And which of you found me?”

Aurelian chuckled. “There is no need for any of this,” he said as he gestured toward one of the suits of armor. “It was she who found you, not I, Leontios.”

There was a long pause as the man—Leontios, apparently—peered at them from the brink of the smallish door.

“Very well. I suppose you would like hospitality?”

“We’ve no time for that,” said Aurelian. “Is there somewhere we can talk at our ease?”

Another short pause and then Leontios nodded curtly. “Follow me.”

The man disappeared through the door from which he had arrived. Eirleida had to scurry to catch up to the man, but Aurelian’s long stride allowed him to manage while seeming at his ease.

In silence, they walked through a sitting room with a large fireplace and two comfortable-looking stuffed chairs facing it. This room had only two suits of armor. In the next room, there was a large, circular table with several heavy oak chairs arranged around it. Leontios took them around the table and into a small, windowless room with a small fireplace and four stuffed chairs covered in maroon fabric all arranged to face the center of the room.

The Maker gestured vaguely toward one of the chairs and waited for Aurelian and Eirleida to choose a seat before taking one of his own.

“Maker,” Aurelian started, but Leontios cut him off with a gesture.

“You will, of course, want at least *some* hospitality,” he said. A muscle in Aurelian’s cheek twitched as the two locked eyes. Without breaking the gaze, the Maker added, “Sometimes a step on the quickest journey is a moment’s pause for refreshment.”

A thumping sound came outside the doorway, tearing Aurelian’s eyes away from the contest.

Sitting back, apparently relaxing, Leontios asked “Tea?” as something that looked like a small, low table carved out of a stump thumped its way in on three impossibly flexible wooden legs.

Slowly, it lumbered to the center of the room and came to rest. Only once it stopped moving did Eirleida notice what it carried on top of it: a

clear glass pitcher, beaded with condensation, and three small cups. Her teeth clicked as she snapped her mouth shut while carefully removing her hands from where they overlapped on her breast. Carefully, she smoothed her skirts in an effort to regain her composure.

“Ice-cold tea on a hot day is the best thing for taking an edge off a grueling journey.”

\* \* \*

Aurelian barely spared a glance for the fluttery woman sitting next to him. He had grown accustomed to her utter lack of poise. He only allowed himself the briefest silent recrimination:

*She's not made for this*, he thought and shifted his attention back to more important things.

The Maker wanted to drink tea and wanted to flaunt that he could provide tea at near-freezing temperatures on such a hot day. Very well. Aurelian could play along when he had need.

He reached out and carefully grasped a fragile cup with his left hand while taking the pitcher in his right. He filled the cup halfway and offered it to Eirleida, who accepted it as gracefully as she could manage. Why was she constantly flustered?

*No matter*, he thought as he filled a cup for himself. *At least, it is of no importance now.*

He offered to pour for Leontios, who declined with the slight shake of his head. After the pitcher was placed back on the carved, animated table, it lifted itself up to pour a third cup.

As one of the spoons took flight to collect sugar for the third cup of tea, Leontios said, “There really is no need to do the small things, here in my home. They tend to take care of themselves.”

Whether it was meant as an opening or not, Aurelian took it for one.

“Then let us move on to the matter at hand. Leontios, we appreciate your offer of hospitality, but we cannot accept. Our mission is too urgent, and we must settle matters here, then be on our way as soon as possible.”

The softer man's eyebrows shot up with the words "settle matters," but he must have dismissed any concerns that it meant some kind of ill will. "We shall see how long it takes to...settle...matters here," was all he said.

"Leontios, you are known to the Council as a great Maker. Perhaps the greatest living."

"Certainly—" Eirleida seemed to halt in the middle of her thought and then start over. "Certainly the greatest I've ever heard of."

"Thank you," the man said with a smile. "Compliments are always welcome."

Aurelian pressed on. "It has gone too long that you have held no rank underneath the Council's authority. I am here to make an offer. One extended on their behalf."

Leontios's smile took on an extremely dry quality. "An 'offer'. I've paid attention to the Council since its founding—it was formed shortly after I myself Ascended, you know—and in all that time, I've never heard of it making gifts...or 'offers'."

Aurelian nodded impatiently. "Yes, yes. Very astute. Something will not be given for nothing. The Council wants..." He let the words die on his tongue and paused for a moment. The man across from him did not seem to care what the Council wanted. He decided to amend his approach ever so slightly, continuing with "and what I would like is for you to join us on our quest."

"It has been a long time since I have left these estates," said Leontios. "I do not care for journeys, by and large, but I can make an exception for the right reasons."

"If you join, you will immediately be given the title of lesser regent. You will be able to draw together modest parties, set quests, and give reasonable orders to the common Ascended in the name of the Council." Aurelian wondered at the other man's unreadable look. "When we succeed, you will be promoted to minor regent—my current rank—as will I be promoted to major regent."

Silence settled into the room. Eirleida fidgeted with her dress again, plucking at nonexistent lint and smoothing imagined wrinkles.

Finally, the Maker asked, “That’s what you’ve come to propose? I join you and I get rank?”

Aurelian squinted in confusion. What else was there to propose? Leontios provided his skills to the party. The Council rewarded him with rank.

You motivate people by offering them what they don’t already have. What else could he offer a man like Leontios but rank? He almost said as much and then thought better of it.

Eirleida stepped into the silence, with an uncharacteristically steady voice for a situation of such tension and uncertainty.

“What else would you like to know?” she asked, prompting a quick, silent reassessment of her on Aurelian’s part.

It was Leontios’s turn to look surprised. “I’d like to know the mission you’re on, for one. Why it’s so important, for another. Perhaps why an organization that has largely ignored me for more than a millennium is interested in giving me so lofty a title in exchange for my participation.”

Slowly, Aurelian nodded. Leontios was not interested in rewards. He was interested in what made their quest important. He was a man of honor, then. That was something the Hunter could respect.

“We hunt a man,” he said. “He himself is on a mission. The Council has not told us what it is—I do not know if even they know—but they consider it a great threat to the world.”

Leontios arched an eyebrow. “To the world?” he asked. The implication was clear. He did not think the Council was worried so much about the fate of the world as about their own necks. On the darkest, most lonely nights, Aurelian had wondered about the same possibility.

Yet it was a thing not said.

Aurelian chose his next words very carefully. “The civilized world’s stability depends on the rule of the Council.”

Leontios took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. “True,” he said. He reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a small bone. Absently, he began turning it over in his hands, staring at nothing. “Too true.”

Shaking his head, his eyes snapped back into focus.

“What could a Hunter of such power and a Seeker of not-insignificant strength want with me?”

Aurelian glanced at Eirleida, who appeared to be studying the inside of her teacup.

“We have had great difficulty capturing him,” he said. “He is always ahead of us. Always. He turns when we think he will maintain his course. He maintains when it seems he should turn. He is not where our senses tell us he should be.” That particular admission was the hardest for Aurelian. “We need to turn the tables. Someone like you,”—he gestured toward the Maker—“must have devices and tools we can use to get ahead of him.”

After a heartbeat’s pause, Eirleida added, “And I’m afraid if it comes to a fight, I’ll be worse than useless. Aurelian should have someone who can help in that department.”

“I’m no Fighter myself,” Leontios pushed through a guffaw. “I can’t help you there.”

Aurelian shook his head. “I don’t believe you. For all your show of fear, it was clear you had something in your lair that can and will protect you in the event of such a conflict. Perhaps you cannot personally Fight, but I suspect at least some of your machines can.”

The other man screwed his face up into a scowl as he resumed the slow twirl of that little bone. “Perhaps,” he said. “I may have some things that can help. But I cannot leave on the instant. I must have time to prepare the estate.”

Aurelian asked, “How long?” at the same time Eirleida asked if that meant Leontios would join them.

“Yes,” said Leontios, rising. “I will set the estate in order.” His eyes narrowed and briefly darted toward the door. “And prepare for our journey, then get a good night’s rest. We can depart tomorrow morning.”

Aurelian sprang to his feet as he shouted, “The morning? You would widen his lead by an entire day?”

Leontios lifted a placating hand in the Hunter’s direction. “A night of refreshment will quicken your pace. I promise. Whatever we lose by leaving in the morning, we’ll catch up and then some.”

Aurelian's chest felt tight. He had to keep Hunting, but he could not without the other man's help. There was no good solution. He worked to force the rage back down.

"Furthermore," the Maker said calmly, "you want me for my things, which I must select and pack. I cannot just walk out of here with my knucklebone and my wits and be of any use to you."

Slowly, Aurelian worked himself back into control. *Devices to see*, he thought. *Perhaps weapons. Maybe even mechanical Fighting machines.* He started to calm himself. *This is not a delay. This is Hunting.*

One of the suits of armor walked into the room, clanging as it stepped, and Leontios gestured toward it.

"This will take you to your rooms. Rest and we will leave early in the morning."

*This is Hunting*, thought Aurelian. *This is what I need.*



## Chapter 2. Departure and Pursuit

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