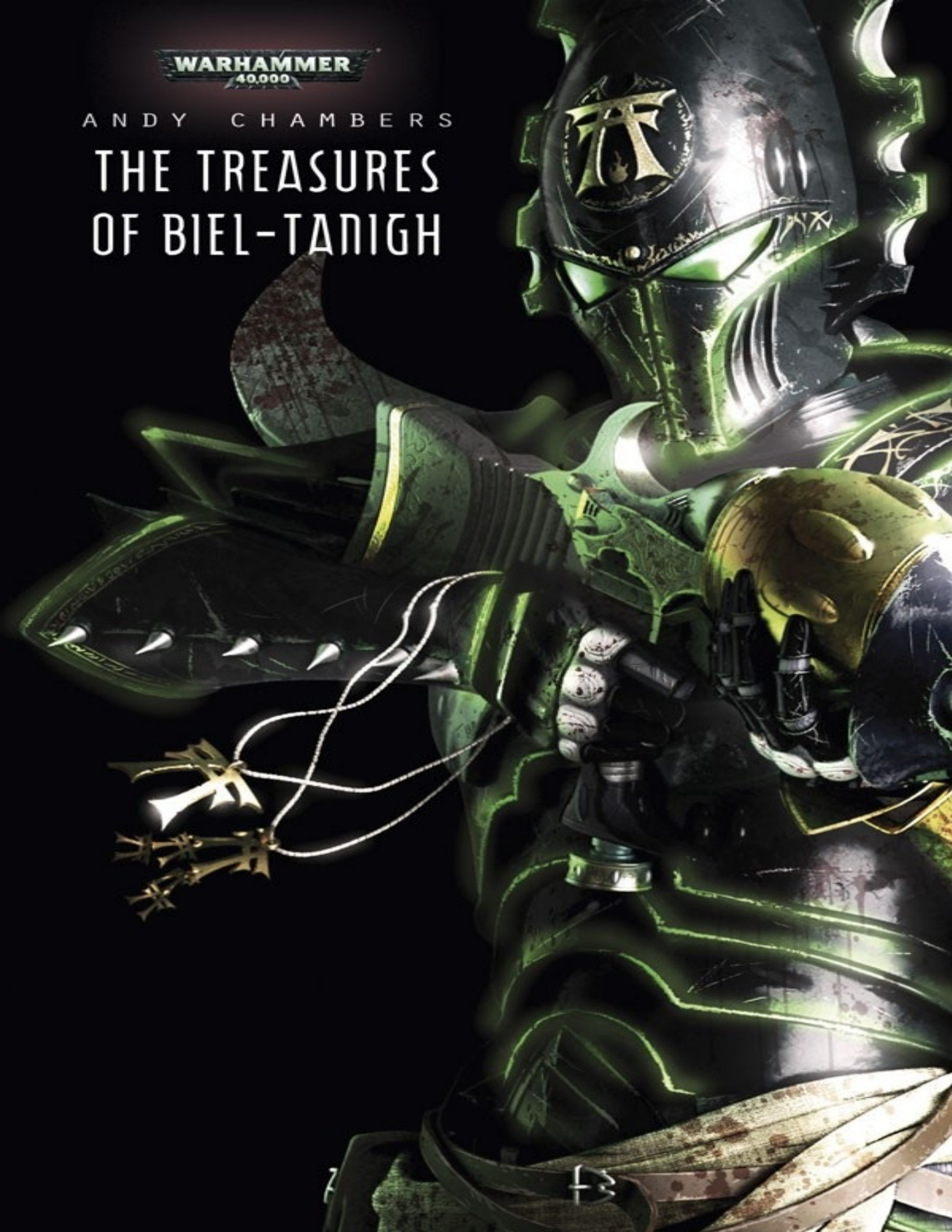


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ANDY CHAMBERS

# THE TREASURES OF BIEL-TANIGH



A WARHAMMER SHORT STORY

# THE TREASURES OF BIEL- TANIGH

**Andy Chambers**

ATOP THE WHITE Flames fortress in High Commorragh lay the pleasure gardens of Archon Yllithian. There, dense banks of dream poppy and lotus blooms breathed a heady musk into the cold air of the corespur. Glittering pathways of crushed sapphires led between ever-changing fractal sculptures starkly gleaming beneath the wan, poisonous light of the Ilmaea, the captive suns above. Ordinarily the pleasure gardens were a place of quiet introspection and less visceral pleasures, but now they were a scene of carnage, plagued by howling destroyers intent on further mayhem.

Archon Yllithian himself stood on a terrace safely above the action, coolly watching as two packs of reavers swooped along the pathways and around the sculptures like brightly patterned, blade-limbed hornets. With both sides mounted on jetbikes, the action was fast and furious, blurs of colour briefly intermingling and bursting into fountains of crimson. The two packs were both pledged to him, but their rivalry had grown to the point of inconvenience of late. Yllithian's judgement had been simple: they would resolve their differences in combat until he was satisfied that their bravado had been suitably quelled. There was no sign of this happening so far. The two packs broke apart and swept together again with mercurial swiftness.

Two figures joined Yllithian on the terrace. A male and female, as alike as brother and sister, dressed in simple, formfitting armour that was the colour of smoke beneath cloaks and hoods of an umbral weave that drank light and voided shadow. They bore the weapons of assassins - long nosed pistols, monofilament garrottes and knives of many kinds - yet Yllithian's silent incubi bodyguards paid them no heed. These were Yllithian's creatures, two beings grown from a single cell by the haemonculus Syiin, a pair-bond bred for obedience and loyalty.

Yllithian winced theatrically as a head-on collision occurred in the gardens below, the belch of flames lighting his face momentarily with a diabolic cast. Turning his back on the ongoing melee in the pleasure garden he addressed the two newcomers.

'Vyriadh and Xyryl, my two light-fingered hands,' he said. 'You've brought me many gifts before now, lives and baubles plucked from the spires of Commorragh. Are you ready to go further?'

'Always, my Archon,' Xyril said softly.

'We live to serve,' affirmed Vyriadh.

Silence lay between them for a moment, broken only by the howl and scream of jetbikes in the gardens beyond.

'There is a place,' Yllithian said, 'beyond the Thorn Gate, where the Livisia meets the Rhozokian Fields, where there is a hidden portal. It is known to only the most ancient inhabitants of Commorragh, and long forgotten by most. This portal leads to Biel-Tanigh, a sub-realm resting like a pearl between the folds of warp and the material universe.

'Now, down the long ages Biel-Tanigh has served as a secret repository for all manner of artefacts from before the Fall. The guardians of that place are friends to no one, but they protect certain items that Asdrubael Vect has placed there to put them out of reach of his rivals. It is one of these items that you will retrieve for me.'

'How does the item appear?' asked Xyril.

'An opal, no greater than the size of a clenched fist. It may show motes of light moving within it with apparent purpose; pay these no heed.'

'How is it guarded?' Asked Vyriadh.

'The dwellers of Biel-Tanigh set traps and patrols to catch interlopers. They are a benighted offshoot of our species that abandoned the true ways of the eldar long ago. They pursue an esotericism it would be too tiresome to describe and their outlook is so extreme that they have alienated their fellows and separated their sub-realm from the greater whole. Kill any you find, but be warned that they are said to be surpassingly puissant.'

Another sudden impact in the gardens hurled the flaming carcass of a jetbike high into the air. It described an elegant arc with its trail of smoke and flames as it curved upward and then down towards the terrace where Yllithian stood motionless.

'My Archon...' Xyril said, watching the tumbling wreckage fall towards them.

'Fear not, child, all eventualities have been accounted for,' Yllithian said. A bolt of vivid energy leapt from a nearby tower to touch the tumbling wreck, and it vaporised instantly with a retina-burning flash of dark energy. Under cover of the sensor-blinding aftermath, Yllithian spoke several more terse instructions to his agents before he turned back to watch the ongoing combat. He waved the pair away with a final warning. 'And don't return until you've got what I want.'

VYRIADH AND XYRIL passed along their ways to the place their Archon had described to them. They were more alike than twins, more than brother and sister, bred and raised together, trained to work as a team for one purpose. The eldar of Commorragh, the true eldar as they would have it said, suppressed their own, naturally strong, psychic powers. They had to do so because they lived on the edge of precipice, with the eternal hunger of She Who Thirsts always at their back. It was death, and more than death, for them to flagrantly use mind powers like telepathy which otherwise would be as natural as breathing.

Not so for bonded pairs like Xyril and Vyriadh. Their lifelong bond cultivated an empathic link between that enabled them to function with perfect synchronicity, each aware of the other's thoughts and actions even as they formed them. Their souls were so enmeshed that such subtle dalliances between them passed below the attention of most daemonic entities.

Pair-bonding was a rarity in Commorragh, and not without its perils. Each half of the whole knew the other could die at any moment and the fear of separation could come to overshadow their lives. Suicide pacts between pair-bonds were common, and murder-suicides not unknown. Still, pair-bonds could be trained in psychometry, the art of tracing a psychically charged object by its unique "scent", making them excellent hunters, assassins and thieves.

Like twinned shadows, they descended from the spires to the coespur, and thence to the sprawling, anarchic districts of low Commorragh. Bloodshed and murder were daily occurrences in the coespur but it still was a place of calm in comparison to low Commorragh. Here, slaves and flesh-born rubbed shoulders in pursuit of illicit pleasures. Lime-lit signs and cages of light proclaimed paths to oblivion or sensory overload powerful enough to obliterate the miseries of wicked, eternal Commorragh... at least for a little while.

The pair-bonded twins slunk past all such temptations without a backward glance. Their only pleasure lay in fulfilling the wishes of their master. They skirted around street brawls and skirmishes, weaving through back alleys and across rooftops as they slipped through the shadows towards their goal. They passed the great barbed edifice of the Thorn Gate unseen by its silent watchers and came at last to the stagnant flow known as the Livisia.

The Livisia twisted through an acid-cut channel crusted with millennia of filth, a slow-moving ribbon of emerald ooze half-choked with crumbling bones and other less identifiable detritus. Xyril and Vyriadh clambered along its banks like dark-limbed spiders and so passed beneath slave tenements and flesh farms on their way to the Rhozokian fields.

We're so close! Vyriadh's mind sang.

Only to the portal, then we must be extra careful, Xyril's mind cautioned.

Extra careful then, careful now, Vyriadh's mind echoed.

They climbed up onto the Rhozokian Fields, a kilometre-wide pan of dirt mounds and reedy pools wedged between two out-thrust spurs of the city. The area was devoid of even slave shacks due to skulking ur-ghuls, the whip-thin horrors making it too dangerous for an unarmed group to enter.

Up high, the portal, Vyriadh's mind called.

Xyril saw the inset slab of metal, seemingly no different from a hundred others lining the spur foundations hanging over them. Almost at the same instant she heard the hiss of indrawn breath through quivering scent-pits, the sound of an ur-ghul on the hunt. Vyriadh was already climbing, flowing up the ridged buttresses at an easy walking pace. Xyril sprang up after him and caught his outstretched hand even as she drew her pistol and fired down without looking. The poisoned sliver caught an onrushing ur-ghul, unseen by Xyril but clearly visible to Vyriadh above, on the top of its eyeless cranium just as it was grasping for her ankle. The ur-ghul collapsed on stiffening limbs as Vyriadh drew Xyril up beside him. A second and then a third of the troglodytic creatures burst into view, their scent-pits wide at the smell of blood. Xyril and Vyriadh shot them down with negligent efficiency and climbed up to the portal together.

THE WEBWAY TUNNELS beyond the portal were filmy and insubstantial, ghostly filaments undulating in the void. Rents and tears in the walls afforded stomach-roiling glimpses of oily hues swirling beyond, the colours of Chaos visible in all their inchoate glory. The chill breath of She Who Thirsts could be felt as Xyryl and Vyriadh moved cautiously deeper inside - daemons had stalked these paths, the wardings that held them in check were tattered and broken. It seemed impossible that this section of the webway had survived at all, and only after long wandering along its dangerous passages did they discover the reason why.

It appeared a savage shrine at first, a ziggurat built of horned skulls and twisted bones in honour of savage gods. Closer inspection revealed its meticulous construction and runes of dire portent burned into it. Not a shrine but a warning, a display of past transgressors to frighten off would-be explorers or invaders. Here was the portal to Biel-Tanigh itself, cloaked in the bones of the damned. Xyryl and Vyriadh remained undaunted and set to uncovering the ancient portal hidden beneath.

'Less than welcoming,' said Xyryl as she pried a skull loose.

'To be expected,' said Vyriadh as he caught it and laid it to one side.

Xyryl suddenly cursed and leapt aside, pulling down Vyriadh with her. An instant later the bone-shrine detonated in a blinding flash of light. Smoking shards scythed across the pair, whirring off their armour and slicing through their cloaks. The thunderclap detonation echoed along the tunnels like distant laughter. Looking up, Vyriadh saw the portal fully revealed and apparently intact, a leaf-shaped arch of copper-coloured metal covered in sinuous inscriptions.

'Crude,' complained Xyryl, sweeping a handful of smoking fragments from her lap.

'Effective,' admitted Vyriadh as he pulled a piece of bone from his scalp.

'Not so, as we are still alive,' corrected Xyryl.

NO TWO SUB-REALMS are identical. Each is its own world, a bubble of

reality afloat in the seething tides of warp space. Most were constructed by the eldar in ancient times at the height of their power. Fortresses, ports, pleasure palaces, exotic gardens, secret lairs: all were hewn from the shifting tides of the warp, with the port-city of Commorragh being the greatest sub-realm of them all. Biel-Tanigh was a subrealm of a different sort, one that was quite possibly never raised by eldar hands.

The sky of Biel-Tanigh was a dull, unrelieved crimson, lit by a distant silver sun that scintillated in a manner disturbing to look upon. Tall, jagged towers of black metal rose on every side, their darkly gleaming flanks netted by immense briar-like growths. Shafts of silver sunlight moved across the scene like questing fingers, their motions so precise that it implied a guiding intelligence controlled them.

The pair lowered themselves into the briar-choked avenues between the towers, dwarfed by the alien immensity surrounding them. The thick briars, all covered with span-wide thorns, shifted with lazy but undeniable purpose as they passed, coiling slowly to try and catch a hand or foot, or creeping closer whenever they halted in one spot for more than a moment.

Xyryl and Vyriadh pushed deeper, following their master's cryptic directions through the labyrinthine streets and seeking the peculiar psychic spoor of the artefact he sought. They saw no living thing, all was still and empty save for the lazy, predatory briars and the silently sweeping sun beams. The jagged towers opened onto the streets at apparently random intervals, their dark maws set at ground level or high on their flanks and surrounded by coldly burning runes.

'All of them portals, you think? Is this a city of portals?' Vyriadh wondered.

'Concentrate on finding what our Archon wants.' Xyryl scolded. 'Nothing else matters!'

A movement ahead made both twins freeze instinctively. A long-limbed figure had emerged from a tower and was striding towards them. Metre-long blades curved from its four upper limbs; its body and head were abstract sculptures of curved armour with only the vaguest implication of humanoid shape.

A thorned briar brushed against Xyryl's ankle and she sprang forward to escape it, racing seemingly heedlessly into the clutches of the scimitar-limbed myrmidon.

Deadly blows rained down like thunderbolts, sending Xyryl leaping, twisting and rolling through the clutching briars to evade them. Vyriadh landed on the thing's back in accordance with their unspoken plan and plunged twin daggers into its neck joint. Its four scimitar limbs instantly reversed and swept backwards to encase Vyriadh in a bladed cage. He slithered free as Xyryl punched a knife up to its hilt through the warrior's curved breastplate, the corrosive poison on her weapon blackening metal with every hissing drop. She left the blade in place as she rolled away from a scything counter-attack and circled warily with Vyriadh as their opponent staggered and thrashed. The thing, the automaton as she now realised it to be, weakened and collapsed in lifelike fashion, its blades shuddering as the corrosive poisons ate out its heart.

'Disappointing, scarcely puissant,' sniffed Vyriadh.

'Perhaps when seen in greater numbers—' Xyryl said before she looked up at Vyriadh in sudden recognition that the air was brightening around them. A white haze engulfed one end of the street, growing in intensity until a beam of silver incandescence swept into view, making the dark avenue blaze with light.

They instinctively ran together, making for the entry the automaton had emerged from as the one piece of cover nearby. The briars were writhing and knotting as if in pain at the coming of the light, forcing Vyriadh and Xyryl to leap over and under the looping tendrils as they ran. They dived inside the entry, only steps ahead of the moving beam front, the baleful, silver light casting grotesque shadows as it swept past their hiding place and halted briefly over the fallen warrior.

I fear the sun spies on us, Vyriadh's mind whispered after a moment.

I fear the sun is not a sun at all, Xyryl whispered back.

After a drawn out, horrible moment, the light dimmed as the questing beam moved on. The hissing, twisting briars quieted once more and the pair risked a glance outside. The wrecked warrior was gone, the whole area where it had fallen swept clean as if by a giant broom. At their backs, the featureless black metal walls of a corridor disappeared into the utter darkness.

Out or in? Vyriadh wondered silently.

Out, we still must find the Archon's desire, thought Xyryl. And safety will not be

found inside.

The entry began to seal as if in response to the thought, leaves of metal sliding into place across it with unhurried fluidity. They darted through the narrowing gap before it could trap them inside, the entry sealing itself behind them with an audible snap. Outside, the dark, angular towers reared up all around them, enigmatic and indecipherable. They pushed onward through them, now watching the skies for questing beams, now dodging predatory briars. At last, they paused.

There! I feel it! Vyriadh thought triumphantly.

Perhaps, Xyryl concurred after a moment. I hear its call too. Numberless voices like surf on a beach, cheering.

Or screaming in a fire, Vyriadh laughed.

They followed the psychic spoor among the metal canyons, wary in case they came upon more warrior machines. Eventually a citadel of black metal rose ahead, squat and multi-peaked in comparison to its neighbours, half-hidden beneath a mass of trailing briars, thicker than the others they'd passed, with a pair of gleaming guardians standing guard outside it. Somewhere high up, among the barbed minarets of the citadel's crown, was the object that Archon Yllithian desired.

Death to climb it, Xyryl sighed, kicking aside a tendril of briar that was creeping closer.

Not if we cross from another spot, Vyriadh thought, showing in her mind an image of another tower that leaned close to their objective. In one place it virtually overhung a broad balcony near the top and looked relatively briar-free.

Good enough, if we can climb that tower, Xyryl judged.

Only one way to find out, concluded Vyriadh.

Swift and silent as shadows, they worked their way around to the overhanging tower. Contact grip pads, formed on palms and toes by their armour, proved equal to the task of adhering to the dark metal, and they began to climb, inch by inch, up its surface. Their progress was slow, many times delayed by having to move crabwise to avoid lengths of dangling briar. Vyriadh and Xyryl froze a third

of the way up as a questing, silvery beam of light swept silently past, their eyes smarting in the monochromatic glare. As they climbed higher they found that the breeze, unnoticeable at street level, grew stronger and began to pluck at their limbs and cloaks with increasing tenacity.

The gradient steepened inexorably as they climbed above a hundred metres, the tower's overhang glowering above them. One of Vyriadh's grip pads slipped as he reached upwards, leaving him hanging in space by one hand and foot as his body weight swung dangerously outwards. Xyрил caught at his flailing arm and slapped it onto the metal surface to steady him almost without thought. They both paused for a moment, breathing hard.

We're high enough already, look, Xyрил thought.

Vyriadh saw that it was true. A drop of some ten metres onto the balcony lay behind them - with a horizontal gap at least as far between tower and citadel.

One good leap will be enough, Vyriadh thought boldly, tensing his body to hurl himself outwards.

Stop! Xyрил warned. Vyriadh instantly froze.

What is it? Vyriadh asked.

A trap for the unwary. See it? Xyрил showed him the balcony again. Something barely perceptible overlaid the balcony, a cross-hatching of pencil-thin lines that was only visible from certain angles.

Monofilament wire, realised Vyriadh and shuddered.

Enough to turn a plunging body into goo, Xyрил agreed. The molecule-thick entanglement would have sliced them limb from limb if they so much as brushed against it, let alone jumped into it.

I still have corrosives. Most of yours went into the disappointing warrior, Vyriadh observed.

Braced by both toe grips and one hand, Xyрил reached over, undipped an emerald-hued bulb of poison from Vyriadh's belt and tossed it unerringly towards the balcony. It burst into an evil-looking green cloud just above the

ground; faint trceries of lines showed where it was eating into the wire. In seconds the taut web had collapsed, completely consumed by the powerful acid-based toxin. In a few moments more the breeze dispersed the cloud, leaving only a handful of blackened streaks behind.

Xyryl and Vyriadh leapt together, somersaulting to land on the balcony. The psychic spoor of their prize was stronger here, much stronger.

The pounding rush of it in her mind made Xyryl sway for a moment. Vyriadh looked at her oddly.

It is nothing! Xyryl's mind snarled. Focus!

Triple arches led from the balcony, peeking out from beneath a veil of briars. Xyryl stepped to the centre arch and quickly cut back the briars with quick, efficient slashes of her blade. The crashing psychic pulse of their prize washed over them again, and this time it was Vyriadh who shook visibly at the onslaught.

Such pain and anger! Vyriadh's mind muttered uncertainly. Perhaps we should not—

Don't even think it. We live to serve! Xyryl commanded, her thoughts edged with fear.

Vyriadh nodded silently and drew himself together, his mental defences hardening against the crash and roar they had so eagerly sought when they first entered Biel-Tanigh. Beyond the arch a corridor sloped away, curving back upon itself to spiral down to the next level. They proceeded cautiously down it, wary for traps at every step. The corridor led them around in one circuit and then its walls disappeared so it became a curved ramp descending into the open space below.

They found themselves in a wide hall, gloomily lit so that its far walls were lost in shadow. Angular plinths rose from the floor at various intervals. Many were empty, but others bore a strange variety of objects: skulls, sword hilts and pieces of armour were among the more identifiable things, others seemed like interlocking whorls of metal or complex nests of frozen light. The roaring surf-song of the Archon's prize emanated from a plinth towards the back wall, drawing Xyryl and Vyriadh onwards with scarcely a glance at the esoteric

artefacts around them.

The jewel Yllithian had described lay upon a plinth, quiescent and seemingly mundane in comparison to its neighbours. A fist-sized stone very much like an opal, but with flecks of light floating in its depths.

Xyryl and Vyriadh glanced at each other in triumph. Xyryl started to reach for the stone and then paused as Vyriadh sprinkled sensor-blinding dust over the plinth to disclose any final traps. Xyryl's fingers closed around the stone and her mind was buffeted by the outpouring of empathic energies.

'Death! Ruin! Revenge!' The silent shouts pulsed inside her temples. She staggered again and almost dropped the opal, Vyriadh's grip steadying her as she rode the emotional wave. There was fear and anger and hatred and pride and triumph, all melded into one great ululating psychic cry of outrage. Xyryl's mind was assailed by images of another place at another time, of towers falling in flames, shrieking daemons blackening the skies, a tidal flood of dark energy rushing outward, reality itself cracking asunder.

Strong! We must be strong! Vyriadh's mind shouted through the maelstrom and Xyryl draw strength from his certainty. Her sense of self emerged like a bubble from the whirlpool of tumbling psychic images and she straightened, gripping the opal harder as the visions faded.

'You should put that back,' a strangely accented voice said from the gloom.

Vyriadh and Xyryl drew their weapons with eye-blurring swiftness, simultaneously moving to place themselves back to back as they strained to identify the speaker. They saw several figures emerging from among the plinths, moving into the chamber with a stealthy tread that Vyriadh and Xyryl would have found hard to believe was possible a moment before.

'No,' Xyryl said distinctly, her little-used voice a harsh croak beside the lilting tones of the newcomers. The pair-bond sidled towards the ramp as she spoke the word, tensing to make a dash for freedom at the first opportunity. Four graceful, thorn-skinned eldar closed in on them, masked in black and bearing whips of dark metal shaped like writhing briars.

'It will bring great woe upon your people,' one warned as it flicked its lash at Vyriadh's ankle.

'The accursed halls of Shaa-dom must remain forever sealed,' said another as its briar-whip whistled toward Xyрил's neck.

The pair-bond exploded into action, diving one over the other to avoid their incoming attacks. Vyriadh's pistol spat poisoned slivers into one masked face and sent the assailant tumbling away. Xyрил parried a strike at Vyriadh's arm, but she was encumbered, still gripping the opal in one hand. Their assailants whirled into the shadows, their outlines shattering into patches of fluttering darkness.

A frightened part of them both knew that her holding onto the stone was crippling their chances of survival, let alone escape, but Xyрил couldn't let it go. It was as if a hot coal was burning in her hand and welding her fingers shut. The surging roar of its psychic pulse was trying to pull her away, up the ramp to freedom without thought for friends or enemies. She had to fight the urge in order to stay and protect Vyriadh.

With Xyрил half-crippled, Vyriadh was struggling against their flitting attackers. He parried another strike from a half-seen enemy and fired his pistol again, this time his target darted out of sight before the trigger was even pulled. Two whips scythed out of the darkness simultaneously. Xyрил managed to block one, but the other wrapped around Vyriadh's hand, lacerating it cruelly as the barbs tore through his armour as if it were no more than silk. Vyriadh's pistol clattered away from his grip as the whip pulled back and almost yanked him off his feet. Xyрил could feel Vyriadh's stab of panic as more whips whistled at him, but she was already sprinting away up the ramp.

Vyriadh's rage, terror and understanding pursued her, yet even that life-long bond was all but extinguished by the beating pulse of the opal in her fevered grasp. All that mattered now was getting to Yllithian; the uncounted dead of Shaa-dom demanded it, implored it, even at the price that half her soul must be left dying behind her. She burst onto the balcony, knowing that Vyriadh was still fighting defensively on the ramp, doing everything he could to delay her pursuers.

She ran for the edge, using her free hand to ready a zipline equipped with a tiny gravitic grapnel at one end. Just as she leapt into space, she felt Vyriadh die. A part of herself was extinguished, a void opened where his fleeing soul once was.

Xyрил gasped, abandoning herself to the fall as the pain of loss stabbed into her like a physical injury. Some baser instinct of preservation made her fling out the

looping zipline towards the face of the tower now rushing past. The gravitic anchor caught, jerking her to a halt so sharply that she almost dislocated her shoulder. She rapidly slid down the few remaining metres to the ground. She wasted no time looking back at the citadel or retrieving the zipline. As soon as her feet touched the ground she ran, driven by the stone in her hand and pursued by her own guilt.

She ran, and they hunted her. Thornskinned eldar and warrior machines and silvery beams like spears stabbing down from above. They hunted her through the coiling briars and labyrinthine streets, beneath angular eaves and between barbed minarets, but they could not find her. The dead guided her now and saved her a hundred times even as they drove onward. Darting flecks of light swarmed inside the opal, its psychic pulse virtually dragging Xyryl from one hiding place to another as the denizens of Biel-Tanigh hunted for her. She allowed it to guide her running feet, too numb with shock and loss to resist the silent urging. It soothed her, filling the lacerated space in her soul where Vyriadh had been torn away from her. She found that she hated it and loved it all at once.

Step by step, they crept together to the portal where Xyryl and Vyriadh had entered the strange, terrible city what seemed to be so little time before. Xyryl could feel that she was dying, her grief was a mortal wound that was sapping her will to live. Her limbs moved mechanically, acting only in anticipation of soon being able to rest forever. Climbing the tower was hard with only one hand but pocketing the stone never even crossed her mind. Slowly, painfully, she dragged herself up to the portal and activated it.

THE TATTERED, GHOSTLY webway seemed icy cold after Biel-Tanigh; the spectral gale blowing through its rents and tears stroked frozen fingers along Xyryl's spine. The opal, so blazing hot before, chilled to a lifeless lump and dropped from her nerveless fingers. Part of Xyryl's mind remembered vaguely that there was something important about the stone, but it was too hard to think about. Bending down to retrieve it would be an incredible amount of effort, enough to snap her thin thread of existence. Nothing really mattered any more.

Something drew her attention. It was a twisting thread of warmth or a familiar scent - she couldn't quite tell which. The icy breeze bore with it some trace of familiarity. Xyryl staggered towards it, closer to the torn edges of the webway

tunnel. Something outside was calling to her.

\* \* \*

IN HIGH COMMORRAGH, atop the White Flames fortress, Archon Yllithian frowned with annoyance as a jewel at his wrist flashed twice and then dimmed. Looking away from the sslyth wrestling match for a moment, Yllithian gestured languidly to a dark, twisted individual who was lurking among the Archon's otherwise glittering entourage. The stooped figure hurried forward and abased itself, its curving spine imparting a curious rolling motion to the action.

'Ready another pair-bond, Syiin, your last ones failed me,' Yllithian ordered.

Syiiin blanched at his words, the tiny amount of colour in his already pale flesh rapidly draining away.

'Are there improvements I could make?' Syiin asked ingratiatingly. 'My first priority is always to serve you as well as possible, my Archon.'

Yllithian gave him a baleful look. 'Do as I command or I will feed you to the sslyth here and now, am I clear?'

'At once, my Archon,' the Haemonculus simpered before rapidly retreating.

Yllithian gave his attention back to the multi-armed ophidians crushing one another for his pleasure as his mind worked over schemes to overcome this failure in his carefully laid plans. Patience was important. He had always known there was only a small chance of retrieving the key to Shaa-dom so easily. Patience and persistence would bring it to his hands eventually, and then the grand plan could begin.