



WARHAMMER
40,000

GAV THORPE
**THE CURSE
OF SHAA-DOM**

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On a dry, savage world, Elemenath felt the Alaitocii unleash slaughter upon the humans who had found the Jade Scarab of Neimenh. The white seer's mind was ice, hardened to the constant whispering that tried in vain to enter his thoughts from the infernal artefact, but he could not block out the death screams of the humans, nor the exultation of violence that pealed like a thousand bells from the minds of the Aspect Warriors.

It was a sad but necessary cull. The humans who dwelt within the fortress had come into contact with the Jade Scarab and had become corrupted, even if they did not realise it. They had to be exterminated to prevent the taint of the Great Enemy spreading. When the dying was over, Elemenath and his five fellow white seers brought forth the null-coffin from their ship and escorted it to the place where the Jade Scarab had been found.

The wraithbone sarcophagus – a long ovoid of pale psychoplastic inscribed with protective runes – floated between the white seers as they made their way up the flights of stairs to the top of the tower, passing the bloodied corpses of the humans. The Alaitocii autarch waited for them at the uppermost storey, with him a farseer and a young warlock. Elemenath paid little heed to the other seers, his mind focussed on blanking out the impassioned pleading that emanated from the Jade Scarab. It cajoled and threatened, begging to be freed from the small box that contained it.

Not for the white seers the barrier of runes that shielded the Alaitocii seers from the pervasive effects of the Jade Scarab. Each had sought a purer path, dedicating their lives to the sole purpose of thwarting the designs of the Great Enemy and the other Chaos Powers. In the Black Library, they had spent their lives learning the rituals of defiance that allowed them to look upon the realm of the Chaos Gods and yet not be drawn into the abyss. They did not seek revelation in the future, nor did they harbour the desire to wield the power of the warp for their own ends. Theirs was a path of denial, their psychic gifts turned towards the sole purpose of containing the potential of others and suppressing the corrupting influence of artefacts like the Jade Scarab.

The infernal piece was placed within the null-coffin, its haranguing and whining almost blotted out by the counter-seals and wards crafted into the wraithbone container. Without further word, the white seers left the Alaitocii and returned to their ship.

The ship was a strange craft, even more out of place floating amongst the ruin of the compound's courtyard, surrounded by the dead. Its main hull was dart-like in shape, swirling gold and blue in colour, surrounded by a circle of six curving tail fins of shimmering black that swept forward almost to the pointed prow. It was just large enough to accommodate a dozen eldar, the bulk of its length taken up by the warp-resonating vanes that gave rise to its name: a skeinrunner.

The null-coffin was sealed into a compartment that extruded from the bottom of the hull and, satisfied that all was in order, the white seers gathered in a circle to commune. Their minds touched upon each other, no words spoken.

It is not necessary for all of us to accompany this cargo, thought Nemerian, the most senior of the white seers.

We are a short journey from Biel-Tanigh, agreed Khetherim, second in age. *Only one of us should suffice.*

I nominate Elemenath to the task, continued Eidoriar. *He has yet to make the journey to the sanctuary.*

I am honoured, but I do not think I am ready yet for such a responsibility, replied Elemenath. He was the youngest of the six and had never visited Biel-Tanigh alone.

It will be of no great peril, said Nemerian. *You may take the hirelings with you. We shall accompany one of the Alaitocii vessels back to Neir-Saman and you will rejoin us there.*

It is agreed, chorused the others, leaving Elemenath feeling privileged but apprehensive.

He was left alone with Nemerian as the rest of the white seers drifted back towards the tower.

There is no cause for concern. Nemerian laid a comforting hand on the wrist of Elemenath. *The journey is swift and without undue obstacles. You know what must be done. Deliver the cargo and your task is complete.*

Elemenath bowed his head in acknowledgement of the other's wisdom, then strode up the ramp into the skeinrunner. He had barely crossed the threshold when the ramp slid up behind him and the hull sealed.

Inside were four other eldar, sitting on low couches that segued smoothly with the floor and wall of the spherical chamber. Two were garbed in the ever-distorting robes and coats of rangers, their cameleoline attire currently blending in with the deep red interior of the ship. The first was Anitheï. She had joined the servants of the Black Library before Elemenath, having left ill-fated Morwhe-Sheno only a short time before it had been consumed by the Great Enemy's mortal followers. The other ranger was Khai-lian of Biel-tan, an aging eldar who had finally grown bored of craftworld life after treading many paths, finding new purpose in service to the guardians of the Black Library.

Sprawled on the bench opposite was Syllion. He had been a pirate for most of his life and his clothes and demeanour celebrated his notorious reputation. His white hair was cut in a scalplock, the bald skin tattooed with winding red dragons. The adventurer's thin face sported a scar from right eye to top lip; an affectation that was well within the technology of the eldar to remove. He wore a baggy shirt of black and silver, fastened with a broad belt chased with sworls of tiny sapphires and diamonds. Silver-studded leggings became boots below his knees, of a deep blue that gave his lower half the appearance of a twilight sky broken by stars.

The last member of the team was sitting a little apart from the others on a small stool, his head covered with a white cowl and mask that left only his deep blue eyes on show. He wore a single piece bodysuit of woven gold and red, which shimmered like the scales of a fish as he twisted towards the

white seer. He was the pilot, Zain Jalir, and it was to him that Elemenath turned.

‘Take us to Biel-Tanigh.’

The skeinrunner lifted silently from the ground and rose up above the human compound. Within, Elemenath seated himself in a small cubicle behind the main chamber, his robe gathered up as he lowered himself onto the ornately patterned rug on the floor. Golden sigils joined by thin tracteries of crystal marked the walls and ceiling, and as the white seer extended his mind they came alive with the glint of psychic energy.

‘Ready to engage the portal,’ announced Zain Jalir.

There came a whine that was felt in the mind more than the ears, the enormous crystal of the webrunner’s ghost engine flaring with psychic life. Elemenath drew in the power of the crystal, shaping it into a faceted bubble surrounding the craft. With another thought, he instructed Zain Jalir to engage the portal.

The air around the skeinrunner was wreathed with energy. Flares of every colour danced across the invisible outline of the psychic barrier as a whirling hole appeared in reality at the nose of the craft. The vortex grew wider, spinning faster and faster. A few heartbeats later, the skeinrunner slipped forwards into the tear, propelled by the thoughts of Elemenath.

Unlike other eldar craft, the skeinrunner was not restricted to existing strands and tunnels of the webway. It burrowed through the gap between the material universe and the warp; opening up its own passageway before it, the walls of the delving collapsing behind as the craft passed on.

Elemenath was in control for the moment, his mind linked to the swirling energies of warpspace, looking at them as no other could; not even a farseer could witness the warp in its raw form. The white seer saw clashing energies, waves and tides of pure emotion and psychic power crashing against each other. Through the maelstrom of colours and textures he located the slender fibres of the nearby webway and steered the ship towards them.

For the shortest moment, the skeinrunner had to pass into the pure immaterium, allowing it to bypass the shielding walls of the webway under the white seer’s guidance. Elemenath felt a freezing sensation, the spirit stone at his breast throbbing hot as he hardened the psychic shell around the ship during its brief translation. His mind and body ached as he felt his life essence leeching away, just for an instant, held in the grip of She Who Thirsts.

For an eternally long heartbeat, all that kept at bay the ravaging hunger of the god created by the eldar was the willpower of the white seer. He had performed this act several times before in the company of the others, but it was his first solo foray and he attended to every detail with precise preparation. His mind was encased by a white wall of denial, blocked of all thought that might attract attention, his actions performed on an unthinking, instinctual level.

With a flash of psychic expulsion, the transfer was complete.

Now hidden within the undulating passages of the webway, secured against attack by immaterial walls erected before the Fall, Elemenath could relax slightly. The webway’s wardings were not a guaranteed defence though and he kept his mind alert to any sign of damage in the protective layers encompassing the tunnel.

Within the webway, Zain Jalir was able to take over, piloting the craft as he would any other ship, its engine siphoning power from the raw stuff of the warp. Turning down a side passage, the skeinrunner continued towards the vault of Biel-Tanigh.

The maze of tunnels surrounding Biel-Tanigh was too convoluted and small for the skeinrunner; leaving Zain Jalir with the craft, Elemenath led the others on foot. Unlike the interstellar branches they had just traversed, these passageways were made of solid material, shaped from the colliding energies of the real and unreal. To the normal eye, the pastel-blue and cream-coloured passage appeared to be a vaulted arch in cross-section, curving slowly, joined by many others at star-shaped junctions. To the psychic sense of Elemenath, it barely existed except as a shimmering barrier of force keeping the ravaging energies of the warp at bay. At least it provided greater comfort to the white seer than the unshuttered warp and he was able to block out what residual noise emanated from around him.

Guided by an inner compass taught to him by the harlequins of the Laughing God, Elemenath sensed the ebb and flow of power through the webway itself. Biel-Tanigh was close, weighing heavily on the fabric of the warp-realspace construct. After passing dozens of seemingly identical star-junctions, Elemenath turned left, passed a few more, turned right and continued on for some time.

It was here that the webway took on a different appearance, simulating its great antiquity in a way that mortal minds could comprehend. Gone were the gleaming, identical corridors of colour and light. In their place the eldar found themselves walking along twilight streets, the sky overhead utterly black and starless, the crumbling walls to either side that guided their course moss-covered, wreathed with thorny vines that slowly moved with a life of their own.

The air became dry, filled with fine dust like a desert wind. Drifts of ancient debris gathered against the sloping walls and encrusted the nooks between worn stones. The sighing of the breeze echoed from arched courtyards that appeared now and then in the walls, giving brief glimpses of ancient villas and decaying estates.

The wind brought with it sad voices, and set the thorn-vines rasping and rattling so that it appeared as if they spoke. The whisperthorns spoke of ancient days of glory, when Biel-Tanigh had been a place of learning and scholarly pursuit. The husky voices lamented the collegiate conflicts that had engulfed the campus as the various factions within sought to pursue ever more esoteric and illuminating lines of thought at the expense of other sects. Logic and reason, the voices cried, had given away to dogma and ritual, and Biel-Tanigh became a place of death and perversion, where study became a religion and investigation was conducted through blade and flame upon the bodies of innocents.

We are dead, dead by our own folly, whispered the spirits trapped within the thorns. Let the living learn from dry Biel-Tanigh, for we can learn no more for ourselves.

Shuddering, Elemenath pushed on through the dilapidation, his mind barred against the intrusive fingers of the dead spirits that sought to claw into his thoughts with their freezing touch.

One further turn, which almost took them back to where they had begun but approaching from the correct direction now, brought the small group of eldar to an impressive gateway. In appearance it seemed wrought of iron and gold, its main structure a dark, forbidding metal decorated by curling

eldar runes in glittering yellow that declared its name: Biel-Tanigh. A complex interweaving arrangement of bars and levers could be seen through the gate; its ornate silver locking mechanism was covered with runes no bigger than pinheads.

The gate hung from a no-less imposing pair of pillars that flanked the passageway, of red-veined marble carved with dire warnings and warding glyphs. The red was the colour of blood and seemed to throb as if fluid passed along them.

Or so the eye saw. Elemenath had been trained to rely on less deceptive senses. He observed a swirling-yet-solid barrier of psychic energy, a small rune of pure white at its centre, beyond which nothing could pass.

There was no bell-pull nor rune nor any other device by which the party could make their presence known, short of shouting, which they were all loathe to do in this benighted place. Elemenath counselled his companions to patience, for on all his previous visits the denizens of Biel-Tanigh had been well aware of their visitors and attended to them in their own time.

The four eldar amused and occupied themselves, each to their own mind. Elemenath recited protective mantras to keep his thoughts busy. The two rangers set to investigating their surroundings – though not moving out of sight of the gate – and inspecting the slowly writhing whispervine and the flaking stonework. Syllion sat with his back to one of the gateposts, a small, white memestone in his hand, lips barely moving as he whispered his secret tale to its memory. Elemenath cared not to think of the things the pirate had done in the past and was pleased that his psychic strength had been directed towards the protection of his own mind rather than the invasion of others', for the temptation to look at the past and fate of such a character was considerable.

Eventually a dismal chime sounded from beyond the gate. The whispervine was thrown into a quivering of anticipation as its black leaves and dead-skin-pale flowers fluttered towards the gateway, straining to enter.

Dim, dark shapes could be seen through the bars of the gate, moving back and forth without haste. The lock mechanism spun and ratcheted and slid, while the psychic wards that Elemenath could see were peeled away, layer by layer, revealing the webway beyond.

The gates swung silently outwards, revealing four figures; Elemenath had noticed before that the number of guardians that greeted visitors always numbered the same as those who came to Biel-Tanigh, like dark reflections.

The four eldar were clad in black and grey, their bodies wreathed about by trailing creepers barbed with hooks and dripping thorns. Their emaciated forms were thin even for eldar, their shadow-hidden faces giving glimpses of almost skull-like gauntness. Dark eyes stared solemnly from sunken sockets, their black gazes pinning Elemenath and the others with their intensity.

Behind the thorn-clad guardians could be seen the dim shapes of warrior-constructs against a bland crimson sky, their many gangling blade-limbs glinting in the light of a flickering silver star. The cracked pavement under the feet of the dark keepers writhed with more thorny growths, whose barbs dripped foul-smelling venom onto the crazily broken flags.

With a gesture, Elemenath brought forward the null coffin. Biel-Tanigh's guardians moved their

disconcerting stares to the wraithbone casket, straightening sharply with hissing intakes of breath; from apprehension or excitement Elemenath was not sure.

‘Long we have sought this infernal device.’ It was not clear which of the figures had spoken. The voice seemed to come from none of them. ‘The Jade Scarab of Neimenh. A treasure indeed for the dead scholars.’

‘It is powerful,’ said Elemenath, feeling that a warning was necessary. The fate of the scarab had been discussed by the group before they had joined the Alaitocii attack. ‘The white seers feel that it should be destroyed immediately.’

‘The white seers do not decide what happens within the boundaries of Biel-Tanigh. Do not fear. There is no lure left that can tempt the dead scholars into corruption. Their dreams have withered like a drop of water in a desert. Their desires have been burnt like a butterfly’s wings before a sun. Their physical needs no longer vex them, for they have departed into the immortality of spirit. The Jade Scarab comes from the Time Before, and was once used to shape the very tunnels in which you have passed. It was taken from us by those who were the most perverse, steeped in the wakening power of She Who Thirsts, binding it to the will of the Great Enemy. Rest assured that it will be destroyed, in time, when its secrets have been prised from its depths.’

The gates started to swing shut and the figures turned away. Elemenath realised that the null coffin was still next to him, though it had returned to its milky white, neutral state; how the Jade Scarab had been removed was a mystery to him.

‘That was... different,’ said Syllion. ‘I have never known them to be so talkative.’

‘Let’s just get back to the skeinrunner,’ said Khai-lian. ‘The sooner we are away from here, the better.’

Elemenath concurred with his companion’s assessment and signalled for them to leave.

They had travelled almost halfway back to the ship, leaving behind the dismal surrounds of Biel-Tanigh, when Anithei pulled up quickly, Syllion following behind almost walking into her back.

‘Watch what you are doing,’ snapped Syllion, stepping around the ranger.

‘Did you not hear that?’ Anithei asked. She turned slowly on the spot, head cocked to one side. ‘Can you not feel that?’

‘Feel what?’ asked Khai-lian, stepping up beside his fellow ranger, eyes narrowed.

‘Singing,’ said Anithei. ‘A dirge, such a sorrowful dirge.’

Elemenath opened up his psychic sense, searching for some break in the webway that might explain the sensation Anithei was experiencing. He saw nothing wrong with the immediate webway, but there was certainly a damaged section close by. The warp was permeating the fabric of the webway, seeping through a break between the wards. It was not a serious breach yet but warranted investigation.

‘Take us to the singing,’ said the white seer.

The patch of webway was oddly narrow and transparent, the nothingness of the warp beyond its walls hinted at through the insubstantial enclosure. Here and there, actual tears in the fabric of the webway

offered up brain-churning glances of the raw void, a maddening vista of impossibility hinted at but not fully seen.

The air itself seemed cold and thin. Microscopically narrow tendrils of gossamer matter floated in it. The eldar avoided the floating ghost-filaments, knowing that they were the ephemeral leavings of daemonic intrusion, the lingering desires and dreams sown by She Who Thirsts given form, waiting to ensnare the unwary.

‘It is safe, the daemons have fled from my presence,’ said the white seer.

With a hand gloved in white silk and his mind armoured with ritual chants, Elemenath gathered up the psychofibres, cleaning the air of their taint as he rolled them into an impossibly delicate ball and placed them in a rune-buttoned pouch at his belt. Anithei watched the white seer crouch before one of the cracks in the wall, studying the damage, but she felt her attention pulled elsewhere.

The singing had waxed and waned since she had first heard it, intoxicating yet dread-inspiring, like a sweet-smelling unguent that will bring burning pain. There was deep beauty in the lament, a sorrow of ages that touched upon her heart like nothing had done so before. It was a memory of a song, an echo of a dream she could not remember.

‘Where are you going?’ asked Khai-lian, grabbing Anithei’s arm and breaking her from the bewitching trance.

As she recovered her senses, she glimpsed something nestling in a shadowy corner: the tip of a boot.

She pointed out this discovery to the others and they gathered around to investigate. They came upon a corpse, shrouded in the ghost filaments like a spider’s prey cocooned in silk. Elemenath carefully parted the fibres, revealing what appeared to be a slumbering eldar, save that her skin was as dry as parchment, her open eyes filmed over with dark mist. The body was garbed in armour that was the colour of smoke, the ghost-filaments clinging to a hooded cloak that sucked in the light, appearing as deep shadow. She was clearly a warrior of some kind, her skinsuit holding sheaths, holsters and pouches for many knives, long pistols and other weapons.

‘Kin of Commoragh,’ muttered Khai-lian, glancing around nervously, eyes wide and alert for danger.

‘She passed some time ago,’ said Elemenath, pulling the long hood over the dead eldar to conceal her face. ‘Her spirit has long departed.’

He began a whispered incantation to seal the body against possession.

Anithei watched all of this with only passing interest. The singing was stronger here and did not come from the body, nor did it emanate from the rip in the webway fabric not far away. Here and there, the walls of the webway had been broken, literally shattered so that shards of psychoplastic were scattered all around.

The singing was coming from behind Anithei, close and insistent. With a glance at the others, she confirmed that they were all concentrated upon the examination of the corpse. She sidled away, drawn by the dirge, needing to hear more, to listen to every sad verse.

Her toe touched something amongst the debris. Glancing down, she saw an opal-coloured gem about the size of her closed fist. With another check to ensure she was unseen, Anithei stooped swiftly,

swept up the opal, and placed it in the pocket of her long coat.

Her body throbbed momentarily at the touch of the jewel, the chorus in her mind reaching a crescendo that lit along her nerves and burrowed into her memories, bringing forth recollections of loss and pain; the loss and pain of a whole city condemned to damnation by their enemies.

‘There is nothing to be learned here,’ announced Elemenath, standing up. ‘I shall let the others know of the damage, though I fear it is too far progressed to be repaired. Another passageway that must be sealed and lost to us forever.’

‘So, back to the skeinrunner?’ said Syllion. The adventurer turned and saw Anithei a little apart from the rest. ‘Spooked by the dead, ranger?’

She blinked and pushed aside the singing that had enraptured her.

‘There are too many dead,’ she replied, trying to focus, her words echoing the choir in her mind.

Feeling a presence at the doorway to her chambers, Anithei quickly slipped the stone into her bag and tossed the knapsack behind her low bed. She lay down upon the covers and called for her visitor to enter. It was Elemenath. The white seer had discarded his heavy robe of office and wore a flimsy tunic and leggings, padding barefooted into the room. His expression was stern.

‘I did not wish to embarrass you in front of the others,’ said Elemenath, ‘but I know that you found something in the webway. Did you think that just because I did not look at you, you could keep this secret from me? Please, let me see your hidden treasure.’

Hesitantly, Anithei rolled over and took up the bag from the floor. She reached inside and her fingers closed about the stone. She stopped, suddenly concerned.

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘I wish to ensure it is of no danger to you,’ said the white seer. Anithei saw concern on Elemenath’s face, but it could have been feigned. Perhaps the white seer heard the singing too and wished to take the stone for himself.

‘That would not be right,’ said the ranger. ‘It is mine. I found it.’

‘I feel its weight upon your thoughts,’ said Elemenath. He stepped forward and thrust his hand out insistently. ‘Give it to me.’

Jealousy and anger flared through Anithei. The white seer hungered for her prize, but he would not have it. She brought out the opal but, as quick as a serpent, she lashed out, smashing the heavy stone into the side of the white seer’s head, cracking open his skull in an instant. He fell without a cry.

The touch of Elemenath’s blood set the stone’s chorus singing loudly, lamenting his demise yet glorifying the act at the same time. Anithei put the stone down and dragged Elemenath’s body fully into the chamber, hiding it behind the bed.

She sat down, unperturbed by what she had done, and picked up the opal again.

‘I will take you home,’ she said, stroking a finger across its cool surface.

‘What’s this?’

Anithei looked up, startled to see Syllion standing in the doorway. The former pirate’s eyes narrowed and moved between Anithei, the opal and the white figure of Elemenath’s body, poorly concealed behind her. ‘What have you done?’

‘It is mine!’ hissed Anithei, pulling a knife from her bag. She lunged, but Syllion was expecting the attack, grabbing her wrist to turn the blow aside. His other hand whipped a curved dagger from his belt and in one fluid movement slashed the ranger across the throat.

The opal tumbled from Anithei’s dying grasp but Syllion moved instantly, letting go of her wrist to catch the stone before it hit the ground. He smiled as the music in his mind resumed, congratulating himself on seizing possession of the prize he had desired since hearing its call moments earlier. He had only just seen the stone, but felt as if he had wanted to hold it for his entire life.

A choir of ghostly shadows sung a long, low lament in Khai-lian’s dreams. A thousand times a thousand voices rose up in sorrow and rage, telling of how they had been betrayed. He felt their sense of loss a hundredfold and murmured in his sleep, tossing and turning with disquiet. The spirits had to be released, had to be set free to wreak their vengeance on the dark traitors who had slain them.

Khai-lian awoke, a fevered sweat on his brow. The key was close, he could feel its presence. There was something else too: another spirit close by.

Opening his eyes a slit, he saw a figure silhouetted at the doorway. He recognised Syllion’s topknot immediately and sensed danger. Pretending to slumber, he rolled over, closer to the holster belt hanging beside the bed, one hand moving towards it under the pillow.

‘What are you doing?’ the ranger mumbled, pretending to wake.

‘It is ours.’ Syllion’s voice had changed. He spoke as many, the syllables echoing strangely around the bedchamber.

Khai-lian made a grab for the pistol, but its grip was barely in his hand when Syllion struck, the pirate’s knife plunging into the base of Khai-lian’s skull. The ranger died wordlessly, blood seeping into the bed clothes as Syllion pulled free his blade.

There was only one left, and then the key would be his alone. Syllion left the aft chambers and entered the main compartment, heading for the passageway to the pilot’s room.

He was only a few steps from the door to the cockpit when he stumbled. His head was spinning, dizziness throwing him off balance. Arms and legs weakening by the moment, Syllion floundered into the wall and then fell heavily, knife dropping from his numb grasp though he clutched the stone to his chest as if it were his life. The pirate’s breath was heavy in his lungs, every inhalation sending a quiver of pain through his chest.

He lay there for some time, shuddering and gasping, his vision blurred. After a while, light broke from ahead, sending agony down his optic nerve and into the rest of his body. A shadow loomed over him and Syllion heard mocking laughter through the rushing of blood in his ears.

‘I see you have already despatched the others for me,’ said Zain Jalir. ‘No matter, the toxin that poisons you would have dealt with them as well. You have something that belongs to me.’

Syllion could do nothing as his last ragged breaths whispered from his lips and the pilot crouched beside him, pulling the opal from the pirate’s twitching fingers. Another surge of pain wracked Syllion’s body before he died, his spirit filled with the sadness of those trapped within the stone.

Pressing deeper into the shadow of the archway, Zain Jalir listened as the hum of the passing skiff receded into the distance. He knew he was being hunted and had dared the dangers of the underspur to journey back to his lair. The bribes at the portway would not have been enough to stop all remarks concerning his return and he had expected to draw some attention, hence his furtive passage through the dark underbelly of the city. As he waited for the sound to pass away, his hand moved to the pouch at his waist that contained the key to Shaa-dom. He felt a moment of pride, knowing that the liberation of his kin was one step closer.

He had learned that the key had been taken from Biel-Tanigh and had left the dark city to search for it, joining the white seers under the guise of an outcast. It had been a stroke of fortune to find the key in the manner he had, but everything else that would put in motion the freeing of Shaa-dom had been meticulously planned since he had been born. The spirit stones of the others – the white seer's in particular – would be enough to hire dozens of mercenaries, and with them he would join with the other scions of Shaa-dom to bring about the return of the old empire.

A nearby hiss snapped Zain Jalir from his moment of reverie. It was a sound he knew all too well, and his heart hammered in his chest. Spinning to his right, he snatched up his pistol as the ur-ghul pounced from the top of the archway. The volley of poisoned splinters took the creature full in the chest, ripping apart its half-rotted flesh.

Too late he heard other noises. He glanced over his shoulder to see four more of the bestial creatures, their scent-pits flaring in the gloomy night. He had been a fool to come this way; of all the perils to face, the hideous fugitives of Shaa-dom should have been avoided. The irony of dying to the atavistic escapees of Shaa-dom was bitter in Zain Jalir's thoughts.

His blade met the next ur-ghul in the throat, but the claws of the third and the fourth slashed across his limbs and body. Zain Jalir collapsed and the ur-ghuls fell upon him, shredding and eviscerating as the air was broken with a cacophony of triumphant shrieks.

From the bloodied tatters of skin and muscle and cloth, the key to Shaa-dom was ripped free, sent into the shadows by an uncaring claw. It came to rest in a twisted patch of blood briar, which constricted quickly around the crimson-speckled stone.

There it would remain, ignored by the ur-ghuls, to await its next victim.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GAV THORPE is the New York Times bestselling author of *The Lion*, a novella in the collection *The Primarchs*. He has written many other Black Library books, including the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost* and audio drama *Raven's Flight* as well as fan-favourite Warhammer 40,000 novel *Angels of Darkness* and the epic Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*. He is currently working on a new Dark Angels series, *The Legacy of Caliban*. Gav hails from Nottingham, where he shares his hideout with the evil genius that is Dennis, the mechanical hamster.