

Floaters

By David Vickery

A calm sea, stirred by the gentlest ripples. Hazy sunlight diffusing through the soupy atmosphere. The merest background sound of sea-birds, the plash of fish, and for the longest time, nothing. Then, abrupt as Icarus, a headlong fall of blinding metal, a roaring quench, the scene drowning in steam. And soon, calm sea again.

0202

That Kysslan's a smart one. I don't mind admitting it. Perhaps I'm getting slow after all these eons. Slipping in a drive computer password on a tight beam while I was taking a quick rest was a cunning move, but I should have seen it coming. So I've only myself to blame for what happened. Let's take some credit, though. I threw the ship into emergency mode as soon as I realised what was happening and just managed to reach this place before everything was eaten away. Touch and go, though.

I've felt better. I can't deny it. Now I'm stuck here in this miserable dinghy, going nowhere fast. If there is anywhere to go, that is.

But I'm an optimist at heart. I've been in worse situations. There was the time he had me cornered – or thought he did – on that dustbowl of a desert planet. And the time he thought he could crush me out of existence inside that 2D world. I've always got out of his traps somehow. Unfortunately, he's always got out of mine too.

This situation is different from those other times, though. There's no power on tap, at least not the kind I need for a resumption pattern. I can't drown in this substate, but I'm losing energy fast. So I've got to take form soon, but what form? I can feel there's probably only one more change in me unless I can get to a proper power source. Can't afford to get it wrong in a place with as little potential as this.

The only thing that gives me any hope at all is the fact that I got to that ryshyyr's helm controls before I splashed down. (That's certainly the phrase for it. Never seen so much water in one place.) So maybe he's even worse off than me right now. I could use the breathing space, that's for sure.

0203

I've been looking at the sky. Kind of a warm grey, tinges of cream, pastel shades. The sun never quite burns through. Not unattractive, but it palls somewhat with nothing else to look at. Apart from all this water, of course.

I wonder what my old adversary is up to. Did he lose control of his ship? More importantly, did he manage to regain control before something horrible

happened to his drive units or his life support? The whole thing has an exquisite touch that almost makes my being here worthwhile: I can imagine him sitting up there, yelling in triumph about how the Kysslan had finally won the war with the Ceti, and suddenly an alarm starts to flash. Maybe he doesn't even notice it for a period or two, he's so busy celebrating. By which time it's too late. Or maybe he notices it, corrects it at once, and is sitting up there, waiting for me.

At least it's restful here. When did I last have a real break? It's not easy when the rights of an entire civilisation are on your shoulders. Still, I shouldn't complain. At least it hasn't been boring.

Speaking of here, it's beginning to puzzle me. I can sense the water is very very cold. In fact it should be in a solid state. It may be of course that it's not water: I'm in a naked sort of condition at the moment, after all. But it's land I'm interested in. If I could make a landfall I'm sure I'd be back on my feet. Geothermal? Hydroelectric? There'd be some sort of energy I could use. Then I could pick a suitable form, metamorphose a new ship, and I'd be off. Perhaps there'd be so much energy that I'd be more than a match for the Kysslan.

Yes, I like that scenario. My ship limping through the atmosphere, open and defenceless. He closes right in and lets me have it with the whole arsenal. A massive explosion: but it's only weaponry engaging my epiforcefield. Then, before he knows what's happening, I power up to full, spin around and perhaps cripple his hyperdrive. Then I could finish him off at my leisure, with a final denouement in, say, a century or so. While I'm at it, his extinction can take this place with him. A glorious explosion to mark the end of hostilities with the Ceti the victors. At least the planet would have stood for something, that way. I'd be a liar if I didn't admit it's seriously beginning to bore me.

0205

If I had form now I'd be as weak as a pup. That's why I didn't bother to encode anything last period. But the exciting news now is that I've picked up something sentient. I sent out a feeler, and if I've got any strength left they should be heading this way soon. I just hope they hurry.

The sun was as bright as it ever became through the soupy atmosphere: morning, to the platform dwellers. Oarsmen, a vast bank on both sides, propelled the hulk through the waters with effortless pace. A squad of helmsmen plied a massive rudder, directed by others standing apart who had the air of command about them.

In sections of the platforms free of oars, fishermen trailed lines in a lazy way. At the back, a large number were grappling with a slick green length of seaweed the size of a mature tree. Eventually they hauled it aboard the platform and collapsed panting around it, accompanied by laughs and shouts of derision from others nearby.

Yanthir and his friend Eannu were putting their lines in good order in readiness for the next fishing shift. Even with him squatting on the platform it was easy to see that Yanthir was tall. At that moment, however, another platform

dweller who made Yanthir look almost scrawny walked towards him, heading for the central hut. Yanthir was too slow in moving out of the way and got a clip around the head and a contemptuous word for his pains. He hardly felt the blow, or only for a moment, and then he was back in the same position, hunched over his line again.

Then something happened to transform the morning. Eannu, looking up in the bovine way of the platform dwellers, gave a sudden yelp. Yanthir glanced up in surprise. Then Eannu was on his feet, his fringes swirling in his excitement.

"*Itan Hlan'k!*" he called, stabbing the air with a stubby finger. And suddenly, marvellous confusion and excitement all around, something to break up the almost deadly boredom of everyday. The oarsmen eased off on the port side and pulled harder to starboard to bring the immense platform nearer to the disturbance in the water. Everyone focused on the rare event: the vegetal gatherers coaxed and slapped the water, the fishermen readied their bait and the leaders flushed with pride and prestige. A few minutes later and the sleek, otter-like animal was aboard, accompanied by a raucous bellow of exaltation that seemed to shake the platform planks.

0209

I've lost that terrible weakness of a few periods back, but I can see things won't really improve until I get onto land and plug into some proper energy. But I feel up to making a few notes.

What my feeler finally brought into view was an enormous raft. I could see life forms moving around on it, which obviously meant organisation, of a kind.

They couldn't see me or my dinghy, of course. I'm sure they had no idea why they had changed course towards me. I scanned them as soon as they were within range and it didn't take too long to decide on my form. Seems they eat everything they find on or under this ocean except this one smallish marine animal which they hold sacred. They think it brings them luck in finding food. Lucky for me, since I doubt I had the energy to sustain myself as one of the creatures on the platform. They're pretty massive close up.

Anyway, I jumped dinghy, changed form and made towards them. They could see me by then and were coming about to try and lure me aboard. Believe me, I was more than happy to be lured. Not only was I wasting away, the water was knifelike, even with my metabolic adjusters.

One of the problems is the pressure here. This explains the liquid state of the freezing ocean, and presumably their hefty build. It came as a blow after the formless state. Haven't felt this heavy for a long time, Still, that's stage one of the great revival accomplished. They've been feeding me some kind of fish, which is a big improvement on stasis. In fact, I think I'm ready for a spot of eavesdropping.

Yanthir was standing, looking across the starboard bank of oarsmen, their even movements gently hypnotic in the soft crimson and magenta starfall. In his line of sight, a female, another Blue called PIna. He couldn't recall ever having spoken to her, but something about the way her fringes and fronds coalesced, a

diaphanous quality as the long rays of light filtered through onto the warm-looking planks, called to him. He moved over to her and made as if to touch her arm; but before he could do so, she looked up, curiosity and blankness in her cherry eyes. He let his hand fall away and her gaze drifted past his.

Eannu called him over to the evening eating. Mechanically he turned and walked back to the Blue assembly area. As he walked past the pole where the Protector was tethered, its front left paw flicked its chin absently and its arctic blue eyes followed the fisherman all the way to the assembly.

0211

Well, well. So these creatures are not indigenous to this place after all. I had to dig deep into the genetic memory to find out, but I'm now the greatest living expert on the subject. They have no idea, for example, that they are the descendants of a colonising race called the Calderans.

Seems a colony fleet of theirs ran up against a battle fleet of another outfit called the Terrans. The usual mass destruction followed, of course. Thousands of individuals committed to crude conflict where we use just one. Perhaps I shouldn't be too hard on them, though. All this happened long enough ago to be almost respectable, even to me.

So their particular ship got badly hit and it was every Calderan to the shuttles. And like me they found that there was only one place to go: here. What they now call Kharr Itan, Waterworld. And now they're the Snart Ythu, or Floaters.

And what happened to the Calderan or Terran Empires, no one knows. I've never heard of either of them, that's for sure. Although if they carried on settling conflicts like that, it's hardly surprising. I mean, where's the art in a butcher's tool?

Being a colony ship, there was plenty aboard the shuttles to keep them alive – although I'm sure the Calderans had somewhere more prepossessing than this place in mind when they set out to colonise a selection of the galaxy's desirable worlds. Anyway, they had plenty of time to send out their signals and set their beacons, but the Calderans never came back. As a matter of fact, nobody came. Until me, of course.

They could have been even worse off. There's this vegetal growth they harvest from the ocean which hardens in the air: they use it for making the platforms and so forth. There are no tides to speak of, no wind and no storms. There's enough essential nutrients in what they catch. But over the centuries, what must have been a proud race has degenerated into a kind of tribal grouping, floating around in this sea of apathy, eating, sleeping and procreating. And I'm their idol, I suppose: the Itan Hlan'k, or Protector. Well, we'll have to see what can be done. It's a rest for me, and then to work.

It was Yanthir's turn to feed the Protector. Amongst the Blues it was regarded as an honour. Perhaps even one or two of the younger greys would have liked to share in such ritual ceremony, he thought as he crossed through their assembly

area on the way to the pole. He looked up as he thought that and caught the eye of two youngster Greys; but they quickly looked away over the ocean, even more disdain than usual in their glance.

He admired the wiry shape of the Protector, long, thin and glossy. Its intelligent face was well-armed with fangs but it ate the *skral* Yanthir dropped with a delicate air, almost a grace.

Perhaps there was something about the unusual sight of the *Itan Hlan'k* on board that unsettled him. However it was, Yanthir walked back to the Blue area in a distracted way. Twice he nearly collided with the arrogant Greys as they barged about on their incomprehensible tasks. And in the central area he actually did run into a Yellow, who cringed up at him with fear in his eyes. The fact that the collision was Yanthir's fault made no difference; he was well within his rights to administer quick justice. But Yanthir just glanced at him and stumbled on, and relief flooded the Yellow's brutish face before he darted back to his own poor section.

Sinking heavily down onto his sleeping patch, Yanthir lay insensible for much of the night, groaning and flailing his thick matted arms about, to the annoyance of others trying to sleep. Sleep was essential because tomorrow, as always, would be a day of hard work.

Yanthir awoke when the planet's star was lightening the foggy skies of the south. He scrambled up into a sitting position. Something about the scene struck him: the gentle night-shift kiss of the oars in the water, the tantalising promise of the dawn, the vulnerable sleepers around him. Although he had seen these sights many times before, they seemed new to him and he breathed a sigh of wonderment. He rubbed his elbows and stretched luxuriantly. His distracted mood of the previous evening was gone, and in its place was a new energy. It was a day, he thought, for catching fish.

0329

Things are definitely looking up. I'm working on a young and powerful Floater called Yanthir. He seems to have the best mind for this work: the most open, the most willing to consider a new suggestion. The leaders are, to a man, dull and stolid types. Heavy inside and out, you might say.

I've had the chance to delve further into the primitive organisation here. There are four tribe-like groupings on the platform, differentiated by colours that relate to uniforms worn centuries ago on board their fleet's ships (although they have no conscious memory of that). The Greys are the leaders. They take decisions, decide on the route, get the pick of the food. Below these are the Blues and the Greens. The Blues are fishermen, the Greens steer and row. There are also the Yellows who do the menial work, harvesting the vegetal planks and keeping the platform in repair. In short, hierarchy, like we see in the lower animals at home.

Still think about the Kysslan occasionally. But there's nothing to be done about him. With a ship I could trace him, or verify that he's no longer around. In which case the war is over and I can go home, ready to enjoy my epoch of

retirement in wealth and luxury. But perhaps he's dead and I'm stuck here forever. In which case they'll wait the usual half-century for news and then pick two more champions. That would be irony indeed with me still alive. But I'm not finished yet. Not while I've got Yanthir to build on.

Yanthir had been right. It was a good day for fishing, and he broke all records. Flushed with success, he stood before Venss for the first time as he patted his shoulder three times in the worthy-pride-celebration ritual gesture.

“Good work,” he said.

“It must have been that the *Itan Hlan'k* guided me to where the big shoals were and gave strength to my spear arm.”

Venss nodded, although with reserve, since Yanthir had exceeded by more than double his first speech allowance. But he overlooked it, since the young Blue was clearly over-excited by his achievements. Amid cheering from the other Blues, Venss granted the usual reward of a free day to him, and Yanthir nominated Eannu as his reception partner.

Strolling about the platform while all the Blues, Greens and Yellows sweated and strained with exertion was a new experience and made it specially enjoyable. Eannu offered Yanthir the gratitude-debt glance several times and was surprised when his friend seemed not even to notice it. Finally he spoke.

“A great catch, Yanthir,” he said. “Of course, the usual extra tithe will be yours in honour of the public award.”

Yanthir caught his arm. “*Skral* and *teth'n* are all right, in their way,” he replied. “But lately, the last few days, I have had a great desire to eat the flesh of the water-bird.”

Eannu looked doubtful. “The *kharr siyr* is hard to kill,” he said. “Only luck can bring one down, since it is wise and stays clear of the platform's edge.”

“I know all that. But I saw how it could be done. I had an idea, Eannu. The spines of the king *teth'n* are sharp and pointed. I could throw one through the *kharr siyr*.”

Eannu struggled with the novel concept. He had to imagine a water-bird, impaled by the deadly spine of the great fish, then gradually weakening and finally dying. But he too was no fool. Finally, he answered.

“But then you would have the water-bird dead in the water and it would float away, or perhaps sink. Do you think the Greys will alter course to pick up one bird for you, a Blue?” And he smiled, but wistfully, for he could taste the succulent flesh for a second, and his mouth ran over with water.

Yanthir's brow clouded over. It seemed that his idea was so good, so new, that it could not be abandoned so soon. Eannu heard him murmuring, and he looked over to him in surprise. The great Floater lips and tongue were calling on the Protector for help, as Floaters often did. And this time he answered.

“I know!” he called out, bringing annoyance glances and silence gestures from nearby Greys. “I can fasten the sea-twine to the spine and haul it back with the dead *kharr siyr*.”

Eannu looked at him in astonishment. The idea was so complete, so perfect, it made walking impossible for a moment. He wanted to stand and take it in. But Yanthir was clutching at his arms again, sweat bedewing his face as it flushed with excitement.

“Or even better! Even better! I could take young bark which is springy and tie twine to both ends. That would throw the spine for me, with greater force than I could. And if I miss the bird, I can pull the spine back and try again.”

This was no mere idea: this was the work of a genius. Eannu’s hands touched Yanthir’s shoulders in a complicated array of gestures. But it was easy to see his awe from his shining eyes.

Later that day, Yanthir took his crude bow to a free space and bent it back to receive the short length of sea twine. His arrow was a dagger-sharp spine of king *teth’n*, a hole near its end threaded like a needle with a long piece of twine which Eannu held. Yanthir pulled back the bow and fired.

The first attempts were ungainly and ineffective, and several Greens began to laugh and mock at the bizarre sight. Venss, looking up, frowned. Yanthir was free to spend his award-day as he wished, but was he free to bring dishonour on the Blues? His tribal memory, the usual guide for everything in life, was useless here, lacking any precedent. Even a few Yellows turned and began to stare and grin, until the contemptuous Greys cuffed them back to work.

Venss watched a while longer and then got up angrily. He knew his duty as Blue Headman and it was time to put an end to this farce. He was even contemplating cancelling the rest of the award-day when he was stopped in his tracks by a strange sound. It was a sharp intake of breath from all the watching Floaters. Eannu leapt and shouted but Yanthir was silent as he hauled aboard the platform the greatest delicacy of Waterworld.

It was a week later and still Yanthir’s fame had scarcely abated, certainly among the Blues and probably among a good many other Floaters. A feast of *kharr siyr* was a rare thing indeed, but rarer by far had been the purposeful and unheard-of way the bird had been caught. At the dividing ceremony Yanthir, as was expected, took almost half of the bird to the Leader himself, for distribution among the Greys or his own consumption as he chose. A few days ago Yanthir would have been terrified of such a meeting, but that night even the disdain of the flanking Greys looked hard to keep up.

Venss had his Headman’s share too, of course. His acceptance gestures were just a little marred by a slight haughtiness around the mouth and eyes, but Yanthir was too excited to notice. The rest of the bird was his to divide, and even after the ritual divisions there was plenty to go around. He pulled three generous helpings from the bird and gave the rest to the senior Blues, an act warmly applauded by them all. Then he handed Eannu his portion, which was only to be expected since he had assisted in the great shooting, and dropped a second on the planks for himself. Finally he got up and crossed over to the female section and stood in front of a Blue who was neither senior nor in any other way distinguished, unless you counted a certain pleasing wave of her fronds.

Plna looked up, pleasure, confusion and even fear mingling in her cherry eyes. But she took the meat all the same, to the envious stares of her friends.

Now it was a week later and the celebrated Yanthir was again honouring her with his presence. Only this time the sky was dimmed and the water lapped quietly at the platform. They lay apart from the other Blues and Yanthir stroked her fringes, as he had long wanted to do. She submitted to his touch in a strange whirl of pleasure and unease.

“No, Yanthir,” she said, “you know this is not right.”

He said: “Plna, do you not also love?”

Love. A strange word among the *Snart Ythu*. A rare word, rarely spoken, carrying overtones of honour and of one singled out for greatness. Almost a Grey word. Her eyes widened.

“I do, Yanthir.”

He smiled and relaxed, but she continued. “But you know that mates cannot be from the same platform.”

But he was strong and gentle and wore down her objections. He could not wait for the next platform meeting. It was something that had to be then, that night, when the month was peaking.

The following day Yanthir stood preparing his lines, hooks and bait for the day’s work. His working space seemed to have increased imperceptibly as the other Blues had unconsciously given him a larger area. Venss passed by and nodded and Yanthir returned the honour-bow but his mind was elsewhere. He was thinking of the great taboo he had broken the previous night; and even more, of the strange fact that it hardly troubled him.

In the days and evenings ahead, Yanthir had many talks with Eannu. Their conversations were of things no Floaters had ever discussed. Eannu now knew beyond doubt that his friend was no ordinary Floater but one of the great ones, and their relationship subtly changed into one of leader-disciple. The other Blues were perhaps aware of this but had no objection. Only Venss remained disturbed.

One night Yanthir and Eannu sat apart as usual. Yanthir was having difficulty controlling his excitement and Eannu knew that he was about to hear something huge, used though he was to unguessable revelations.

“Far to the north, beyond the fishing runs of the platform, there is an area without water which rises from the ocean,” Yanthir began.

Eannu looked at him. The days when he would have expressed disbelief were long gone, incredible though this latest idea sounded. But then all the others: the bow, the net, the sling; they had all sounded incredible at first, and they had all been right. So he said nothing and continued to listen.

“Vegetation grows there and creatures like water-birds, only bigger, flock in abundance. The seas lap over its edge, then stop. We could walk onto it like walking on the platform.”

“Are you sure?” breathed Eannu, not wishing to doubt but needing to say something.

“I know beyond doubt that this place is real. Eannu, if we went there we would have as much food as we needed. We would no longer have to sail to

harvest the planks and weeds and follow the shoals. We could..." And his words trailed away as the visions came again, inexpressible, ineffable even, the idea of their tribe proud and happy, building, creating things and prospering instead of sailing the endless ocean forever.

The following day they discussed it with PIna. It was harder for her to understand, even harder than it had been for Eannu, but finally she said, "You must ask to speak to Venss."

Venss looked at Yanthir with suspicion when he finally begged audience but then took him aside. It was after all better that no one else should hear anything Yanthir might have to say. He let him speak without interrupting, an unheard-of honour, but it was useless.

"This is a fantasy," he said. "There is no place without water." That was the end of the audience.

For days after that Yanthir thought of little else but his dream, his waterless place. His sleep was fitful because of it. If Venss had taken up his idea he could have pleaded it in open council. The Blue Headman had a privileged place and the Leader himself might have decided to try it. Without Venss, Yanthir was powerless, unable even to address the Leader without invitation.

And yet, was he powerless?

It took nearly another week to convince Eannu that this was the only way. Then the two Blues walked softly over sleeping bodies to where Venss lay in the shadow of the day. Eannu held him down and Yanthir choked the life from his body. Then they slipped his corpse over the side of the platform. The water did the rest.

Eannu was afraid afterwards and shook with fear at the immensity of the taboo they had broken. "The *Itan Hlan'k* will withdraw its protection and we shall be destroyed," he said.

Even Yanthir looked shaken, but he took command of himself. He replied that it was otherwise, that the Protector had willed what they had done for the good of all *Snart Ythu*.

The following day the Blues voted on who would replace Venss. He had gone without sign and some saw in this the vengeful hand of the gods. But others said he had been called to serve them as a reward for his virtue. Yanthir spoke out, saying that Venss had been a true and just Headman, and Eannu and many other senior Blues called out in his favour. After so many acclamation gestures the voting was a formality, and Yanthir became Headman of the Blues with all the rights of a Headman – including the right to speak to Leader face to face.

Over the next few weeks Yanthir busied himself with introducing improvements to the way the Blues worked, new and often astonishing ideas which were yet accepted on the strength of his previous suggestions. The Blues began to improve their catches, received greater distribution shares and grew happier and more contented. Meanwhile their new Headman was the talk of the whole platform.

As was his right, he attended the open council: Leader himself (whose name was never to be spoken once elected), Finet, Byrth, K'hy and Arrye of the

Greys, Ishs of the Greens and Yanthir. Ishs was vindictive and hoped to use the situation of the unorthodox Blue chief to further the Greens; but Yanthir was careful to support Leader and only make suggestions when they would improve existing ideas. Over time, Leader accepted him as rightful Headman and gradually the Blues' ascendancy over the Greens was reasserted and even enhanced.

Finally the day came which seemed right to Yanthir. He spoke out in the meeting place as the seven were assembled. Leader looked at him strangely because it was not for him to speak with thoughts but with agreement. But he listened. Yanthir looked up at the end, which was also a minor taboo; he should have had his head bowed for the Word. But he needed to see. He watched Leader struggle with the idea of a waterless area and weigh the clear benefits which might accrue against the dangers, his face mirroring his thoughts. Then he spoke.

"We do not sail in the north, Blue Headman. We would miss the next platform exchange."

"This is better than the meeting of platforms." Almost an argument with Leader by a Blue! The Greys gasped. Ishs intervened: "My father was of a platform that sailed north. There are strong currents there and they were nearly destroyed. The north is taboo."

Yanthir spoke again. He said that there was a way through those currents and that he would guide them. But Leader looked at him almost with fear and said no. Yanthir would have spoken again, even against Leader's silence-essential gesture, so Leader made the dismissal. Finet and K'hy touched this seemingly-crazed Headman to take him in disgrace back to the Blue area, but at that something seemed to snap inside him and he drew a spine from his belt and buried it deep in Leader's guts.

0515

Today is the day of the sacred immersion. Byrth is to be the new Leader and he will give the sign. I'd be lying if I said the prospect of Yanthir's execution didn't move me. It depresses me as well. Still, let's look on the bright side. I've got rid of that thick-necked Leader, and shaken up the whole social order. What's more, Eannu will be the new Blue Headman. Even better, my son stands a much better chance thanks to all this crude butchery.

I think of him as my son; in reality, of course, he'll be the offspring of Yanthir and Plna. But I don't think it's too fanciful to think of him as mine. I was responsible for his conception, after all. Just as importantly, I've implanted a lot of dormant knowledge. I predict a bright future for him. Wish I could say the same for myself.

Eannu and Plna walked through the Grey area, ignoring the sneers and gestures. If they wanted the stigma of talking to a condemned man they could have it, since it was not officially taboo.

Yanthir was tied to a ritual pole with sacred twine, awaiting the hour of his immersion. Eannu and PIna stood before him, their faces cast down. PIna sprinkled some sea-flowers onto his fringes.

“Do not grieve for me,” Yanthir said softly. “I got to my death a Calderan.”

PIna looked up through bleared cherry eyes. “What is that?”

“I am a Calderan,” said Yanthir more loudly. “And all who believe in me are also.”

“Then we are Calderans too,” said Eannu.

“I will tell you something else,” said Yanthir. “The Greys are leaders because they win in the annual games: the water endurance, the wrestling, the singing. But they win because they receive the best food and have spare time in which to train. Eannu, you will follow me as Headman: keep the fishing improvements and think of others if you can. Make it so that the Blues have more to eat and can spend less time in fishing. Then one day the Blues will beat the Greys and you will be Leader – and you will take the platform north to my land.”

Eannu looked up in great surprise. “Leader is not someone to tremble for; he is only a Floater like us.”

Eannu would have spoken again, but suddenly there was a great cry from the port-side Greens. Yanthir craned his neck to see. Coming into view was another platform.

“This is not the time for a platform meeting,” said Eannu. “What is happening?”

Byrth strode to the edge of the platform and gathered his Greys around him. They made the appropriate calls and, as the other platform drew nearer, the proper gestures. But there were no answers from the others. Detail became visible as it approached. The platform was at least as big as Bryth’s and maybe bigger, with a similar arrangement of oarsmen on either side, but pulling the platform along at greater speed. Towards the front stood a great horde of Floaters, determination in their stance.

Byrth looked around him at his Greys. Some made the what? gesture, others signed news-from-the-west or simply shrugged. He had them move out along the platform in the usual ritual greeting-of-platforms position. This was not the time for such a meeting but Byrth could think of nothing else to do. The Greens and Blues watched the other platform curiously, all activities suspended. Only the Yellows continued with their tasks. And as all Grey, Blue and Green eyes looked west, Eannu reached over to Yanthir and sawed through his twine with a *teth’n* jaw.

As the platform approached ever nearer, Byrth made the Leader bow and signaled to the Greys to do likewise. When he finally looked up, he realised with a shock that the other platform had not slowed down to come alongside; in fact, it might even have speeded up. He gave a cry of alarm. The Greys looked helplessly at him. The platform rammed into planks which buckled and tore, throwing rowers on top of each other, fishermen into the water and Greys over the deck.

With a roar, the other platform Floaters who had been crowding the front leapt onto Byrth’s territory. They wielded spines like short swords, stabbing and

maiming any Greys that stood in their way. Recovering from his inertia, Byrth shouted and led forward his Greys to grapple with the enemy, but it was a one-sided contest. The Blues, Greens and Yellows looked helplessly on and made no move as one huge Floater roared on the battle from the enemy platform, flourishing a spine like a baton.

The Greys were falling back. Some were rolling on the decks, bellowing with pain. Others dropped silently on the planks or into the icy waters. But what really paralysed them was the breaking of the oldest, the greatest taboo: Floater laying hand on Floater. *Snart Yth* against *Snart Yth*.

As for the Blues, Greens and Yellows, all they could do was pray, pray to their Protector for some miracle to end this outrage. One Blue in particular was praying more fervently than any of them; then he seemed to receive his answer. He stood up, flexed his bow and fired an arrow straight at the head of the enemy leader. The leader stood for a second, then collapsed onto the deck of the platform. Everyone watched him fall, then their eyes saw the impossible: his body exploded, creating a shock wave which bowled everyone over and set the placid waters dancing all around them. When the invading Floaters stood up again they shook their heads as if to clear them; and when they saw the dead and dying Greys, nobody was more shocked and horrified than they were.

0516

It was the Kysslan, of course. Obviously I had got to his drive; equally obviously, he made it here too, with rather more energy than I had. In fact, a lot more. How did he play it? Here's a good guess: he lured a platform over with a feeler, took the form of a dominant male and then got their minds well and truly under control. In no time at all it seemed like a good idea to them to pour most of their resources into warfare. Meantime, he was searching for me.

So the war between the Kysslani and the Ceti is over. Must admit, it's almost a shock. Perhaps after all these eons I didn't expect anything quite so abrupt. I'd be at a bit of a loose end, I think, if I didn't have a new project on hand. I've suddenly realised that a retirement in honoured luxury seems like a bit of a bore. Instead, I'll send the good news home and they can get on with carving up the Kysslani empire. I intend to stay here and see what I can do with this lot.

0517

Needless to say, Yanthir is the new Leader. There were hardly enough Greys left in one piece to protest, not that they would have done after that fine piece of archery. In fact, the Blues are now top tribe; although I rather think the whole hierarchical nonsense will disappear as soon as Yanthir gets round to it. As it is, he's got his hands full with the new Floaters he's taken on from the other platform, as well as working out a course towards higher latitudes. As soon as we make land, I'll be taking on a somewhat more dignified form. And then it'll be my pleasure to help take the Calderans to somewhere more like home...or, on second thoughts, just somewhere drier will do nicely.