

## Neal Asher - THE OWNER

There is a place where stands an ancient pillar. It is taller than a man, just, and wider. It is a plain cylinder without plinth or capital and is made of grey corrosion-free metal. Its surface is intagliated with strange runes, or circuit diagrams, and it stands upon sand in a bleak place where few have heard of Ozymandias. It is real, absolutely and solidly real, as if its location has formed around it — an accretion of reality. Standing on the sand by this pillar is a swordsman. He is just in its shadow; all dark fabric and iron, and seemingly part of that shadow. Such fancy he would perhaps allow a smile, knowing a permanence greater than that of the grey metal.

They were tired of running, tired of forever being on guard, and tired of the fear, but there was only one alternative. Cheydar knew this and it churned him up inside. Sometimes he felt a hopelessness so strong he just wanted to stop, to sit down and wait for the end, but he hadn't, not yet. The Code would not allow him suicide without permission.

When he saw him, the man seated on a boulder out on the flats, watching them, Cheydar thought, *Here is another killer come for the Cariphe's reward*. And, as he waved his two sons to his side and moved out from the campfire he wondered if he might die this day. The boys spaced themselves and pumped full the gas cylinders of their air guns. Cheydar was weary, loath to kill yet again, frightened he might not be able to. Behind him Suen held her daughter close and looked on. Suen, wife of Tarrin, to whom he and his family were sworn service of life. All this for her and the girl now. He knew that sometimes she damned the loyalty that kept him and his kin with her, only sometimes, without it there was only that one alternative.

The man was motionless. It seemed as if he might have sat there all night watching their camp. When he finally moved, when he finally came down from his rock, it was at the precise moment the sun gnawed a red-hot lump out of the horizon. Cheydar felt his throat clench: The Daybreak Warrior. Then he damned himself for a fool and the bitterness inside threatened to overwhelm him. He was too old for such fairy tales. If only Tarrin had been as wise.

"He looks a handy one this," he said.

It was the way the man had come down from the boulder: lithe, strong. That had been a four metre drop and he had taken it as if it was nothing and was strolling towards them with the loose-limbed gait of a trained fighter ... killer.

"Not handy enough to outrun an iron dart," said Eric, Cheydar's eldest.

If only that were so, but the three would not fire at this man unless he attacked. Honour would not permit murder. They must wait until he had come close and offered challenge, and gained the opportunity to kill them one at a time. Cheydar had taken on two challengers and killed them both. Would he be able to kill this one? A bitter part of himself observed that dying first he would at least not get to see his sons die. He observed the approaching killer and shivered. The killer was a hard-faced man with cropped blond hair. His age was indeterminate. His stature short but heavily muscled. His clothing was dramatically black and leaning towards leather. Over his leather tunic he wore chain mail. Sticking up above his shoulders were the pommels of two swords. There were knives at his belt, in his boot, probably elsewhere. Three metres from the Cheydar and his sons he halted and squatted.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Cheydar demanded.

The man looked past Cheydar and directly at Suen. "They burned your husband on the frame," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Have a care," said Cheydar, and glanced around at Suen. Would she ever get over it? Would she ever look as if she wanted to live? She had bribed the Jack-o-the-frame to use green wood so Tarrin would have a quick and relatively pain-free death from smoke inhalation. He had taken her money and still used coke and dry wood. Tarrin had screamed for a very long time. Now Suen was outlawed for attempting to bribe an official of the Cariphe. She winced and turned her face away, hugged her daughter to her. Her daughter flicked a long suffering look at Cheydar's son David, and carefully tried to extricate herself. The stranger turned his attention from Suen to Cheydar.

"He nearly got you, didn't he? You're getting too tired."

Cheydar suddenly felt cold. This was the thought that had been occupying him for days. The last killer had nearly got through his guard, nearly gutted him. This man must have seen, must have been watching.

"Who are you?" Cheydar asked yet again.

"Call me Dagon. I have come to join you."

Cheydar felt that tightness in his throat yet again. Dagon. The name of the Daybreak Warrior. He did not need this kind of thing, not now, not when he was weak enough to hope, weak enough to believe.

"Why should we allow you into our company? Why should we trust you?"

The stranger stood abruptly. There was a look on his face. Cheydar could not identify it, but it made his skin creep.

"Where is your hospitality? I am thirsty and I am hungry," said Dagon.

Cheydar felt a flush of shame, felt his face burning. Such was the way of things: the most basic tenets of the Code lost in only five days and strangers greeted at the campfire with hostility.

"You will forgive me," he said tightly, and glanced aside at each of his sons. They lowered their air guns as Dagon came forward. "Please, eat at my fire, and drink." Even as he spoke the ritual words Cheydar was aware they could ill afford the food; straight porridge gruel and not much of that. He backed off as Dagon stepped past him, his hand on his sword. It could be a ploy. There could be one quick draw and swipe when Cheydar might least be aware. Perhaps Eric might get him, he was much faster than David, but even that was doubtful. Cheydar knew the measure of men and this one looked as if he would not die easy.

The man squatted by the fire, smiled at Sheda and bowed his head to Suen, then with a deliberately long look at Cheydar he folded his legs and sat, not a position he could quickly gain his feet from. Cheydar nodded and moved to the fire, sat opposite him. The boys stood well back, air guns still ready, holsters for spare cylinders clipped open. Sheda, with a businesslike expression, pulled away from her mother and spooned gruel into a bowl, which she handed to Dagon. He thanked her, placed the bowl in his lap and carefully removed the pack from his back, exposing the sheaths of the swords. Well made, Cheydar observed from the glance he got. Dagon removed jerked meat from his pack.

"Let me offer this in return. It is little enough."

Ritual. He knew it verbatim. Cheydar felt his mouth watering as he looked at the meat. They had eaten nothing but gruel for four days. He took three pieces and tossed two of them to Eric and David, chewed on his own piece, found it tasted wonderful, better than he had ever had before. Suen and Sheda ravenously chewed into their meat.

"I have this also. Little enough."

Apples and cheese. How was it he had such fresh food so far from civilization? Cheydar did not want to ask. He asked other questions instead.

"It is a burdensome name you carry," he said.

Dagon nodded. "I sometimes think that if I had been named differently I would have been a farmer, or an inn keeper."

"What are you now?" Cheydar shot back.

"Many things. For your purposes I can be a killer of men. What do you say?"

"I say tell me how you know so much."

"I have followed you since the burning."

"Why?" asked Suen, taking part at last. It was not right for her bondsman to deal in this matter. She must take on her mantle of power. Her time was now.

Dagon said, "Because the Owner brought you people here in the Greatship Vardelex so you could build a new life. Because soon the Owner will return for an accounting, to see that his strictures have been obeyed, that the contract you people have with him has been held to. Because before the end of this demicycle the Owner and his Proctors will once again walk the world."

Suen gaped at the stranger and tried to take in his words: all that her husband believed and had understood, and they burnt Tarrin for those words in the Square of Heros before the Cariphe's palace in Ompotec. Stupid stupid words had lost Suen her husband, a son, a home, and would soon lose her her life. She could only run so far before the Cariphe's people caught up with her. She looked at Cheydar: grey, old. How long could she depend on his strength? For how long had she that right? Soon the priest soldiers would be upon them, for their sport, and they would die. At least out here it might be a cleaner death. She studied this young man who called himself Dagon, out of nursery rhymes and bedtime tales, and thought about what he had said. The Heresy of Ompotec. Ironically the name of the only place where it was called heresy and where the Cariphe and all his sick minions dwelt. Verbatim, but for one tiny alteration. She glanced at Cheydar and wondered if he had noticed. This man had said you people rather than we. She felt cold and she did not want to ask the obvious question.

"If you come with us it may well be the death of you," she said. She would give him every chance to go, every warning. This she told herself to assuage her guilt. "We have no hearth nor home — " Abruptly she stopped. No, it was wrong. "You cannot stay with us. You must go ... " She gazed at him, straight into grey-green eyes that seemed too wise. That was it, she realised. Look away from him and he is a young warrior. Look into his eyes you know he makes only his own choices.

He nodded, then lifted a strong sun-tanned hand and pointed off to their left. "It is too late for me to walk away now. They will not allow it. Guilt by association you could say, not that they observe any code."

Cheydar leapt to his feet his hand slamming down on the butt of his sword. Eight men were coming towards them at a steady trot. Eight fully-armoured and armed priest soldiers of the Cariphe. Too late now for anything but survival.

"Into the rocks!"

Suen went to take her daughter by the hand, but her daughter stayed close to David and avoided this mothering. Instead Suen took up a weapons belt from which hung a dagger and a short crossbow.

Cheydar took up his own air gun and trotted behind her, his sons following. Dagon stood by the fire watching the soldiers approach, then after a moment he followed the others.

"We need a vantage, a place to defend."

Dagon pointed up into the rocks and scrub. "Up there."

They took him at his word and scrambled that way.

"I will stay."

As he helped Suen up the slope Cheydar watched him suspiciously. Dagon returned the look then grinned and disappeared into the scrub of bushes and cycads. Cheydar had no time for him now. The priest soldiers had broken into a run and were spreading out.

"Check your targets," he told his sons. "Our friend is down there, if friend he be."

"Of course he is, father," said David. "He is the daybreak warrior."

Cheydar ignored that, cracked down the barrel of his gun, inserted an iron dart, then worked the hand pump on the charge cylinder. The leading soldier was close enough now. He brought the intricately carved butt of his gun up against his shoulder, flipped up the sight, then aimed and fired in one. The crack of the air gun was vicious and immediately followed by the horrible crunch of impact. A priest soldier staggered back with his hands coming up to a suddenly bloody face. There were two more cracks and a dart hit the rocks just in front of him and went whining over his head. He ducked down.

"Yes!" shouted Eric. Crouched down Cheydar saw that his son had hit one of them in the thigh. That one was struggling for cover. Another lay with a bloody throat. There had been no exclamation from David. The rest were now in cover provided by the bushes around their camp, and no doubt would be drawing close. Cheydar recharged the cylinder on his gun and put in another dart. Only in close fighting would he resort to the spare cylinders on his belt. His sons, he saw, were doing the same. He watched, allowed himself a little smile when he saw Eric aiming at a swiftly moving figure in black, then lowering his gun. Let us see what you are worth, Dagon. A scream was swift to answer him, followed only moments after by the gagging gurgle Cheydar recognised as the sound issuing from a cut throat. One or two? He wondered.

"Who is he?" Suen asked.

"Just a killer, out to make a name for himself," whispered Cheydar, but it did not sound right. There was a yell. Two soldiers running, a figure standing. Eric aimed again and David knocked his gun aside with the barrel of his own. Cheydar felt a fist closing in his stomach. Now. It was beautiful, if death can be called that. The two swords; crescents of morning sunlight. One man down on his knees his forehead against the ground, the other man standing for a moment until his head toppled from his shoulders. Cheydar had only seen the second blow.

"Fast," Eric breathed.

"Perfect," said David, his observation analytical.

Cheydar had no words. His mouth was dry. He looked from the scene to see one priest soldier running away just as fast as he could. He levelled his air gun, adjusted the sight for the extra distance, fired. The man sprawled then crawled on for a little while, his back rapidly soaking with blood. He tried to haul himself up by the hard dark green leaves of a cycad, then he fell again. Cheydar turned to his sons.

"Go down, see that they are all dead. Get their supplies, weapons, all we might need."

There was nothing in the Code against looting the dead.

Steeleye was the name of the third moon, or the Still Moon, for since the time of its cataclysmic arrival it had remained stationary in the sky above, day and night. In appearance it was a polished ball of metal, and there was something ominous about it, something attentive. It had appeared in the time when Cheydar had trained for service, causing floods and earth quakes. It stood vigil in the sky when he learned bladework, unarmed combat, and the maintenance of dart guns. That time was exciting; change was imminent, things would happen ... But the years passed, the tides settled and the ground ceased to shake. And the only change had been the growth in the power and oppressiveness of the Cariphate. It seemed like a betrayal to Cheydar. The moon just became ordinary. He turned his attention back from it to the conversation.

"He would not have allowed it. He would not allow the Cariphe to do the things he does. His Proctors would stop the killing. His Proctors would enforce His law."

He could see Suen regretted the outburst the moment she finished. She shouldn't have said that, but wasn't it true? All that her husband had believed: a better time, a golden age that would come again. Suen closed her eyes and shook her head. Her anger was always greatest when she missed him most, but in Cheydar's experience railing against injustice only brought it down on you.

"Why did the Proctors go away?" he asked, embarrassed and clumsily trying to move away from the subject of Tarrin's execution as he poked at the fire with a stick. He wasn't really interested in why the Proctors had gone away. He wondered if anything about those indestructible monsters of the past and their ten-thousand year old demigod master could have anything to do with him and his life.

"They did not go away. They are sleeping," said Sheda with that certainty only a teenager can have. "Daddy said they sleep in the Forbidden Zone and that they can be woken." As she finished speaking she looked at David and flushed at her own boldness.

*Now wouldn't that be something*, thought Cheydar, and shivered. He stared through the flames at Dagon. The man had been very quiet and still. Eventually he spoke.

"Why should you want to wake them?" he asked.

"Justice!" spat Suen, but she sounded suddenly unsure.

"The only justice they bring is the Owner's," Dagon replied. "They enforce only his laws and his laws say nothing about you people killing each other."

" 'You people.' You do not consider yourself one of us?" Suen asked.

Dagon looked briefly annoyed. "A manner of speech, nothing more. But I tell you this, I have read the Agreement."

Suen snorted her disbelief.

Cheydar said, "It is etched into a metal pillar around which the Ompotec temple is built. Only select members of the priesthood are allowed to see it."

Dagon smiled mildly and shook his head. "Wrong, there are in all fifty-eight of the message pillars and every death post around the forbidden zones has the Agreement etched in its surface. Anyone prepared to take a bit of a walk can read it. I've seen it many times." Suen and Cheydar stared at him. They did

not know how to refute that. He continued, "Understand that the priesthood uses any and all methods to gather power to itself. Like all religious organizations its greatest power stems from the claim to forbidden knowledge, the ability to intercede with the divine, all of that, though the Owner is hardly divine."

"What does it say?" asked David, speaking for the first time that evening, uncomfortably aware of Sheda's attention firmly fixed upon him.

Dagon glanced at him. "It is quite simple: No one to enter the forbidden zones, no building in or corruption of the Wilder zones, no more taken from them by a human than a human can carry without mechanical aid. There is also a population stricture, but that is hardly necessary as the population here is in decline."

"There has to be more than that," said Suen.

"There is not. The Owner is a great believer in personal responsibility. Beyond preventing damage to his property he doesn't have much more interest in planetary populations."

"You are an Owner expert all at once," said Suen.

"I've studied him all my life."

"Like my husband."

Dagon regarded her very directly, "No, not like your husband. My research was into original materials, not the wishful thinking and distortion that came after."

"What do you mean?"

"The Owner has fascinated scholars for centuries and a great deal has been written about him, and a lot of what has been written is simply not true."

"How do you know what is true?" asked Cheydar.

Dagon showed annoyance again, quickly repressed it. "Simple research. Consider the entire mythology that's arisen about the Proctors. To some they are saviours, and their enforcing of law will bring about Utopia. To others they are demons and this is perhaps closest. They enforced the Wilder laws. If someone used a cart to haul wood out of the Wilder a Proctor would turn up and smash the cart. They simply prevented the law being broken. But it was the population stricture that inspired terror of the Proctors. The population here is set. at two billion and must never go above that number. When it did, about two centuries ago, the Proctors turned killer. For every child born at that two billion limit a human was killed. It was completely random. It might have been a baby that died or an octogenarian on his death bed."

"I do not believe this," said Suen, but her voice was not firm. She turned to Cheydar. "I want to go into the Wilder. I want to read what is written on a death post."

Cheydar was watching Dagon thinking, *simply a killer?* He nodded, feeling his stomach clench. To actually go to the edge of a Forbidden Zone ... He turned to Suen and saw something else there in her expression: a kind of set stubbornness, a determination to carry something through. He had seen that look before and it brought to him a feeling of hopeless dread. She nodded once as if by his look he had guessed her intention and she was confirming it. She reached into her pack and took out a leather-bound book. She held it up.

"In the morning we head for the Forbidden Zone beyond North Forest, by the coast," she said. Cheydar

knew the book. It was one of Tarrin's.

"We will be caught and killed before we get there," he said. "Any route will take us through the Cariphe's lands. If we go South we can take the road to Elmarch and the Forbidden Zone there nearly touches on the road."

"We go to North Forest, by the coast."

There would be no arguing with her. She turned to Dagon, who had taken out one of his swords and was running a stone up and down the blade.

"Will you be with us?"

"Of course," he said. He looked around at them. "Sleep now, I will watch."

Cheydar returned the look.

"Wake me in two hours," he said.

Dagon took out a pocket watch, checked it, then nodded and moved off into the darkness.

The sky was lightening, but the sun had yet to break over the horizon. Like a corroded coin the sulphurous moon Linx traversed the sky, one edge gilded by the approaching sun. Steeleye was a misty orb all but lost behind thin cirrus. There was frost on the boulders, layers of mist out in the scrub.

"Father will be very annoyed," said Eric.

"Ah, but he will be well rested," said Dagon. He stood next to a boulder, an air gun cradled before him. Eric did not recognise the design. He walked up and stood beside this warrior.

"Your weapon," he said.

Dagon flipped the gun around, handed it across.

Eric said, "Valved gas cylinder ... how many shots?"

"Five. The darts are in that revolving barrel and are automatically presented."

"I've never seen its like before."

"They're made in Elmarch and are standard issue to the army there. They're the reason the Cariphe keeps to his borders."

"I'd like to go there. So would David. They say it is always sunny and the King's navy is always looking for volunteers." Eric handed the weapon back.

"They're normally volunteered with a club on the back of the head. Try the Border Legion, you'll have better luck there."

Dagon turned and started walking back to the camp. Eric followed.

"That's where you're from then?"

"Yes."

Eric glanced back. He's from Elmarch, he thought, staring at the ground. Something ... He shook his head

and halted. Yes. Where Dagon had stood there were two prints in the frosted ground ivy. No prints other than those Eric had just made coming out here and the both of them were now making as they walked back. There had to be a reasonable explanation. No man could stand as still as a statue all night, or fly, or just appear out of thin air.

"I would say that if we skulked all the way to North Forest we'd more likely be caught than if we just travelled there openly. Head into Giltown, rent a carriage and take it right to the edge of the Wilder. Much less chance of getting caught," said Cheydar. He felt that if they must make this insane journey it would be best to do it quickly.

"I leave that decision in your hands. You are the soldier," said Suen.

Cheydar grimaced. Subterfuge was hardly soldier's work. He turned to Dagon. "What do you think?"

"I think you're right," answered the warrior. "The priesthood is geared that way: they'll be looking for people who look guilty, who are trying to hide, they'll always be looking for that kind. Best to go boldly, pretend to Lord Right, even priestliness." The last word came out with a touch of contempt.

"You don't have much liking of priests do you," said Suen.

"I just don't like the ignorance of faith," he shot back at her.

The coach house at Giltown was a sprawling affair with many attached stables and low buildings for the coaches and, because it was on the main trade route from Elmarch, the carts of traders. Even from a distance the bellowing of the titanotheres could be heard, and in the fields all around grew tree ferns; fodder for the great beasts.

Beyond the coach house the rest of the town consisted of red brick houses with many storeys leaning precariously over a street leading down to a dock crowded with low black barges. It was on these that goods were brought up from the richer southern country and traded for metal ores mined around Ompotec.

"The priesthood keeps to the agreement," said Cheydar as he walked at Dagon's side to the reception building of the coach house. "There is never mining in the Wilder, nothing like that."

"There has never been the need," replied Dagon. "The established mines supply all the demand there is." He looked at Cheydar. "If they did mine in the Wilder that would bring the Proctors back and believe me, that's the last thing the priesthood wants. They have no wish to appear in any way powerless."

The main building of the coachhouse was ringed with a low veranda on which priest soldiers lolled and inspected passers by. Dagon and Cheydar ignored them as they mounted the steps and went in through the main door. Within, a fat bald official sat at a desk sorting through sheaves of paper. He glanced at them over half-moon glasses and continued with his work until Dagon, as agreed, walked up and addressed him.

"The Lady Vemeer requires a coach to take her North," he said, and dropped a bag of metal money on the table. Cheydar contained his surprise; that hadn't been in the game plan.

The official delicately pulled at the strings of the bag and opened it. His eyes widened at what he saw inside and with a glance to the door he quickly slid it across his desk and dropped it in his lap.

"We are in a hurry, a Metrarch awaits her presence."



"The gold phaeton would be best. I will take you to it." He slid the money into a pocket, picked up some forms from a stack beside him and led the way to the door. Once outside he turned away from the priest soldiers and led the way around the side of the building. The soldiers inspected the trio with expected suspicion, but did nothing.

"Will you be requiring a driver?"

"No."

"Ah."

They shortly came to a man who sat on the edge of a water trough while watching some girls work at cleaning out the huge stables. The man looked bored. He held a short whip in one hand and was methodically slapping it against his leg. To one side, in a compound with fences five feet tall and made of tree trunks, a male titanothere ate from a huge basket fixed to the stable wall. The grey hide behind its head was goad-scarred and there were calluses on its sloping back and sagging belly, from the cart straps. A couple of the fist-shaped horns on its head had been broken off, probably in mating fights, and its small piggy eyes regarded the world with seeming indifference. It flicked warble flies away from its huge rump with an inadequate tail, twitched its mussel-shell ears. When it leaned its many tons against the fence the tree trunks bowed and looked as if they might break.

"Feruth, the gold phaeton, how quickly can you have it ready?"

The man pushed himself upright and gave Cheydar and Dagon a probing look. "What's the hurry?"

"A lady visiting a Metrarch," said the official.

"Ah." The man made no move until the official tapped his pocket and the clink of money could be heard. He grinned, nodded. "I'll have it ready in a couple of hours." He moved off.

The official turned away from him to Cheydar and Dagon. He met Cheydar's look. "Yes, I know; shocking isn't it?"

Dagon said, "You'll send for us when the coach is ready?"

"Yes. Where will you be?"

"The tavern. The lady waits there now. We shall have a meal there and hope to hear from you soon after?"

"So it will be."

The official gave a little bow to them and they moved off.

"They have no honour, these people," said Cheydar, after a moment.

"Money and power command respect. There are few people who can even be true to themselves. You should have realised that long ago."

"You are cynical, Dagon."

"I see things as they are."

"You believe so?"

"Unfortunately, I know so."

Cheydar allowed that to sink in for a moment then said, "The money, did Suen give it to you?"

"It was my own."

"You shall be reimbursed."

Cheydar just caught the quickly repressed smile.

The tavern was similar in construction to the coach house; red brick and sagging, ringed with wooden verandas. The areas around the buildings were dry, as was the slabbed road. The verandas around most buildings were an indication that later in the year the combination of rain and traffic would turn the bald ground to a quagmire. Dagon stepped up onto the veranda first, and while waiting behind him, Cheydar glanced back the way they had come. That the priest soldiers from the coach house had followed them he gave no indication until he was inside the building.

"We have company, five of them," he said.

"I know."

"What would you suggest? You seem more able at subterfuge than myself."

"I feel that should they seek identification from us subterfuge will be wasted."

"Even if we kill them all here, others will come after us riding titanotheres and catch us on the road."

"I will think of something," said Dagon.

The room beyond the door was like a thousand other rooms of taverns. Suen and the rest sat at a long table, sipping at goblets of orange wine while a young man laid out food for them. Cheydar noted with approval that his sons, though staring at the food wide-eyed, were waiting for Suen to break bread and offer them a piece. Ritual; the lady feeding her bondsmen.

"Go and join them. I will go to the bar."

Cheydar made to obey then stopped himself. "You give commands very easily," he said, his face grim.

"Now is not the time, Cheydar. I can get us out of this."

"You are isolating yourself."

"Yes."

"Why?"

At that moment the five priest soldiers came in through the door. Cheydar met Dagon's look only for a moment then went and sat with Suen. From there he watched Dagon walk to the bar, a sudden arrogance in his walk, contempt in the glance he threw at the soldiers. The soldiers gazed around the tavern then followed him.

"What is happening?" asked Suen.

"I don't ... " Cheydar stared, then realised. Of course. He cursed then turned to Suen. "I think he's going to force a duel. Even priest soldiers stick to some of the Code."

"What do you mean?"

"Win or lose the rest of them will not harass us, not immediately. One night must pass between blood-lettings else duel will degenerate into open brawl or battle."

"Can we be sure of that?"

"With them, no, Lady. It is the best chance we have, though."

At the bar there was a sudden altercation. Dagon shoved one of the soldiers back.

"Be prepared to stand by your words!" he shouted, as if angry and very offended. Cheydar noted that he had picked on the officer. He aimed to behead, perhaps literally. The officer regained his balance and said something more. Dagon struck him back handed across the face then stepped to one side as another of the men made a grab for him. His sword was an arc of light between. One of the men stumbled back holding his forearm. The others kept out of the way. Cheydar was on his feet, with his air gun in his hand, and coming up beside Dagon in a moment. His sons were behind him. Dagon glanced at him.

"This scum offers insult to our Lady," he said with vehemence. Cheydar thought he acted the part well. He looked to the officer, whose eyes never wavered from the tip of Dagon's sword. Though his hand was at the short sword in his belt, he made no move to draw it.

"This scum should be made to pay, then," said Cheydar.

The officer watched. He was thin-faced and had the wiry toughness of a trained fighter. He did not draw. He knew his chances. Dagon stepped forward a little way and ritualistically spat on his boots.

"My choice, then," said the officer. This was what he was waiting for, Cheydar realised. "The time I chose is one hour from now, the place I chose is the street outside, and I chose air guns as the weapons of combat."

Cheydar nodded to himself; a sensible choice. Dagon had demonstrated his speed with the sword.

"So be it," said Dagon, and sheathed his sword in one smooth motion. As he did this hands strayed to the hilts of short swords. Cheydar smiled and raised the barrel of his gun. Hands drew back. Dagon nodded and stepped past him. They moved to the table where Dagon dispensed with his swords and took up his gun. The priest soldiers tramped from the tavern. Cheydar saw that Eric was grinning.

"What amuses you, boy?" he asked.

"Dagon's weapon — it has five shots. It is a repeater."

Cheydar nodded in confirmation when he saw the weapon, then he felt misgivings.

"You and David, keep your weapons gassed and cover the others. There may be some objection." Cheydar knew that in air gun duels it was often not the first shot that counted and that the winner was he who could reload the fastest and have more time to aim for the second shot. Dagon would not have to reload and could probably fire off all four of his remaining shots while the officer reloaded. The officer's men might consider this an infraction of the rules.

The sun was poised above the coach house and Linx was making its second daily journey across the sky, but this time was partially in silhouette and looked like a hole punched there. Dagon walked out across the worn ground and stood midway between the coach house and a titanotheres fence. The fat official from the coach house stood a few yards to one side of him and fidgeted nervously; adjudicators were

often shot by accident and he had not wanted the task. From where he stood Cheydar directed Eric and David to move away from him to the far ends of the veranda and be ready. He noted that over by the other end of the coach house a three-wheeled phaeton was being hitched to the backs of two patient cud-chewing titanotheres. Perhaps they could get this over with and be quickly on their way. He turned his attention to the right as the officer stepped out of a building just beyond the coach house and began walking towards Dagon. Six other priest soldiers walked out behind him and moved off in different directions. That could be taken two ways, either they were setting themselves for attack, or they were just covering their officer's back. The officer walked, his air gun held one-handed at his side, until he came face to face with Dagon. The fat official approached.

"Standard procedure," he said distastefully. "Stand back to back with your weapons held as you wish, then start walking at my count. I will count to ten then shout 'now'. You turn and fire at that shout, not before." He backed away quickly as Dagon and the officer turned their backs to each other. "One, two, three ... " The count seemed to take no time at all. He reached ten and the officer turned and fired. Dagon staggered forward. "Bastard," said Cheydar. There had been no 'now' and the official was unlikely to object. There was a silence as Dagon regained his balance. The officer dropped his expended cylinder and was putting in a new dart when Dagon turned, and holding his gun one-handed up to his shoulder, took careful aim, and fired. The dart cracked against the officer's gun and ricocheted up into his jaw. He stepped back making a keening sound, his cheek hanging off in a flap and his side teeth exposed in a bloody grin. He put another cylinder in his gun. Dagon fired again and there was the hollow fleshy thump indicative of a chest hit. The officer keeled over and lay coughing blood. Dagon walked up to him, watched him for a moment, then walked towards Cheydar. Cheydar watched the soldiers, then glanced aside as the official stepped up to him.

"Your phaeton is ready," he said, his face deliberately clear of expression. "I suggest you get in it now and leave."

Cheydar nodded in agreement and turned his attention to Dagon.

"Are you hit?"

"Yes."

Cheydar looked at his left arm. Blood was trickling from his fingertips. "How bad?"

"The bone is broken. The dart is still in me."

Cheydar nodded to the interior of the tavern. "We will deal with it now."

"It would be better if we left," said Dagon.

"Don't be foolish. If there is to be a fight later on today or tomorrow I do not want you weak from blood loss. We deal with it now."

Dagon looked at him with evident surprise then smiled. "You are right. You are absolutely right," he said.

Cheydar wondered why he took such delight in being wrong, but dispelled the thought when Dagon staggered as they entered the tavern and he stepped to support him. Suen rushed to help once they were inside.

"Sheda, get my things," she said. They sat Dagon in a chair and Eric stood guard at the door. "Sheda! Damn, where is that girl?" Cheydar looked around then continued to cut away Dagon's shirt. He took a look at the wound then went to his own pack and removed a field-surgery kit. Suen walked to a back

door and looked out. "Sheda!" Cheydar put a tourniquet around the top of Dagon's arm then tossed powder on the split below.

"That should deaden it some," he said. "I have to get the dart out." He cleaned a pair of surgical pliers in alcohol and a pair of spatulas that he handed to Suen. "When I say, hold open the wound with these." They waited a short time until the powder did its work, then at Cheydar's instruction Suen pushed the spatulas into the split and opened it wide. The dart was imbedded in broken bone. Cheydar got the pliers on it, but had to shove his fingers in the wound so one end of the break did not get pulled out as he tugged at the dart. Dagon turned to look at him with a sickly grin on his face, then he fainted. Cheydar stitched his wound and splinted his arm while he lay unconscious on the floor.

"Now we have to get him to the phaeton. Where is David?" Cheydar turned to Eric, who looked momentarily guilty before removing a fold of paper from his tunic and handing it over. Cheydar unfolded the note and read it. He was angry for a moment then guilty to feel relieved. He handed the note to Suen. She read the note then suddenly looked very angry. Cheydar waited for the explosion, as Dagon regained consciousness and struggled to sit upright. Cheydar squatted to help him.

"What's going on?" Dagon asked Suen.

"David and Sheda have gone. They've taken or are taking a barge to Elmarch."

"We have time to stop them," said Suen, screwing up the note.

"Why?" asked Dagon.

"Why!" Suen all but screeched. "She is my daughter. She is just a little girl!"

Dagon gave her such a look of contempt it was almost a blow. She stepped back. "That little girl has been lying with David since I joined you, and probably long before. She's found love, or infatuation if you will, and you want her at your side to go and die with you below a death post."

"I am not going to die," said Suen, quietly, almost whispering.

"Then you can find them in Elmarch sometime after. They will be safer there." Dagon staggered to his feet. Suen stared at him, probably knowing him to be right but loath to agree. She turned away as Cheydar and Eric began to collect up their things.

"I blame you for this," she snarled at Cheydar. He nodded acquiescence and continued with what he was doing. Suen abruptly sat down and began crying into her hands. Cheydar reached out to touch her shoulder and she knocked his hand away. As they loaded the phaeton she made no objection. She boarded without a word.

It took four days to reach the last coach house before North wood and during the four stops on the way for the feeding of the titanotheres they mostly stayed inside the capacious phaeton and ate cold food. For a day Dagon ran a fever, but this was quickly dealt with by drugs bought at their first stop. No one followed. Perhaps the soldiers were embarrassed by the cowardly duelling tactics of their officer, or frightened by the way he was dispatched. At the last coach house they bought supplies and set out afoot along one of the many paths into the Wilder.

"Perhaps we should have hired a guide," said Cheydar as the trees closed around them. He preferred to be out in the open. Too much that was unexpected could come upon them in this place. There were dangerous creatures in the Wilder and dangerous men. He unhooked his airgun, dart pack and blades, and handed them to Eric to free himself of iron before checking their course. He laid the compass on the

map, turned the map, grunted his satisfaction then put map and compass away. His son returned to him his weapons. They continued.

"We'll be at the coast by the evening," said Cheydar. No-one felt inclined to reply to him. The forest brought its own silence that it seemed should not be disturbed by rude human chatter. Suen had had very little to say since her daughter had run away. Perhaps, Cheydar thought, she was beginning to realise what was most important. He had. He was glad David had gone and only sad that Eric had not gone with him. The two of them had not yet sworn any oath to Tarrin's family and it was not necessary for them to serve to the limit; death.

They walked all morning and most of the afternoon through thick deciduous woodland. Great oaks, chestnuts, nettle elms, and the like, towering all around them. The nettle elms were bare, but the oaks still held onto the Autumn leaves other trees were in the process of shedding. The ground was swamped with leaves in shades of red and gold, and every breeze brought more of them kiting down. Through this colourful layer pushed fungi in bright poisonous colours and colours the same as the leaves. Dagon collected some of the latter in a cloth bag he hung at his belt. Eric and Cheydar, not knowing which fungi might be edible confined themselves to picking up sweet chestnuts, and walnuts. Suen just tramped along.

"Let us take a break now," said Cheydar, in the afternoon. "The last four days have been wearing. Here at least we can relax some. Here." He gestured to an area clear of briers below an ancient walnut tree. Suen nodded to him and slumped down on a pile of leaves by the trunk. "Take yourself off," said Cheydar to Eric, while looking at his mistress. "Bring us some fresh meat. I'll light the fire." Dagon and Cheydar cleared a space in the leaves and collected together a pile of the ample fallen wood. Cheydar waved Dagon away as he built a fire. Dagon went to sit by Suen.

"You have to let them go some time," the warrior said.

Cheydar glanced over, seeing Suen looking up at the tree from where she lay with her cropped golden hair on the leaves, blending with them. He felt something twist in his stomach; concentrated on the conversation.

"I don't need your comfort," she told Dagon.

"But you do, and I think it would comfort you to know that David carries with him enough money for them both to live in comfort in Elmarch for a year or even more." He looked at her with mild eyes.

She sat upright. "You?"

"I gave him the money."

"You knew then," she said, angry now.

"Yes."

"You could have said something."

"I could have, but I did not see their choice as foolish." Suen just glared at him. He continued, "I think Sheda hoped you would follow, that you would abandon this meaningless quest."

Smoke wafted into Cheydar's face as his fire caught; made his eyes water.

"It is not meaningless," said Suen.

"What meaning then does it have?"

Cheydar left the fire to its own devices and joined them, squatting down on his heels. Suen reached into her pack and removed her husband's book. She shook it at them as she spoke.

"My husband recorded here that there is a breach in the fence two miles in from the coast. Only a few miles North East of this there is a building in the forest. In that building are the Proctors."

Dagon looked thoughtful for a moment. "What makes you think the breach is still there?"

"Why should it not be?"

Dagon grimaced. "What would you intend should you reach this building?"

"I will wake the Proctors and lead them back through the breach."

"Why should they go with you? Why should they even wake for you?"

"They will. I'm not interested in argument, Dagon. I did not ask you to join us. You said when you first joined us that you believed the Owner to be returning for an accounting and that his Proctors would once again walk the world, yet you show no signs of this belief. I am going there. Cheydar will follow me because I know he would not obey me if I ordered him not to. Eric should perhaps return ... " She looked at Cheydar, then returned her attention to Dagon. "You do not have to come, yet you are, that's your choice. Kindly stop trying to dissuade me from the choices I have made."

Dagon bowed his head, "I apologise. You are correct. I do not have the right to make other people's choices for them, even should those choices kill."

Suen turned her face from him. "Here is Eric." Eric came back to the fire with four squirrels, skinned and gutted, hanging on a stick. He was grinning like a maniac. He had been enjoying himself. Cheydar thought it unlikely he would be able to send this son away. He took a pan out of his pack and tipped in a little water. They dined on squirrels broiled with mushrooms and sweet chestnuts. They ate walnuts while they waited for the squirrels to cook, as there were plenty on the ground, then they sat around the fire talking of anything but Proctors and the Owner. It was pointless moving on, as darkness was gathering the forest close about them. Dagon took first watch.

Waking to take his watch, Eric saw that Dagon had apparently not moved all night. So *that is it*, he thought, remembering footprints in frost. He wondered how any man could be possessed of such a stillness.

"You have not moved all your watch," Eric said to him.

"That is true," said Dagon. "The leaves create too much noise."

"How can you be so still?"

"It comes from inside."

Eric did not understand, but was not prepared to admit this. He saw that Dagon had his arm out of its sling.

"You can move your arm?"

"It is healing quickly. This is a good body."

Eric watched him walking back to the embers of the camp-fire. *He is deliberately mysterious*, he

thought, *to make us think he is more than we reckon ... or is he deliberately mysterious to cover that there is something strange about him?* Eric blinked in the darkness. It was all too complicated.

Morning brought a thick fog into the trees that coated everything with well-defined ice crystals and brought leaves tumbling down ungently. The fire was roaring up well with the extra wood Cheydar had thrown on it and he kept it within sight as he patrolled, his air gun charged and ready to come up against his shoulder. It would be too easy to get lost in this, and he definitely did not want to be lost now. The chuckling bark came again, to his left this time. Whatever it was it could be circling around to get at the others. He hurried back to the fire. When he got there he saw the other three were awake.

"What is it?" Eric asked.

"Hyeanadon," Dagon supplied. He tossed his air gun to Eric then drew his sword. Eric looked at him with surprise. "Our darts will not stop it if it decides it is hungry enough to attack us." He glanced at Suen who was staring at him white faced. "You take Eric's gun." He turned to Cheydar. "I know, I'm sorry, but I know about these creatures and I doubt you've encountered one."

"Your other sword," said Cheydar, holding out his hand. His own blade was a short stabbing blade used in combat with an armoured opponent. He would use that as well as the sword Dagon handed over. It was light. Just holding it gave Cheydar a surge of confidence. It was so very very sharp.

"Let's move," he said, taking up his pack. "We cannot stay here all day." He led the way back onto the path, sliced a leaf in half as it fell in front of him. Confidence died as the two halves reached the ground and Eric fired one shot. The huge creature made a yipping growling sound, its teeth clashing over where the dart had struck it, then it disappeared into the fog. That sound was answered by chuckling barks from two different directions.

"They hunt in packs," said Dagon.

"Really," said Cheydar, studying the sword he held and wishing he was somewhere else. Eric loaded another dart. He looked no less scared than the rest of them. Of course Cheydar had heard of such creatures. It made him cringe to think of how he let his son go hunting squirrels.

"Remember, they are only animals," said Dagon.

"That's a comfort," said Cheydar. How long had those teeth been? Two inches, three inches? And how high at the shoulder had the creature been? Higher than his own head at least.

"Shoot for the eyes, cut for the legs," said Dagon.

"Yes, of course."

The fog seemed to grow thicker as the morning progressed, and frost formed on loose clothing. Cheydar was thankful for Autumn leaves as the hyaenadons could not attack in silence. Any other time of the year and they would have been dead long since. One hyaenadon would make a noisy growling feint while another tried to sneak up on them. Every time it was the noise of the leaves that gave it away. The leaves also told them that the creatures were still with them all the time between attacks. Two attacks were driven off, steel darts smacking against rock-hard skulls. On the third attack the hyaenadon kept coming.

Cheydar dropped his air gun and braced himself with the sword held two-handed before him. The hyaenadon came in a snarling charge, its shoulders and head thick with the blood of its dart wounds. Eric pumped darts into it and it was half blinded by the time it reached them. Dagon strode to meet it, stepped neatly to one side and cut across with full force, his whole body in the cut. A ton of hyaenadon went past



him nose down in the leaves, its left forelimb clinging by a sliver of flesh and skin. Cheydar struck down with his blade and it carved meat from the creature's face but did not penetrate bone. Its huge jaws clashed at him as it struggled to right itself. Dagon's sword went in through its side, twisted, came out on a fountain of blood. Cheydar stepped around, hacked down on its neck. Three hacks it look to reach a spine he could not sever. The stink of the creature's vomit and excrement thickened the air. Cheydar drew his short sword to drive between vertebrae, then turned as Dagon bounded past him. Another of the creatures was coming from the other side and only Eric faced it. Cheydar felt his stomach clench. Eric had perhaps one shot to fire. He was dead.

"Get out of the way!" Cheydar bellowed, running after Dagon.

Eric took careful aim, pressed the trigger. The hyaenodon stumbled, shook its head. Eric shouldered the air gun, reached up, and hauled himself up onto the oak limb above his head. Dagon met the second hyaenodon like the first, brought it down, heart stabbed. It died vomiting up its last meal in which Cheydar was sure he saw the chewed remains of a human hand. Eric grinned like a maniac from the oak tree. Suen just kept saying, "Oh my God. Oh my God." But she shrugged away Cheydar's hand when he rested it on her shoulder. A third hyaenodon retreated into the fog.

In the middle of the afternoon the fog cleared as far back as they could see through the trees, and the hyaenodon that had been trailing them disappeared. Then they saw a herd of chalicotheres that were the hyaenodon's usual prey. Perhaps it went after them or returned to the ready source of meat its fellows had become.

The trail began to cut across the face of a steep slope, and after consulting his map and compass, Cheydar led them down the slope to a fast-moving river, with gravel beds between half submerged slabs of rock. Armour-headed salmon swam in the deeper pools hunting trilobites the size of a human hand. They followed this river downstream and as evening encroached they heard the cadence of waves on a shingle beach and came out of forest by the sea, gleaming in yellow moonlight.

"Not a place to swim," said Cheydar, pointing out at a huge fin.

"It's only a basking shark," said Dagon.

Cheydar looked at him with annoyance.

"Is there anything you don't know?" he asked sarcastically.

Dagon looked at him, didn't reply.

They walked on for some while longer until the setting sun illuminated a silver post in the trees above the beach. They climbed above the beach and came upon the post, no closer than five metres. The post was higher than a man and as wide. It was a plain silver cylinder with what could have been runes, or could have been circuit diagrams, etched into its surface.

Cheydar stared at it and felt a crawling superstitious dread. He had been raised on stories about these things, about the power, the death. So many people had died trying to cross fence lines, or by just crossing accidentally. He glanced to his left, into the forest. No trees grew in line to the next post. There was just short grass and lichen on the ground. It was like this all the way along; trees never grew close enough to a fence where their falling might damage a post. No creepers or vines grew, nothing grew that might obscure posts from view. A human, crossing the line between posts would die, dramatically. Animals crossed the line without ill effect. It was just the way it was.

"Where are these words?" Suen asked Dagon. He pointed to a framed area on the post and looked at

her. Her lips pulled back from her teeth in sudden anger. "And how are we supposed to understand that?"

"Your husband would have understood it. The language is old-Earth English; the language of scholars, the language that was yours when you came here."

"Ours," said Suen pointedly. She led the way into forest then, keeping to the edge of the trees, away from the death posts.

Eventually they came to an area where trees had fallen on ground turned boggy, their roots clawing at the sky. Beyond this was a break in the ground risen to head height; a recently risen wall of mud. Just before the break, spring water bubbled and new streams were cutting their way into the forest. They moved away from the fence line and got past this by climbing the trunk of a fallen elm. Above the break only a couple of trees had come down. The ground was dry here, but there were deep cracks in it where it had moved.

"Underground river," said Dagon. "Changed its course; undermined everything." And one of the things it had undermined was a death post. The post was tilted at an angle and glassy underground cables exposed.

"Here," said Suen, "if we cross on the side the post is tilted from we will not be harmed."

"It is good to be so certain," said Dagon.

"You do not have to try," snapped Suen.

Cheydar gazed across the line and wondered if he dared cross, even to follow Suen. There was too much dread caught up in the idea. Never before had he so feared death. Perhaps it was because there was nothing here he could fight. He turned to say something to Dagon; anything to ease the tension in him. The snarling bark came just behind him and he was jerked off his feet by his back pack, shaken, then hurled to one side as the straps of his pack broke. He struck a tree and fell to the ground half-stunned and staggeringly tried to right himself as the hyaenodon went for Suen. Air guns cracked and the creature turned, its teeth clashing at the air. Cheydar ran at it, drawing the sword Dagon had given him. He saw Dagon in front of it, sword drawn, ready for the cut, but the creature turned at the last moment and its jaws snapped on the sword and broke it in half. Then it had Dagon in its jaws, shaking him, still running, into fence line. The air filled with lightnings. Clamped in the creature's jaws, Dagon was sheathed head to foot in fire. The hyaenodon went down, releasing him; a burning thing on the ground that after a moment rose into the air again as if impaled on the lightnings. Cheydar saw this, smelt burning fur and burning flesh, black after-images flickering across his vision. Then the lightnings went out. Dagon's blackened corpse dropped to the ground beyond the fence, extremities breaking and falling away in charcoal shells. The hyaenodon was not burnt, but it did not move again. Cheydar gritted his teeth over sickness and horrified surprise. Not him, not Dagon, he shouldn't have died.

"Why did it kill the hyaenodon?" asked Eric, his voice flat.

"The power was there to kill a man. The hyaenodon just got in the way because it was holding him in its mouth," replied Cheydar. They were both standing back by the trees looking at Suen who stood close to the fence and stared at the blackened corpse. What could she possibly say or do now? It was time to turn back and follow David and Sheda to Elmarch. Time to end this pointless quest. Perhaps, thought Cheydar in the most secret part of his mind, for an ending to oaths. Suen had ceased to have a right to his loyalty when she no longer supplied his food, a roof over his head, and a means to decent interment after his death. Only plain stubbornness had kept him with her.

"What will we do now?" asked Eric.

Cheydar paused a moment over his reply and saw Suen take a step towards the fence. He did not believe she would go further. She feared death as much as any and a working fence was certain death. In some stories it had even been described as the fence separating the living world from the land of the dead.

"We will go to Elmarch, perhaps down the coast so we avoid all the Cariphe's lands. We'll take service there. Perhaps the army ... No!"

Suen was striding towards the blackened corpse of the Daybreak Warrior. Cheydar ran after her with Eric close behind him. They did not reach her in time. She crossed the line of the fence, came to stand over the corpse. Cheydar hesitated only a moment at the line, Eric not at all. As they reached her she was breathing heavily and had an insane look to her face. Cheydar realised she had meant to die. The fence had not killed her, perhaps something had gone wrong, burnt out. Cheydar realised he was shaking. He reached out to rest a hand on her shoulder, but at that moment she dropped to her knees and bowed down, sobbing. Cheydar felt sick with fear after the fact. He glanced at Eric whose face was now white with shock at the realisation of what they had done. They had crossed the fence. They were in the Forbidden Zone.

Digging with Dagon's broken sword and the pan Cheydar carried, they buried what remained of the warrior and stabbed the broken sword in the ground to mark the spot. By the time this was done they had all regained a certain grim composure. They would go on and find this building that contained Proctors, and then ... Cheydar had no idea what would happen then. Perhaps the Proctors would kill them for being in the Forbidden Zone. Perhaps Suen would lead them to Ompotec and there exterminate the Cariphe and his priest soldiers. Whatever, Cheydar preferred to walk forwards. He doubted he would have the nerve left to turn around and walk back through the fence.

In the long shadows of evening, after covering perhaps two miles, they built a fire and roasted a wild pig Eric had shot only a short distance from the fence. It was one of the normal kind; similar to the domesticated ones, not one of the forest giants Cheydar had heard tell of. They really did not need another encounter like the one with the hyaenadons.

"I thought there was something special about him," said Eric. "He stood watch all night without moving."

"There was something special about him," said Cheydar. "He was a great warrior, fearless and strong. It took death posts to stop him. Nothing else could." He looked at Suen who was staring out into the darkness. "What did you think, my lady?"

"He knew things, and he was not one of us," she said. "He wasn't meant to die."

"None of us are," said Cheydar, then he stood to take the first watch. As he stepped away from the light of the fire to stand in darkness, he felt bitter. Her final comment had been right, he felt, yet he dared not admit to himself why he thought this was so. He walked a circuit in the darkness then slowly made his way back to the fire where he sat warming his back and watching. A chill breeze shifted the fire behind him when he had been watching for an hour. This slowly increased in strength and in only a few minutes the others had woken.

"Winter is upon us," said Suen, sitting up with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Cheydar wondered why he thought this comment so futile and why he felt that this wind had nothing to do with Winter. It grew in strength, at first a muted roar through the trees blowing leaves before it. Then its strength increased. Soon the roar was no longer muted and a blizzard of leaves was blasting across their

campsite. The flames from the fire came out below the stack of wood and flat along the ground. Out in the darkness a tree went down with an abrupt crash, then another. They huddled against the wind. Cheydar tossed a log on the fire and this prevented it being blasted away. The wind fed it leaves and it spat out sprays of embers.

"This is not right!" he shouted over the roar. Suen and Eric just stared at him. They were in the Forbidden Zone Who knew what was right? Cheydar looked up, why, he did not know. "God save us," he said, and they heard his words clear and gazed up as well.

Steeleye, the third moon, now filled a quarter of the sky, gigantic, impossibly close. It wasn't a moon like the others. Cheydar realised he had always known that. It was one of those things never spoken of in the Cariphate; it was a moon put there by god to light our nights. Heretical to believe otherwise. Cheydar saw the constructions on its surface; the angular shapes and the towers, the glint of power, vast cities of machines, giant ramscoop engines, and the flare plates of fusion drives ... here, no moon fallen in place by the luck of natural forces brought to balance, but a ship, a ship so vast it stunned the mind, a Great Ship. Here then was the Vardalex; the Owner's ship. And as Cheydar stared, wondering when he might be crushed, red fire flashed and swirled between constructs the size of mountains and flashed down, here, there, again and again.

"That was over Ompotec!" Eric shouted.

Cheydar wanted to crawl under his blanket and hide, or he wanted to get up and shout at the sky. He sat, unable to move. There could be no doubt; this was the stuff of ancient stories, of the wars they had fled, of vast ships and planet-destroying powers. What of Ompotec? Granted the place was a sack of scorpions, but there were good people there as well.

"The wind is easing," he said, because it was, and there seemed little else to say. He lowered his gaze, returned his attention to the forest, to things he could deal with. "Suen, Eric." They turned to him, then turned to see what he saw, said nothing, again, what was there to say?

The Proctor stood five paces from the fire, leaning on a thick metal staff intagliated like a death post. It was eight feet tall, robed and hooded, but the hood not enough to hide the eyeless leathery head and grim slit of a mouth. It gestured with one huge six-fingered hand. It wanted them to follow, this was clear. Cheydar stood up. At least it had not killed them, perhaps it intended to throw them out of the Forbidden Zone. Eric and Suen stood also. They grabbed up their belongings and followed the Proctor into the darkness and the leaves, and the cold blast of the wind. It was leading them away from the fence, Cheydar realised.

As they walked bowed through the darkness the wind began to abate, and a stinging hail rattled on the leaves. Every few hundred paces Cheydar had to look up at the sky to remind himself what was happening. He tried to recapture the excitement he had felt as a youth when Steeleye had first appeared in the sky. There was awe, but with it the wisdom of age had brought fear. He saw that after the first time Suen did not look up again. She stared resolutely ahead and was the first to see the grey loom of the building in the darkness, and the dark mouth of a doorway. The Proctor led them into that darkness.

"This must be the place," said Suen. There was something avid in her voice. Cheydar surveyed the dusty gloom and wondered at it. He had not been able to see much beyond the grey bulk of this place in the concealing trees, but it had not seemed to him to be of any great extent. The Proctor had gone to one side. He could hear it moving about. Suddenly there was light. Suen gasped. Eric swore.

"Nothing here," said Cheydar. He turned to the Proctor for answers and saw that it just stood with its back to the wall, waiting, patient as a stone. Something stirred then. Air feathered his face. He turned, felt

Eric's fingers digging into his biceps, heard Suen moan with fright, felt his legs go weak and his stomach turn over.

"No Proctors here but Galeb," said the apparition. "He stayed for whatever reasons Proctors have. His fellows went to other worlds, other civilizations, a long time ago. There is nothing here for you."

Cheydar could see Dagon in there; in the shape of the face, somewhat in the tone of the voice, but otherwise this could not be mistaken for anything less than the Owner himself. His eyes were pupil-less red, and he was pale like an albino, half-seen machines hung about him, were connected to him, plugged down into sockets in his head, neck and spine; his link with the ship and with the rest of a mind that had outgrown its human skull, his mind. He seemed solid, the machines less so. There was a feeling of power in the air, of forces bearing down on this point like mountains turned on their tips.

"You ... the Owner," said Suen.

Dagon, the Owner, looked at her and she flinched back.

"Didn't you know that?" he asked.

"I thought ... but you died."

"Dagon is just an aspect of me, a part of me, the oldest part and a part not yet reintegrated else Ompotec would still be standing and the Cariphe's garrison still living."

The red fire, thought Cheydar, and felt a deep vicious satisfaction.

"What do you mean?" asked Suen.

"I do not interfere in human affairs," said the Owner. "The Cariphe would not have lasted. The King of Elmarch was preparing to bring him down even as your husband burned ... All part of the ebb and flow in the tide of human affairs." There was a shimmer. Something changed. The machines became distant and Cheydar saw that the eyes were no longer red.

"But I do interfere in human affairs." And it was Dagon speaking now; the man they had travelled with. He looked directly at Suen. "Proctors would have done no good, but this has, for you. When I died on the fence all that I was returned here to this." He gestured behind him at the half-seen machines. "I held my integrity long enough to open the fence, to destroy the Cariphate. That I speak to you like this, now, is a boon my whole self grants. There will be more killing, Suen, when the army of Elmarch hunts down the last of the priest soldiers. But once the King has access to the mines around Ompotec, a new age will be born. You'll see the start of that." He turned to Eric. "Join the the Border Legion, like I said. You'll do well there." Finally he regarded Cheydar. "And you ... do what you must. You are a good man, Cheydar." There was pain then in Dagon's face. The last he managed was, "I've been before, perhaps ... sometime ... "

"Wait," said Cheydar, and knew his request to be futile. The Owner was back, the eyes like a fire seen through rubies. The machines showing a solid face turned out from that other place where they were, somewhere above.

The Owner said, "That is all. Galeb will lead you to the fence. The death posts will be reactivated in the morning."

"But you can't — " began Suen, a note of righteousness in her voice that had Cheydar cringing.

The Owner interrupted, "Suen, you are on my property. You have until morning not to be. Galeb will

lead you and if you will not go he will kill you. That is all."

Air dragged at them as it rushed to fill the space the Owner had occupied. Dagon had been there even at the end, but buried under layers of something ancient and frighteningly complex. Cheydar took Suen by the arm and led her out. Eric followed, trying not to grin at such adventure.

"We'll go by the coast to Elmarch, find David and Sheda," said Cheydar, wondering if Suen would ever be able to live.

"Yes," she said, and leant against him. He shrugged her off and followed the grey shape of the Proctor into the dark.