

Neal Asher - TIGER TIGER

*'What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?'*

A tiger had taken the orphan Jeleel Welder down by the Wishpool. Her blood speckled the Rhode's dark green leaves and they found her soul, on its unbreakable silver chain, depending from its roots. Sapher found tracks near the pool and told their story to the villagers.

"It took her here while she washed Baum's shirts. She fought it here and it dragged her to here and this blood is where it bit her. It is arterial blood and there is much of it. She probably died before it took her deep into the Rhode and ate her," he said.

He was very matter of fact about it all and Tamsin felt sorrow for his brother. He knew how much Sapher had loved Jeleel. How intensely he had courted her. The villagers peered to the Rhode. The dendrons were in flower and deep in them was all perfumed shadow.

"This cannot be," said Baum, the Elder, pointing the grey spade of his beard at Sapher. "The Agreement. He does not allow this."

"The Agreement," spat Sapher. He stabbed his spear into the earth to demonstrate how he felt about the Agreement.

Baum continued, "I know your thoughts on this, but there has to be some other explanation. 'Man must not kill tiger and tiger will not kill man.' The Owner was very specific." As he mentioned the Owner, he touched his pendant with his forefinger then made the sign: his hand held out flat, parallel with the ground.

"The Agreement is just that. It does not bind. What about Temron Drivetech? He killed a tiger. Who is to say that tigers may not break the Agreement as did he? Perhaps this is their vengeance," said Sapher.

"Vengeance was done upon Temron," said Baum.

They all nodded and remembered. After his sister had died of the ague Temron had denied the Agreement and vehemently claimed that there could be no Owner. He had then, in the madness of his grief, told the village that his sister would be buried in a tiger-skin burial robe. He had killed a tiger and done this thing; his sister wrapped in skin that was still bloody. The following night Temron had disappeared.

"You say vengeance was done upon him. I saw no evidence of it. I saw only his footprints leading into the Rhode. I saw only that he left us," said Sapher.

"What Temron's fate may have been is irrelevant. What do we do now?" said Tamsin. He watched his brother. He needed to hear this, though he did not want to.

"We go after the tiger and we kill it," said Sapher.

"I cannot allow that," said Baum.

Sapher ignored him and turned to the villagers. "Who will come with me? This must be done. Too long we have been bound by superstition and fear. We are stronger and more cunning than the tigers. We should rule here, as is right!"

Some stepped forwards, but others shook their heads and turned away — returned to the village. Ephis came up and stood beside Tamsin.

"You will go with him?" she asked, frightened that she might lose this newly found love.

"I must," said Tamsin, placing his hand against the side of her face. "He is my brother."

"This is madness," she said. "The Owner will punish us."

"Your father has faith so you must have faith," he said.

She pushed his hand away. "Can you doubt the truth of the Agreement?"

He smiled at her. She was like so many of the villagers; she never questioned the old teachings, never wondered what might or might not be true. He loved her but sometimes her beliefs caused painful argument. If only her father had not been Baum. This, he decided, was not the time for argument — his brother needed him.

"I have to go," he said.

She regarded him for a long moment.

"Then I will go with you," she said.

Though half the village agreed to go with him, Sapher was livid at the rest.

"Yes, crawl back to your huts and sleep untroubled. When the tigers come in the night to eat you I will laugh and climb a tree to watch," he sneered at those who departed.

Amongst those who remained were Tamsin, Sapher and Ephs, Torril and Chand — husband and wife who had always been closest to Sapher, and who hunted with him all the time. The surprise members were Baum and Ghort.

"My daughter is all I have now. I will come with you. I will interfere in no way. I will not stop you killing the tiger, nor will I help you," said Baum.

"I will come," said Ghort.

They all looked around. The huge man was sitting on a boulder with his elbow on his knee and his chin resting on the palm of his hand. He blinked blue eyes at them and said no more. That was the thing about Ghort: no one noticed he was there until he let them know. When they did know they were again awakened to the fact that this was the man who had lifted a fallen coral ash from his hunting partner Dorlis, and who had, at a run, carried Dorlis the ten kilometres back to the village. A vain rescue though, for Dorlis had taken poison rather than spend the rest of his life a cripple.

"Why should you come?" asked Sapher, bitterness still in his voice. Tamsin glared at his brother, hoping he would say no more. Ghort would be a valued member of such an expedition and must not be put off.

"I come because I wish to," said Ghort.

"You believe in the Owner," said Sapher.

Ghort just regarded him with those blue eyes. Sapher turned away in frustration.

"Very well," he said after a moment. "Be back here in the hour. You know what supplies to bring, and if any of you have access to family weapons you may bring them."

"Family weapons?" said Baum, outraged.

Sapher glared at him and he desisted.

They wore the canvas trousers and jackets that were necessary for travelling deep into the Rhode. The only family weapon brought to the hunt was the one Sapher carried: the Logisticson's gun. Tamsin allowed this even though the gun had been his assigned responsibility from his fifteenth year. Since its last firing, in Tamsin's grandfather's time, it took a month of bright sunlight to get it up to eighty per cent of a charge. It would take no more. That charge also tended to bleed away during the hours of darkness. It was all something to do with the flickering red lights on the side of the weapon, but Tamsin could not decipher them — the manual had been lost four generations ago.

Torril and Chand brought their hunting bows and long knives, plus all the usual supplies for a hunt when the prey were deer and swamp elk, not tigers. Tamsin was not skilled in the use of a bow, so he brought his father's two spears — serviceable weapons with wide blades fashioned of ship metal; blades that took ages to lose their edge and ages to sharpen again.

Ghort came with only one spear, but what a spear it was. The blade was two hands wide and as long as a normal man's forearm. The Smith had taken months to cut the metal for it, from the old hull, and months to sharpen it. It was Ghort's reward for his rescue of Dorlis, who killed himself the day after the presentation.

Ephis brought her crossbow with its quarrels fashioned of Rhode wood. Her father, Baum, brought no weapons at all. He brought the Agreement. Sapher looked set to explode when he saw this, instead, he climbed a rock to address them all.

"We have two hours left until darkness," he said, then waited a moment until sure of all their attention before continuing. "The tiger went east to the Ship. We will camp there for the night then use it as our base while we hunt the beast down. The Plain of Landing is probably its main hunting ground." He glared at them all belligerently, daring them to dispute his words.

"He can tell an awful lot from a few tracks," Ephes whispered to Tamsin. Tamsin glared at her, then moved away from her to be closer to his brother.

"If we work together on this we should have the beast's skin within days. We will kill this tiger for Jeleel!"

As he said this he punched the air with the family gun. There came a grumbling response from the crowd that could have meant anything.

Then a voice spoke up from the back. "Does Jeleel want you to kill a tiger?"

For a moment there was absolute silence, then heads turned to seek the source of that voice. Abruptly the crowd parted and a raggedy scarecrow of a man walked through.

"Owner save us!" exclaimed Baum, clutching the Agreement to his chest.

"That option he left to you," said the man, then he held out his hand to Baum. "Now give me Jeleel's soul pendant."

"Who are you to make demands?" yelled Sapher, jumping down off his rock.

Tamsin moved up beside him and grabbed his arm. "That's Temron: the tiger killer," he said, and this news stilled even Sapher.

They watched while Baum groped about in his pouch and eventually came up with a tangle of chains and pendants.

"That's old Nigella, and that's Dolic. Ah, here." He separated out a pendant, "I see you've lost yours," he said as he handed Jeleel's pendant across to Temron.

Temron smiled and closed his fist around the object.

"I have been dead for eight years and now I am back," he said.

At this there came a concerted muttering and most people moved back from him. All except one, Tamsin noted. Ghort moved closer, his expression strangely intense.

Temron continued, "I died out in the Rhode because I broke the Agreement. I died alone and in pain, but at least my pain was my own."

Temron raised his fist and a voice spoke out that all recognised. It was Jeleel's voice:

"Now, with what I know, I wonder if I should forgive him. I find that I cannot. Life was sweet and seemed likely to become sweeter. I was innocent," said the voice.

A woman wailed and fell to her knees. The voice went on:

"Do not weep, mother. You will be with me again some day."

"Who has done this?" the woman shouted.

"Sapher did this to me. He raped me, then he beat me and cut me with his knives, then he tied rocks in my dress and threw me into the Wishpool. Despite his beatings and his cuttings, I drowned in the end."

"You murderer!" Baum bellowed.

Tamsin was turning to his brother when Sapher yelled.

"Nooo!"

An actinic flash burnt the air and a sound like a rock hitting a tree trunk, opened it. Tamsin staggered back with the smell of burning flesh in his nostrils. He saw Baum falling with smoke pouring from the embered cavity of his chest. His brother had fired the gun..

"Sapher!"

Sapher turned the weapon on Tamsin. Tamsin saw the look in his eyes and dived to one side. Behind him he heard a scream. He rolled and ran into the Rhode. Fire behind him. Screams and chaos. His brother had raped and murdered Jeleel. Tamsin ran in semidark until a root tripped him and brought him to his knees. He pulled himself to a tangle of trunks and tried to bite down on the tears that threatened. Had he known this already? He dared not entertain the thought. Distantly he heard shouting and the sounds of people running. Then close to he heard something and moved as quietly as he could to observe.

It was Temron walking up a path through the Rhode. He seemed almost to be gliding, moving faster forward than his pace should actually have taken him. He also seemed somehow blurred. Behind him Ghort was running to catch up. Temron turned when the big man was close.

Ghort staggered to a halt and rested his weight on his spear. Temron seemed to be fading into the background, or perhaps it was that another background was reaching out from somewhere to grab him back. Abruptly he came back into focus and was no longer Temron. Dark hair turned white over a thin face. Dark eyes turned red, demonic. Canvas clothing transformed into something more like the inside of a machine than attire for a human being. Around him, indefinable engines lurked at the limit of perception;

gathered and poised like a planetoid only moments before impact. Ghort sank down onto his hocks and placed his spear on the path next to him. He kept his eyes down while he regained his breath. The entity before him did not move. It just nailed him with its viper eyes. Eventually Ghort looked up.

"Owner," he said. "Take me with you."

The Owner's reply came after a suitable pause. Tamsin felt that this pause was not for reflection. This was a god after all.

"Are you wise, Ghort?" the Owner asked, and the voice had nuances of power. Hearing it, Tamsin realised it might be possible to kill with a word.

"I am wise," said Ghort.

"Ah," said the Owner. "Yet patience is integral to wisdom."

The Owner turned and things distorted somehow, as if he was attached to everything around him by invisible threads. For a moment Tamsin saw something vast — the inside of an iron cathedral. Then the Owner was gone and Ghort was bowed down with his forehead in the dirt. Tamsin thought he might be crying.

Tamsin waited a moment or two then moved over to the big man and stood next to him. Ghort abruptly pulled himself upright and brushed dirt from his forehead. He sighed, then abruptly turned and studied Tamsin.

"You saw?" he asked.

"I saw, but I'm not sure what I saw," said Tamsin.

"What you saw," said Ghort contemplatively. He went on, "What you saw was the Owner. Surely you realise that?"

"I don't believe in gods or supernatural beings. Everything has a reason," said Tamsin.

"Yes, you're sure of that," said Ghort, observing him. "You are very unusual in your attitude to life. Practically unique. It's probably why he let you see him."

"Let me?"

"Don't believe for one moment that he wasn't aware of your presence," said Ghort.

Tamsin closed his eyes and tried to straighten things out in the storm that was raging between his ears. "I do not believe in gods or supernatural beings," he said stubbornly. He opened his eyes when Ghort's hand clamped on his shoulder.

"He is not a god nor a supernatural being, Tamsin. What he is is a ten thousand year old man with the power of a god and command of a technology that seems almost supernatural."

Tamsin suddenly felt very calm as things began to click into place.

"We ... we knew more," he said.

"Yes, you did," replied Ghort.

"Who then, are you?" Tamsin asked.

Ghort slipped his hand from Tamsin's shoulder and cupped Tamsin's soul pendant in his palm. His expression was almost wistful.

"These are your blessing, for you will never die. For the very same reasons they are my curse. You have believed that your souls are kept safe in your pendant after you die until the time that they transmigrate to heaven. How much truth can you stand, Tamsin?"

"All of it. Only truth is important."

"Very well. You are recorded to your pendant and when you die that recording is transmitted to the Owner's database. You essentially become part of him; a very small part of an immensely powerful mind. With me that does not happen. I am my pendant and there is no transmission. I have died and woken in a crib more times than I care to remember."

Tamsin was silent for a long moment.

"I do not understand all your words," he said, "but I will. Now we must return to the Wishpool to find out what has happened. Then I think we must pursue my brother." He paused then pulled his pendant from Ghort's hand. Ghort dropped his hand to his side. Tamsin went on, "Would the Owner accept the soul of a murderer?"

Ghort said, "Oh yes, he accepts all information."

Baum, Torril, and three others lay dead. By the time Ghort and Tamsin had reached the pool the corpses had been laid out side by side and their pendants removed. Chand wept over the body of her husband and Ephs sat by her father. Tamsin wondered what comfort the truth would be to them. Most love, he realised, is selfish, and all they knew was that who they loved was gone. Tamsin walked over to Chester, who was now village elder.

"What of my brother?" he asked.

Chester glanced up, a mass of pendants clutched in his hand.

"Your brother? Your brother ran into the Rhode when no more charge remained in the weapon. A weapon that was your responsibility, Tamsin Logisticson."

"I will get it back," said Tamsin.

"Best you do that, boy, but before you do, go take a look at the corpse on the end there. Perhaps sight of it will stiffen your sinews."

It was Jeleel. Tamsin could only feel horror and bewilderment at what Sapher had done to her. A fast anger and faster knife he could understand. What had been done to Jeleel had taken time. He stepped back and gazed around at the villagers. Many of them were walking around with stunned expressions, and leaden movement. He turned to Ghort.

"My brother must be found. Will you come with me?"

Ghort nodded as he surveyed the scene. "I'll come, but Tamsin, what will you do when you find your brother?"

"I don't know yet. But he must never come back."

They set out just as it was becoming dark, into the perfumed undershadows of the Rhode.

"We could wait until morning, but daylight is my brother's friend."

The steel eye of the moon provided enough silvery light to make travelling a possibility. In an hour they had reached the edge of the Rhode and were gazing out across the Plain of Landing.

"You sure this is right?" asked Ghort.

Tamsin said, "I am not the tracker my brother is, but I would guess he has headed for the Ship. The place has always held an attraction for him. Tell me, were you on that ship?"

"I was not. You people had been here some time when I arrived."

"Where did you come from?"

"Another world, originally. The Great Ship at the last." Ghort pointed to the moon as he said this and Tamsin wondered what he might mean. He knew about other worlds. The teaching was that they had come from another world to this one — a world that was owned. The Owner had agreed to let them stay under certain terms. Thus the Agreement had been made. But the Great Ship? What was that? It seemed now that everything Ghort said raised another question.

"Was the Great Ship like ours? Tell me about it," he said, and while they travelled, Ghort did that thing.

The long grasses of the plain rustled all around them in the night breezes. They heard the coughing growl of a tiger in the night, but it was not a sound that held any fear for them. Tigers will not attack men. It was written. An hour's travelling brought the Ship within sight; a broken shell of metal lying at the end of the gully it had cut many centuries ago. They stopped and crouched down.

"Let us move quietly now," said Tamsin. He had heard enough for a while. His head felt bloated with words, with confirmations and denials. He understood that what was religion to his fellows was just historical fact. He understood that the Agreement was real, but that worship was inappropriate. Much more he had yet to sort out in his mind. He glanced at Ghort, but the big man was looking away from him. He was staring back the way they had come. Tamsin followed the direction of his gaze.

The tiger sat on its haunches with its tail flicking. Its eyes were silver stars and moonlight glinted on the moisture on its fur. It was magnificent; a full grown adult in its prime, easily capable of snapping a man's spine with one swipe of its paw.

"Would Sapher have gone up against him," said Tamsin, surprised at his own bitterness.

"Perhaps — he is sick enough," said Ghort, and as if his words were an acknowledgement and a dismissal. The tiger growled then slid into the shadows. They listened to its hissing progress as it passed them and went deeper into the grasses. The silence that followed was broken only when Tamsin signalled that they should move in. This they quickly did.

The Ship was grey metal upon a lattice of white metal struts. It lay like a scattering of the broken eggs of some titanic bird. Monoliths of hull metal rose out of the ground. Skeletal lattice glinted in the moonlight where hull metal had been stripped away. This was all that remained. The contents of the ship had either been taken out over the centuries or decayed to dust. Grasses grew inside the shell and vines crept up the slick metal. With geologic slowness nature reclaimed what had been taken from it.

Tamsin held his spear in readiness but did not know how he would react should he encounter his brother. They moved into the shadows cast by the ancient hull then split to search the length of the ship. Soon they returned to the centre.

"I felt sure he would come here," said Tamsin. "It's where he always ran when we were children. It's where he hid when he did something wrong."

"It is where he came to do wrong as well," said Ghort.

"What do you mean?" asked Tamsin.

Ghort gestured for him to follow and led him to the part of the ship he had searched.

"There," he said, pointing to a shape lying below mounded vines creeping up a section of hull. Tamsin stepped closer and saw that a tiger lay there. It was dead. Half its head burnt away.

"Is that the ... " Tamsin trailed off as Ghort shook his head.

"It's not the one we saw. This one is younger, and a female. It seems your brother did not empty the charge of the gun back there."

"But why kill it?" asked Tamsin. "He killed Jeleel, not this tiger."

Ghort nodded then pointed. Tamsin turned to see the tiger they had first seen, standing close by and watching them. It shook its head and let go a short coughing growl. It turned away, paused, and then looked back at them.

"I think we should follow it, don't you," said Ghort.

"Why should we do that?" Tamsin asked.

Ghort pointed to the horizon, which was now made distinct by an orange glow. The steel moon was now at its zenith and the same glow etched one side of it. Sunrise was imminent.

"In very little time Sapher will again be armed. We must find him quickly. We must end this."

"You still have not explained why we should follow this tiger," said Tamsin.

"Because it will lead us to Sapher," said Ghort.

"Why should it do that?" asked Tamsin.

"Tigers don't behave like this. I think the Owner still has an interest here," Ghort replied.

Tamsin felt his stomach lurch: the things he had seen this night, the things he had been told.

"You would know. You've had plenty of time to observe them," he said.

"That I have," replied Ghort. "That I have."

The tiger led them away from the ship and along trails beaten through the grass. The sun broke the horizon and leached colour back into the world. The tiger's coat was gold and snow and its eyes pure topaz each time it looked back at them. As the sun cleared the horizon they heard movement in the grasses all around them. The tiger brought them to a clearing beaten down in the grass. In this clearing tigers patrolled. Tamsin had never seen so many together. In the centre of the clearing lay a boulder of grey metal laced with golden pipes and strange cooling veins.

"Piece of a jump engine," said Ghort.

Only because of what he had been told in the last hour did Tamsin understand what Ghort meant. He

acknowledged this additional information, but could not relate it to any reality he knew. His attention focused on the tigers, and then on the figure crouching on top of the artefact.

Sapher was naked and there was blood all over him. Keeping a wary eye on the tigers, which in turn completely ignored him, Tamsin walked towards his brother. He saw that Sapher had the gun next to him catching the rays of the early sun. He raised his spear to his shoulder, not sure what he would do next.

"Have you come to kill me, Tamsin?" said Sapher. "Please try."

Tamsin halted and lowered his spear.

"Why, Sapher? Why did you do it?" he asked.

"Because I did not know right from wrong. Because I had no empathy. Because I was insane, brother," said Sapher, and as he said it he looked at the gun next to him.

"I don't understand," said Tamsin.

Sapher looked up.

"You saw the tiger?" he asked, then after Tamsin nodded he continued, "We can kill each other with impunity and it is for us to decide if it's a crime or not. The tigers are his, though, and if we kill them we will be punished."

"What is your punishment to be?" asked Ghort, from beside Tamsin.

Sapher glanced at the big man and Tamsin saw that there were tears in his brother's eyes.

"Be?" said Sapher. "I've already been punished."

"A whipping, is that enough?" asked Tamsin, his anger growing.

Sapher stared at him.

"No, brother, I stripped myself and ran through the grass naked so it would cut and flail me. I wanted the pain, brother, but it was not enough. The Owner's punishments are more subtle and more powerful than that."

"What was your punishment?" Tamsin asked.

"Sanity," Sapher replied, and picked up the gun.

Tamsin threw his spear. There was a flash of light and that spear turned to ash. Its blade fell red hot out of the air to clang against the base of the artefact and there set a small fire. For a moment Tamsin thought Sapher had shot his spear out of the air. He had not. The gun was pointed off to one side.

"Too easy," said Sapher, then he put the gun up against his own face and pulled the trigger.

Tamsin ran to his brother as he fell to the ground. Sapher lay in the grass gasping in agony. His face was burned down to the bone. He had not waited long enough and there had not been sufficient charge in the gun. Tamsin halted then turned to Ghort.

"Please," was all he said.

Ghort drove his wide-bladed spear into Sapher's chest, and ended it.

All but one of the tigers slid off into the grasses the moment Sapher died. The tiger that remained was the one that had led them to the clearing. How could it have been any other? It watched them while they dug a hole with Ghort's spear and placed Sapher in it. It watched them while they filled it in, then it moved towards them when they were ready to return to the village.

"Is that it now?" said Ghort. "Have you finished?"

The air distorted and emitted a low plangent groan. In place of the tiger now stood the shape of Temron.

"I'm never finished," said the Owner.

Tamsin stepped forward. He held the gun at his side.

"Why are we less than animals to you?" he asked.

The Owner regarded him, eyes changing to red now, face slewing and blurring and changing.

"We have an agreement," he said.

Tamsin fought his anger. He'd just asked the question one might ask of a god. The Owner was not a god. He had to remember that. He glanced aside as Ghort stepped forward.

"I'm ready now," said the big man.

The Owner nodded and gestured for him to come forward. Ghort did so. The Owner reached out and took hold of his pendant, pulling and snapping the chain. Ghort sagged, sank to his knees, then with a sigh he fell over onto his side. Tamsin moved closer. His brother had killed himself because of this ... man. He knew that the Ghort he knew was now dead. He had the gun. It was charged ... But he knew that was wrong. He knew that he didn't understand anywhere near enough.

"He was Ghort — quiet and dependable and distant ... yet he told me he has lived many lives. Who was he?"

With Ghort's pendant clutched in his right hand the Owner carefully studied Tamsin.

"He was a foolish man who served me badly. Now he is a wise man who will serve me well," he said.

Tamsin closed his eyes. Quite deliberately he raised the gun then shoved it into his belt pouch. He said, "You are real and now everything has changed. How can I be at peace? How can I just live the life I have always lived?"

"My answer should be that it is not for me to answer you. But you are somewhat unique, Tamsin. I can give you more if you wish it. Most people don't. Most people lack the imagination to see beyond the simple act of living. Would you serve me, Tamsin?"

"Yes, I would."

"Then first, Tamsin, you must learn wisdom and the patience that is integral to it."

Tamsin felt his soul pendant grow hot against his chest, then slowly begin to cool. He pressed the palm of his hand against it and tried not to be frightened of what he knew it meant. As the air around him distorted and the immensity behind reached out to pull him back the Owner spoke again.

"Raise your people up, Tamsin," he said.

Tamsin knew that he would, and that he had more than one lifetime in which to do so.