

Revolt on Waterworld

By David Vickery

Steryan clapped the loudest of any in the audience. The whirling swirl of the dance, the mad, laughing eyes of the girl, stayed in his head as the applause subsided. He drained his glass of *mranth* and signalled for another.

A White made his way through the hot and bleary crowd to Steryan's and Mogil's table, obsequiously putting down two mugs. Steryan, busy in joke-telling with his friend, waved his hand to the White, the gestural equivalent to a mumble. It could have meant anything, but in the context it obviously stood for dismissal. The White moved away backwards, then turned to serve the next customer.

"I could drink this stuff all night," laughed Steryan.

"That's what you said last night," said Mogil.

"And did I succeed?"

"You did not," grinned Mogil.

"Then here's a new challenge! Hey you, Whitey! Bring the bottle!"

It was late in the morning when Steryan awoke, his head as thick as the cloud cover over *Kharr Itan*. A disagreeable sense of guilt hung over him as usual, although he could never quite work out what he felt guilty about. What was a young Blue to do, except enjoy himself?

He plunged his head into the waiting bowl of water, cooled to perfection with *Kkraubaunth* ice. Lifting his dripping head out, he breathed deeply and dried his fronds with fingers surprisingly delicate for a Calderan. Obviously the servants knew just when to add the ice for the right effect. He was feeling better already. A quick walk along the beach to clear his head – and then *Cla'esset* later.

The shore was not a popular place with the better class of society. Steryan often thought something along those lines as he made his way to the beach. It was hard to escape the thought, passing through the cramped dwellings so different to his own palatial residence. He reflected again with pride on the stone floors and porticos which graced it, the latest word in elegance from *Astaru*. Those *Astar* brothers knew their business, even if they were smiling rogues ready and willing to fleece the innocent. But he was more than a match for them.

He smiled as he continued his walk. Soon he was passing the Yellow chalk quarry, and then, almost before he realised it, he was at the shore itself. *Greens*, with their garrulous and raucous banter, were putting nets in order before rowing out with their rafts to catch the *skral* and *teth'n* which shoaled in abundance at this time of year.

Steryan walked along the shoreline, soon leaving the fishermen behind. The sea rippled gently beside him as he walked, clear and inviting. He stooped to snatch a quick drink.

"So this is what you get up to on your own!"

He turned, to see the familiar shape of Cla'esset, russet eyes laughing at him. He coughed in embarrassment, and then grinned.

"And why not? What's the difference between drinking it straight from the sea and paying someone to bottle it for us?"

She smiled. "All the difference in the world, as well you know."

They linked hands and continued to stroll.

"I didn't know you came here, Cla," he said.

"I don't, but I knew you do."

"We were meeting later anyway."

"Why wait for later?"

They walked on. The easy ripples of the sea spoke rhythmically on their left. Ahead, the shoreline was studded with pearl-pink fragments of shells. Above, hazy sunlight diffused through soupy atmosphere. Their fronds mingled as their heads touched.

When Steryan returned home he was surprised and even slightly alarmed to see that a White messenger awaited him. His drooping posture showed that he had been waiting for some time, forbidden of course to sit down on Blue property. His white flower of office showed that he was the personal servant of some high-ranking dignitary.

Steryan dismissed the White and opened the message. Then he ordered an immediate bath, scented with finest *dlu*.

An hour later, he stood in the reception chamber of an impressive house. Impressive in its scope and conception, yet clearly out of date in its design and appearance. Stone was completely absent, the room girded in sea wood. Yet Steryan was impressed, and even a little tremulous, as he waited for his host to appear.

The wait was not long, yet it seemed like an eternity before the old and shapeless figure was carried in on a chair by four Yellow Assembly Guards. They deposited the chair and took up formal positions at the four pillars, their hands crossed over their chests in the traditional manner.

For a second, Steryan assumed that the shape was a bundle of fur: some ritual object which graced the room before an audience could take place. Then he realised, with a shiver of shock, that it was a living being. It straightened up and looked at him. Before him was the oldest Calderan he had ever seen, its pelt lightened almost to silver, its spine truncated and bent, its once-thick lips flaccid and sagging. Only the eyes, although yellowed with rheum, still retained something of their youthful vigour.

Steryan sensed that the creature was waiting for something – and waiting with scarcely disguised displeasure. He suddenly remembered his etiquette and executed the most formal of salute-gestures.

"Hmmm," said the cracked voice. "Stiffly done, youngster. It's a long time since you made such obeisance, I'd say."

"Yes, First Speaker," said Steryan, nervously.

"Do you recognise me, youngster?"

Steryan looked again at the ancient Calderan. All he noticed, with a spasm of distaste, was that his fringes were almost gone. Unconsciously his hand moved to his own luxuriant growths. "Should I, First Speaker?"

There was a pause, a gulf of silence across the years between them.

“Perhaps not, Steryan. Yet I recognise you. My name is Eannu. I knew your father Thir’th, and your grandfather Yanthir.”

Steryan’s surprise got the better of his fear of etiquette. “You knew The Great Leader? In person?”

Eannu gave an almost voiceless laugh. “Yes. I sailed on the Last Platform. And I watched your father row off on that very same platform with a hand-picked crew these fifteen years ago.” He seemed to lose himself in the past at that, and Steryan became uncomfortable, wondering whether Eannu had forgotten him. But at last he looked up again.

“Things have not worked out as Yanthir once hoped, youngster,” he began again. “I remember how it was when we finally stepped off the platform to solid land – to this land of ours. The rejoicing, the celebrations, the cheers for Yanthir! You had to be there to experience it. The first time in any of our lives that we stood on land – and what’s more, land teeming with animals to hunt, birds to shoot, grain to harvest, and space to build homes in. All this thanks to the vision of one man: your grandfather.

“And then we threw ourselves into making this place, Ykharr, our home. The dreams we had! We were going to change the future, shape it instead of allowing it to shape us. We started well. We built, we hunted, we harvested. We grew sleek and comfortable. But then things began to go wrong. I trace it back to when Plna, your grandmother, died before her time. When Thir’th decided to sail to other platforms and try to persuade others of our race to join us, I thought there was still hope. But now it has been fifteen long years, and no news. And things go from bad to worse.”

Steryan stood mutely, trying to reconcile this ancient’s forebodings with the world he knew. What was wrong with it? He was perfectly happy. Calderans were better off than ever before; rowing forever across the sea, following the shoals and harvesting the sea wood – all that was gone for good. And now they had taverns and *mranth* and beautiful stone residences, and what was wrong with all that?

Eannu was old, but he had never been a fool. His eyes caught the shadow of doubt across Steryan’s fronds. “You’re wondering whether this discontent is just an elder’s ravings,” he said drily.

“Well, First Speaker....” Steryan found himself unsure of how to continue.

“I sent for you, Steryan, because you have your grandather’s intelligence. And your father’s too, which in some ways was even greater.” Steryan felt a warm glow of pleasure at the praise. “But from those who have much to give, much is expected,” continued Eannu.

“But what can I do? It’s ten years before I enter the Assembly, and even then only as a junior.”

“Not true,” said Eannu. Steryan was filled with confusion.

“Forgive me; I know little of politics. But I thought after ten years, I join the Assembly as Last Speaker and gradually work my way up.”

“Speakers!” said Eannu in a croak of disgust. “Yes, that is how the Assembly has gone. But that is not how it was, nor how it should be. The Speakers, yes, even the First Speaker, were to give their opinions only after the Leader had put forward plans.”

“But I thought the office of Leader – “

“Had been abolished? Not so. It rests with its last incumbent.”

“You mean –?” said Steryan, trembling with a strange excitement.

“Yes. Your grandfather is still alive. But he has not emerged from his palace for ten years. He refuses to lead, to make suggestions, to show us the way. As a result, the Assembly is little better than a Blue *mranth* tavern. The divisions between our people have not been abolished. In fact, they have become greater. And Yanthir sits in his palace, alone with his Protector.”

“Protector? The sea animal called the *Itan Hlan’k*?”

“Eannu was suddenly as angry as any youngster. “Sea animal! How dare you! The *Itan Hlan’k* guided and guarded our race for centuries before you were ever born....” But being an oldster’s anger, it soon lost its focus. “Although it’s true, it hasn’t protected us much of late. And nor has Yanthir himself.”

“Why don’t you go to him, First Speaker, and put your worries to him?”

“I have tried. He won’t even admit me. But perhaps you could succeed where I have failed. Go, and consider what I have said. If you wish, I will try to help you gain admittance.”

Eannu made a feeble gesture with his thin wrist. Steryan tried to read it, but it was archaic to him. Assuming it was a dismissal, he made his formal salute again and straightened up.

“One more thing. I have heard dark rumours about Bel’ath, one of about your age. Do you know him?”

“Bel’ath? The son of Athnaw? I’ve met him once or twice. But what –?”

“Never mind. He’s a Grey, that’s enough.”

“A Grey? Traders and merchants. Surely there’s nothing to fear from them?”

“Perhaps not. And perhaps so. Consider my words, youngster, and remember this: before the Blues ruled Ykharr, the Greys ruled on the endless ocean.”

Mogil sat on the bed, sipping *illnth*. It was lighter than *mranth* and was the friends’ usual aperitif before moving on to the town and more potent brews. Steryan stood by the open window watching the starfall. Fingers of crimson and magenta underscored with purple trailed through the pastel cream of the sky. Mogil spoke.

“So he said your grandfather was still alive? But everyone thought he died years ago.”

“That’s what I thought too,” said Steryan, turning from the cool marble sill and taking up his goblet again. “Perhaps that’s what they wanted us to think.”

“They?” said Mogil. “Isn’t this intrigue getting too much?”

Steryan laughed. “Perhaps. It’s certainly hard to believe. According to Eannu, he just sits in his palace with his Protector.”

“If it’s the same one as in the legends it must be a pretty old creature by now. Steryan nodded, half-heartedly. “Come on! Don’t tell me you believe in all those superstitions? Tales for oldsters and Whites!”

“I suppose so,” said Steryan. He sipped his drink and made a face. “What’s wrong with this *illnth*? I’ll lay odds that White of mine has been watering it.”

“What you need is a proper drink,” said Mogil. “Come on, let’s go into town.”

A White entered the room, making the usual Blue recognition salutations. He held out a message.

“What’s this?” said Steryan. He opened the message. “It’s from Cla. Wants to see me at the Southern Gate. Strange – I saw her earlier today, on the shore.”

“Twice in one day, eh?” said Mogil. “Something tells me that a certain ceremony involving sea-flowers will shortly be in the offing.”

Steryan gave him a playful punch. “Time enough for marriage when I’m a responsible Assembly member. I’ve too much to do in the meantime.”

“I know what you mean,” said Mogil. “In fact, I’m on my way to a tavern also. I’ll walk with you as far as the Gate.”

The skies were darkening as the two friends walked out of Steryan’s home. An old Yellow was lighting poles of fish-oil in the predominantly Blue area they were leaving, but soon the streets became gloomier as they headed into town. Two Green farmers could be heard up ahead of them discussing their perennial topics of harvests and weather, while the guttural tones of several Yellow miners mingled in from the right.

“So what do you think, Mogil?” said Steryan. “Should I try to see my grandfather?” He glanced to his right. His friend was now in shadow.

“What good can you do? And do you really want to get mixed up in all this oldster politics? When there are so many more pleasant things to do.”

What happened next was so quick that Steryan could hardly think. He was grabbed from behind, roughly dragged round the corner and pushed up against the wall. Light flared from an uncovered fish-oil lantern. Four or five Calderans stood unpleasantly close to his face. Next to him was Mogil, his fronds quivering with agitation. Nevertheless, he found his voice first.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Fafnar, lieutenant to Bel’ath,” said an unpleasant voice.

“How dare you lay hands on us? Do you realise who we are?”

“I think so. At any rate, one of you is the grandson of the last Leader.”

“We are senior-family Blues, and sons of Assembly speakers,” continued Mogil.

“Ah, youngster Blues. Tavern-haunters and decadent idlers,” the unpleasant voice continued evenly. “Yes, we know who you are.”

Half an hour later, Mogil and Steryan stood together inside a completely dark building. The air and the sound of their voices told Steryan it was a huge structure, but where exactly it was he could not say after the blindfolded dance the gang had led them. The faintest of odours told Steryan they were not far away.

A light fell on their faces, blinding them. When they could look again, they saw two Calderans in front of them. One looked vaguely familiar; the other had fear but also glad recognition in her russet eyes.

“Cla!” cried Steryan, and at that someone struck his head a searing blow from the side. He looked around in shock; even Blues did not strike Blues.

“You will speak when I speak to you, not before,” said the Calderan behind Cla’esset, pushing her forward to join her friends. “Recognise me?”

Steryan looked. “You’re Bel’ath. And you’re in big trouble.”

“How so?” said Bel’ath, eyeing him coldly.

“A Grey, a trader and merchant, daring to strike a Blue – “

“Ah. Let me correct you. It’s true that some of our fathers and grandfathers lowered themselves to those occupations – although not even all of them were quite what they seemed. But we are something quite different. We are the Young Greys.” There was a wordless susurration of approval at this phrase from all around them, and Steryan was suddenly aware that the hall was crowded.

“And what do you want?” he asked.

“Want? We want to take back our own. We’ve had fifty years of Blue rule, and what has it brought us? Decadence and decline. You Blues are despicable, sapping your virility with perfumes and baths and wallowing in fermented drinks. It’s time the Greys took over again. Don’t you know that the very name of our world, *Kharr Itan*, means Waterworld? That’s where we should be, sailing the oceans again.”

“But we’re Calderans. We’ve turned our backs on all that,” said Mogil.

“Yes, you decadent sea-slime might have done, but we never will,” said Bel’ath fiercely, his fringes quivering. “And don’t use that word ‘Calderans’ in our presence. It’s an invention that means nothing.”

“Then who are you?” asked Mogil, growing angry in his turn.

“We are the *Snart Ythu*, the Floaters!” cried Bel’ath; and all around him, this time in a roar, came the answering call of “*Snart Ythu!*”

“So you want to take us all back to the days of superstition and slavery, do you?” shouted Mogil over the unseen hordes. “All that nonsense of the gods, and the Protector – “

At this, Bel’ath whipped a metal sword from his belt, a weapon no Blue had ever seen or imagined, and plunged it into Mogil’s chest as though quenching a red-hot iron in a trough. Mogil fell to his knees, then flat on his face. Cla’esset and Steryan moved to help him but were jerked back upright from behind.

“I can see it in your decadent face,” said Bel’ath, eye to eye with Steryan. “Death horrifies you. But we must have respect for the truth. You heathen might have forgotten the *Itan Hlan’k*, but we Greys never have. And he has never forgotten us. He will lead us back to the endless sea, where we and he belong.” He lifted his sword, the tip still warm from Mogil’s blood, close to Steryan’s fronds. “As you can see, we haven’t entirely wasted our time on this waterless place of yours.”

Surprisingly, it was Cla’esset who spoke next, through her tears for Mogil. “But what good is all this talk of returning to the sea when the Last Platform sailed fifteen years ago?”

Bel’ath laughed, and made a gesture. This time the entire hall flooded with the radiance of hundreds of uncovered lanterns. The edges of the room were crowded with Greys; but they paled into insignificance beside the central object: Hundreds of feet long, garlanded with ancient ritual twine and poles and girded with oars gleaming with oil.

“A platform!” cried Steryan. “You’ve built a platform!”

Bel’ath laughed scornfully. “This? This is no more than a large fishing raft. But it will grow. We will return with it to the places where the sea vegetation grows in abundance, take it from the water and let it harden, and add it to this raft, just as our forefathers did for centuries. And as before, the

Greys will rule. What are now called Yellows and Whites shall row the platform and steer it since they are the strongest, and shall be called Greens as of old.”

Leading Steryan and Cla’esset past the platform and pointing out the designated areas as he spoke, Bel’ath continued. “The Greens will be the fisherman as many of them are now, and shall be called Blues. And you who are now Blues will do the work of the Yellows, harvesting the vegetal growths, keeping the platform in repair and serving the other castes. Maybe it will toughen you up after your years of indolence.”

“And what of Ykharr?” said Cla’esset. “Will you at least leave it to prosper and flourish in its own way?”

“No,” said Bel’ath. “We are not barbarians and will take anyone with us who prefers our way to the sword. But this place is an abomination to the *Itan Hlan’k* and to all *Snart Ythu* and will be burnt to the ground.”

The Assembly Guards were armed only with their traditional weapons, the long, sharp spines of the king *teth’n*. The Speakers of the Assembly were unarmed, unless the blubber of comfortable living and half-empty *mranth* bottles counted as defences. But none of them could stand for a second against the metal swords of the Young Greys.

They stood, their swords smoking in the pale light of the Assembly hall, looking around them. Not a Yellow Guard or Blue Speaker was still alive. Steryan and Cla’esset, their thick matted arms tied behind their backs with twine, surveyed the carnage with sickened eyes. Then someone mentioned the Leader’s palace.

“Yes,” said Bel’ath. “We will spend the night there. It is only fitting that we take the best that this accursed place has to offer. And tomorrow we gather the *Snart Ythu* and launch our platform.” Loud cheering echoed round the bloodstained chamber; but Steryan and Cla’esset looked at each other with sadness and despair. Fafnar called the troops to order and they left the ravaged building.

The palace was outside the town, on a hill overlooking it. As the horde of killers tramped towards it, pushing Steryan and Cla’esset in front of them, they could see a frail figure standing in their way. Steryan recognised Eannu, holding a bow notched with one spine-arrow. He wondered even in the midst of his desolation whether it was *the* bow, the legendary weapon Yanthir once used to save his people. The Young Greys halted and Bel’ath stepped forward into the light of his followers’ lamps.

“Greetings, First Speaker,” he said. “We have no wish to take a life once so honoured and now so near its end. Come with us, and live out your last days on the platform: and when the gods take you to them, we shall honour your passing with a sacred immersion and sea-flowers, as it should be.”

Eannu tried to pull back his bowstring. “My friend Yanthir stopped a far worse danger than you miserable sea-scum with an arrow once, and I will kill the first of you who approaches now.”

Bel’ath seemed undecided for a moment, his fronds wavering: but at that moment a light shone from the portals of the palace totally different to the pale, flickering lights of the lanterns. It bathed Eannu in gold, so that for a moment he looked as he must have looked fifty years before.

“Come inside, Eannu, and let them pass,” said a voice, filling the air with a soft yet firm resonance. The Young Greys looked at each other. Eannu dropped the bow, turned and entered the palace.

There was a pause.

“Come on,” cried Bel’ath, with a flicker of anger in his voice that might have masked fear. The horde moved on and up to the palace doors, and Bel’ath opened them.

Inside in a wooden-pillared hall was an old Calderan seated in a wooden chair. Beside him, standing, was Eannu, still looking younger than he had minutes before. And in front of him was a creature. It was long and thin, with a glossy coat which gleamed in the same light which had shone on Eannu and which now filled the room. Its Arctic blue eyes seemed filled with intelligence as it stared at the youngsters marching into the palace.

The old Calderan rose to his feet. “Steryan,” he said, “I am Yanthir. Please accept my apologies. I allowed my own losses to turn me from my people, which was a bad mistake. But then – “

“You will address me,” cried Bel’ath in a rage. “I am Leader now.”

“Steryan,” continued Yanthir in the mildest voice, as though Bel’ath had not spoken, “I had such ideas. Such ideas, Steryan. Everything before them was as nothing. Now I know how the Calderans can leave this place if we want to: not just this island, but this whole world. Or how we can stay here, and develop into a new and shining civilisation. And I am ready to lead my people again.”

Steryan looked at his grandfather. His fringes and fronds were neither the colour of youth nor the pallor of oldness, but ageless. His face, from the thick Floater lips and tongue to the bright and glistening eyes, was ageless too.

“Yanthir,” he said.

Bel’ath looked at him too: then he drew his sword. Steryan strained at his bonds, and unexpectedly they gave way like rotted twine. He seized a sword from the belt of his nearest captor and dived at Bel’ath, who swung round to meet the challenge. Sword clanged on sword, their metal gilded golden in the unearthly light of the chamber. Young Greys surged forward to take Steryan, but Fafnar stopped them with a gesture.

“Let them fight!” he called, and his eyes found the eyes of Bel’ath in agreement.

Slash, counter-slash, thrust, counter-thrust. The room rang with the rapid sounds.

“You didn’t learn that in the company of your sottish friends, tavern-boy,” Bel’ath grinned mirthlessly. “Maybe there’s hope for the Blues yet. And for you too, if you join me.”

Steryan said nothing, but launched himself at Bel’ath again. The Grey’s sword took the blow; but the blade slid off and sliced down into Bel’ath’s upper arm, drawing blood. With a bellow of rage, he slipped the attack and hit the side of Steryan’s face with the flat of his blade. Steryan fell heavily and did not rise.

Bel’ath strode up to Yanthir and hit him once with a downward slash. The old Calderan crumpled wordlessly. Then Bel’ath sank to his knees in front of the glossy creature, whose eyes had never once left him. The Young Greys all knelt too.

"Itan Hlan'k," he said in reverence. "Our Protector. We have returned to you. Do with us what you will."

Steryan raised himself groggily and watched the creature as the Young Greys chanted its ritual name. It was beginning to glow: at first a tinge of redness along its flanks, and then suddenly and magnificently a golden lemon, a colour that he had never seen before. He was filled with peace, and all his despair, fear and guilt dropped away from him. The Young Greys were chanting with eager delight. And then the Protector seemed to burst its bounds, roaring through the palace like an explosion of light. And at that instant, all the chanting turned to shrieks of utter fear.

When Steryan opened his eyes again the Protector had gone, replaced by a creature too bright to look at. Beside him was Cla'esset, and behind the chair was Eannu. The rest of the room, crowded a moment before, was empty.

"Steryan," said a voice, the same rich, soft tone he had heard summon Eannu outside. "Are you all right?"

"Itan Hlan'k" – began Steryan, but he was interrupted.

"Afraid not. That was just a disguise. Call me Ceti."

"Ceti, I'm unharmed. But what happened?"

"Yanthir wasn't the only one who made mistakes," said Ceti. "I guess I just got too attached to him – and to that form as well, I think. I was too concerned with passing on stuff about hyperdrive and repulsor beams when I should have been watching this place."

"Ceti?" hazarded Steryan.

"Well, never mind," said the voice. "Sorry I didn't act in time to prevent all that crude butchery, but don't worry: you lost no one of importance. No-one but Yanthir: and his time had passed." Steryan felt something like a hand touch his face, and glimpsed another touching Cla'esset's beside him.

"You know, you've got PIna's eyes, almost," he said softly to her. "You should make a good team. It's up to the two of you now, and I hope you make a better job of it than the unlamented Speakers. I'd be a liar if I said I don't think you will. But now I think I'll leave you and yours alone for a while. So long, Steryan. Goodbye, Cla."

The creature turned to go. Steryan called after him.

"But what if we need you, Ceti?"

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm your Protector, aren't I?"