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# PATH OF THE OUTCAST Gav Thorpe

Aradryan has chosen to leave his sheltered life on Craftworld Alaitoc and walk the Path of the Outcast, seeking the myriad pleasures and threats the wider galaxy has to offer. Still unfulfilled as a ranger, he is lured into the life of a star pirate, bringing him into conflict with the Imperium of Man. A chain of events is set in motion that could have catastrophic consequences for Alaitoc, forcing Aradryan to take drastic action if his old home is to survive.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe has been rampaging across the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 for many years as both an author and games developer. He hails from the den of scurvy outlaws called Nottingham and makes regular sorties to unleash bloodshed and mayhem. He shares his hideout with Dennis, a mechanical hamster sworn to enslave mankind. Gav's previous novels include fanfavourite *Angels of Darkness*, the Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*, and the Eldar Path series amongst many others.

*Path of the Outcast* can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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Death and rebirth played out across the heavens, every star a furnace of creation and an inferno of destruction. They stretched out in every direction, spiralling around the galactic core, seemingly timeless yet ultimately as mortal as any creature. Birth and demise, all of it cycling again and again, giving rise to life and civilisations, and destroying them as quickly as they appeared. Stability was an illusion. There was no stasis, just an everlasting dance of elements that would outlast any mind capable of comprehending it.

Opening his eyes, Aradryan surfaced slowly from the dream, feeling the weight of air upon him, the press of darkness on flesh as he lay still on the thin mattress of his bed, the silence suffusing every fibre of his being. It was utterly black in his chambers; not the least glimmer of light existed to intrude upon his thoughts.

The cosmic nature of the dream continued to spiral slowly in his thoughts as unconsciousness gave way to waking. Responding to his state, Aradryan's chambers suffused him with the barest glow of light, slowly brightening to bring him out of his mental submersion. Limbs tingling, the dreamer twitched his fingers and wriggled his toes, the first of several exercises that would enable him to lock his thoughts back to his physical body.

Aradryan sat up, his breathing becoming faster and shallower, his body reacting to the sudden influx of soft stimuli. Half sleeping, latched on to the core essence of the dream, Aradryan stood up slowly. He clothed himself without conscious effort, drawing on a long robe of dark blues and purples. Slipping his slender feet into a pair of knee-high boots, he left the dreaming room and went into the main chamber. Here the light was brighter still, though a fraction of its normal intensity, causing Aradryan to squint for a few moments while his eyes adjusted.

The after-images of the dream lingered still and he felt small and unimportant. The dream had shown him the vastness of the universe, and against that he was nothing, a tiny conglomeration of cells and thoughts that would be extinguished.

The chambers felt too constricting, so Aradryan left quickly, his heart yearning for something that would recapture the soaring majesty of the galaxy. Without conscious regard, he made his way to a skyrunner. Placing his hand upon the activation jewel, he let his desire pass into the machine's matrix, which in turn drew power from the infinity circuit: the psychic network of Alaitoc Craftworld.

The skyrunner interpreted his will as best it could, rising swiftly from the balcony-like docking bay to skim across the white grass fields that covered the floor of the Dome of Swift Longings. Realising that the skyrunner was taking him towards the dock towers on the craftworld rim, Aradryan chuckled to himself. The semi-sentient craft had felt his yearning for the wide galaxy and was taking him to the berths of the starships.

Aradryan's quiet laughter stilled. Perhaps the skyrunner was more intelligent than he was. He had experienced many dreams, but none had left an impression as strong as the one he had just woken from. Part of him was glad for that fact. The Path of Dreaming existed to tap into the power of the unconscious and subconscious, bringing forth fears and desires that it was impossible to recognise while awake. For nearly two passes he had trodden the Path of the Dreamer, alongside his friend Korlandril, and they had shared many special moments of pleasure and regret, their dream-bonds tighter than any ordinary friendship. Was this dream the Moment of Realisation? Had the dizzying vistas of the galaxy been the culmination of his searching for purpose?

Such thoughts, only partially constructed in his semi-fugue state, occupied Aradryan until the sky-runner arrived at its destination, furling its guiding sail to slip into a mooring at the Tower of Winding Destiny. Aradryan stepped from the craft and followed the passageway that led up

to the heights of the docking spire. The few eldar that he encountered immediately recognised the half-alert state of a Dreamer and stepped nimbly out of his path, allowing him to follow his whims unimpeded, until they brought Aradryan to a broad expanse alongside one of the main quays.

It was hard to disassociate from the dream-images, but Aradryan was conscious of there being many other eldar around him. There was a ship docked at the quayside. It was massive, its hull towering above them, its stellar sail even higher still, stretching towards the glimmering force dome that held the ravening vacuum of space at bay.

Looking up, Aradryan saw the stars, scattered across the outer sky like diamonds on black velvet, enticing and bewitching.

Someone bumped into him, shaking him from the last vestiges of the dream's grip. A little disconcerted, Aradryan looked around and found himself in a large crowd thronging the dock-side. More eldar were coming down the ramps that led from the open gateways of the starship.

Aradryan was aware of a solemn mood; he sensed it even before he heard the first sobs and saw the glistening tears in the eyes of those around him. He felt an emptiness, and when he looked again at the eldar disembarking from the ship he realised why.

The first to alight were Aspect Warriors. A wave of grim anger and deep hatred washed over Aradryan as Khaine's anointed killers strode down from the gangways, still armed and armoured. Striking Scorpions in heavily plated armour of greens and yellows bore three of their number amongst them, the corpses carried on floating biers, guided by the hands of the living. Dark Reapers in black and red followed, also accompanying their dead. And then came the Dire Avengers, so bright in their armour of blue, white and gold, yet so sinister with their faceless masks.

Aradryan wanted to back away, but there was someone behind him. The Aspect Warriors were apparitions of death to his half-dreaming mind, each an incarnation of the part of Khaine they represented. Howling Banshees filled his thoughts with screaming images of flashing death; Fire Dragons set his mind ablaze with an inferno of destruction.

It was almost too much to bear in his fragile state, but Aradryan stayed, morbid curiosity getting the better of him. From images glanced in the infinity circuit and snatches of conversation, he saw a blue sun and a yellow sun, gleaming down on a still lake. A white building, human-made, was wreathed in death and fire. The brightly-armoured Aspect Warriors stormed through doors and windows, cutting down the humans within without mercy.

After the Aspect Warriors, others came from the ship: Guardians and seers. These were not the grim-faced fighters that had come before, and it was their grief that suffused the crowd around him. The feeling of lament grew stronger and stronger as more of the dead and wounded were carried down to the dockside, each a life lost or damaged.

Aradryan stared at the blood-flecked blue and yellow armour of a Guardian. He could not say whether the blood was eldar or from their foes, but each glistening droplet, every ruddy stain, held within it some hidden secret of mortality.

The dream and the current surroundings melded in Aradryan's thoughts, forming a whole. Even the stars die, he thought.

Yet the eldar who had fallen were not yet wholly dead. Upon the chest of each glowed a spirit stone, containing the essence of each slain warrior. From here the stones would be taken into the depths of Alaitoc and placed upon the nodes of the infinity circuit. The spirits would flow free from the stones and mingle with the psychic energy of generations who had come before, becoming both the lifeblood and the nervous system of the craftworld.

The thought suddenly terrified Aradryan. To be trapped on Alaitoc for eternity, bodiless and voiceless, seemed to his dreaming mind a fate worse than death.

He stopped short, for there truly was a fate worse than death that awaited all eldar: She Who Thirsts. The creation of the eldar's depraved past hungered after their spirits, and would devour them all if given the chance. The spirit stones, the sanctuary of the infinity circuit, were the only defence against such a nightmare; the only bastion secure against an everlasting torment of spirit

that terrified every eldar.

Yet even that fear could not fully cut through the sense of entrapment that had seized Aradryan. With glassy eyes he stared at the corpses as they floated past, body after body after body. Questions crammed into his thoughts, of who the slain had been and how they had died. Had there been pain? Had their lives been happy and complete, or had death taken them before their ambitions had been fulfilled, their desires sated? Would they linger ever after in the infinity circuit regretting the missed opportunities, now denied to them as much as the utter silence of true death?

'Save me...' Aradryan whispered, falling to his knees. Alaitoc was a prison, keeping him from a life amongst the stars. Worse than that, he realised. The craftworld was a place of the dead, fuelled by the spirits of the deceased, consuming their life force with a hunger every bit as ravenous as the Great Enemy's.

Aradryan surged to his feet and grabbed the nearest person, a maiden a little younger then himself with auburn hair that fell to her knees, and eyes of violet. She wore the robes of a healer, the white of death marked by handprints of dried blood.

'They cannot stay here!' snapped Aradryan. 'There is no more room. The dead, they are so many, we cannot have any more.'

'You are dream-touched,' said the healer, gently removing Aradryan's grasp. 'Leave me be.'

Aradryan staggered away, but wherever he looked there were more dead eldar. Each was a meaningless mote snuffed out of existence, and the thought threatened to tip him from his teetering state into the darkest abyss of madness.

A hand fell upon his shoulder, turning him. Aradryan looked into a pair of wise grey eyes and heard a soft voice.

'What is wrong?' said the other eldar, his face full of concern.

'I do not want to die here,' Aradryan replied simply. 'The stars call to me, and I do not want to die before I have seen them.'

'Then do not stay.' The eldar smiled and stroked his hand down Aradryan's arm, bringing a sense of stability and calm. 'This ship, she is called *Lacontiran*. She will leave again in four cycles' time, why not come aboard with me?'

'Come aboard?' Aradryan turned to look at the starship. Amongst all the blood and ugliness she was beautiful; sleek and purposeful.

'I am Nairnith, a steersman,' said the other eldar. 'It seems that you have dreamed enough. If you wish to see the stars, I will take you to them.'

'Yes, to see the stars,' said Aradryan, his panic fading into memory.