

# The Temple Bell

By David Vickery

A calm sea stirred by the gentlest ripples, unbroken in all directions. Hazy sunlight diffusing through a souplike atmosphere, the sky choked with pastel clouds. The lap of the waves, the splash of fish, the plaintive cries of seabirds, and for the longest time, nothing. Then, majestic as Poseidon, a great metal ship breaching the waters, droplets falling from its streamlined hull, rare waves in rocking motion. The fish shoaling frantically, the seabirds wheeling in panic, the ship taking the air in eerie silence. It rises rapidly, gains the upper atmosphere, slips smoothly through the world's grasp. And the sea calms, the seabirds settle on the water, the fish return.

*The Yanthir's a beauty, though I say so myself. Gutsy repulsors to take the ship out beyond the atmosphere, then the latest word in hyperspace tech ready and eager to kick in. Even plasma generators for armament and an epiforcefield for defence, though I'd be the first to admit these are in the nature of a flourish. So what if they're never used? Every designer likes to make the occasional aesthetic statement, and I'm no exception.*

*Besides, they remind me of the old days. When I was the Ceti's champion in the war against the Kysslani it was propulsion rather than armament that came under the heading of luxuries. Great days. Never a dull moment.*

*Now of course, all that footloose and fancy-free stuff's over. I've got responsibilities. It's not easy protecting these Calderans, even from themselves. It's not easy picking the right time to launch the Yanthir, with more than 10,000 huge platforms plying the waters. And most of all, it's not easy adjusting to their timescale.*

*Finding that trading planet, establishing diplomatic relations, learning the language, building up trust, metamorphosing the Yanthir, recruiting a crew – all that took time. I'm no slouch, I hope, and I think a century or so for that lot is pretty good going. But it's so easy to forget how long such a short period is to them. Yanthir – the ship's namesake – his female Plna, his friend Eannu; even his grandson Steryan, and Mogil and Beyr who in different ways laid down their lives for him; they're all just memories now.*

*What brief lives they have. In fact, of all the races I've known, only the Ceti and the Kysslani have time to look about them. And perhaps even the Kysslani regard virtual immortality a mixed blessing now that they're vassals of the Ceti. Or maybe that aspect of things hasn't struck them. Those ryshyyrs were never much for irony.*

*But enough of those losers. Ever since I've been back it's clear that things have changed quite a bit here on Waterworld. Looks like this society could well be in need of my assistance.*

*So what else is new?*

Vyrdeena shivered as she waited for her friend Ha'nen in the streets by the harbour. It was cold in the morning before star-rise on the island of Ykharr, especially here by the waterfront where the sea-tainted breezes blew inland. But it was not the cold that made her shiver: it was the voice calling insidiously to her. She looked up and down the street, half fearing, half hoping that someone else would hear it. But she knew it was inside her head and she knew she was going slowly mad.

A finger of bright pastel yellow quivered along the purple-black horizon. Another beautiful Waterworld dawn. But the beauty of it was diminished for Vyrdeena by having to see it shivering and half awake. Still she tried to appreciate it. She had always tried to find the time to appreciate the beauty of *Kharr Itan* because it was undeniably a beautiful world – and because beauty was the one thing the rich and powerful couldn't take from her, a Green.

And there was the damnable voice again, when she was trying so hard to shut it out. Twin tears brimmed under vermilion eyes. There it was again.

*Look at the great houses.*

She looked inland. Just a short distance away but an uncrossable one for her: the new houses of the leader Blues and the wealthy Grey merchants.

*Once the shore and anything to do with the sea were avoided by the better class of society, but lately they have moved in to construct stately houses, while the great building families of Nauru, Jy'hku and Astaru compete gladly for the business.*

Was that the voice or her own memory? She couldn't tell any more. But what did she know of such things, or of anything except baiting lines and spearing fish?

But she had eyes. Strange that the beauty of the star-rise had often struck her, so much so that her friends on the fishing raft had teased her for her rapt expression; and yet she had never thought about the injustice of those mansions compared to her own hovel. Until now. Another, more bitter tear squeezed through her eyelids and matted her fronds as she strove to shut out the sight. Because there was nothing to do about it. Except maybe burn those palaces to the ground.

A laugh escaped her lips, surprising her. She felt warmer, as though the blaze was already kindling. Yes, she would like to see those fat wealthy citizens reduced to her circumstances, if only for a few nights!

*Not bad. But why beat them when you can join them?*

Oh yes, she thought scornfully. I can see them inviting me in for a goblet of *illnth*!

*You could join the Temple. The Calderan Priestesses are open to all castes.*

The strangeness of the idea hit her: and then she realised that she had been arguing with herself. But if it was madness, at least it made a kind of sense as well. To get away from the drudgery of her life...!

"Hello, Vyrdeena." She looked up: there was Ha'nen, morning dew making her fringes glisten. And behind her, the homes of the rich, glowing in the after-dawn light. She paused for a moment.

"We're late," said Ha'nen, magnanimously overlooking the cause of their lateness.

"I'm thinking of joining the Priestesses," Vyrdeena said as lightly as she could manage as they walked quickly onwards.

"Better ask Headman for his permission," said Ha'nen, with a little laugh at the idea.

"I could join. The Temple is open to all castes."

"Ya, Vyrdeena. At least the floors and walls are – and they'll even give you scourers and a bucket of water for your very own."

They turned the corner to see the fishing raft waiting. The other Greens were all at their stations, while family slaves of the lowly Yellow caste chattered at their oars and around the large rudder.

*Not very big, is it?*

"It's big enough for me," said Vyrdeena.

"And more than big enough for me," answered Ha'nen, surprised.

They got aboard with no more than a scowl from the Headman. He waved them to their places and signalled cast off/under way with an imperious gesture.

*Some Headman. A crew of fifty?*

Vyrdeena smiled.

It was a long day, but no harder than any other. The rains kept away and the raft rowed steadily out to sea. The fishermen and women trailed their lines, speared their catches of silvery-olive *skral*, terracotta and purple *perl* and fat succulent *teth'n* – with an occasional and danger-filled landing of a king *teth'n* whose spines were sharp enough to kill. The midday heat made their fronds run with sweat as they hauled lines, stabbed fish and cast their floppy quivering cargo behind them to enrich the lives of the leaders of Ykharr.

In the late afternoon they rested. Even the Yellows lounging on their oars or by the rudder were too spent to say much. Vyrdeena looked back in the direction they had come, Ykharr out of sight beyond the horizon line. Then she looked out to sea. It lapped gently in every direction, nothing but sea, clouds stuffed with blue-yellow-brown light and seabirds to meet the eye.

"Is it true you once saw a real platform, Ha'nen?" Vyrdeena asked wistfully.

"Once: when we were further out even than today."

"Was it full of *Snart Ythu*?"

"Packed with Floaters. More males and females than I'd even seen before. And the platform was huge, too. But they veered off before we could see them close to. I think they were laughing at our little raft."

*Primitives. Buffoons. Ryshyys.*

"You should have laughed at them," said Vyrdeena hotly. "At least we can go home in the evening. We don't have to ply the endless ocean forever."

"I thought you liked the *Snart Ythu*," said Ha'nen, surprised.

The Green Headman made a peremptory gesture and the raft was thrown into activity, preparing for the homeward journey.

"I thought so too," replied Vyrdeena. As perplexed as her friend.

It was midnight. Vyrdeena went from deep sleep to wakefulness in an instant, panic drenching her. She struggled to hold herself together. She raised herself on one elbow. It seemed to help.

"Who are you?"

Her one-roomed shack was so near to the sea that even its gentle insistent lapping sounded loud. But it was the only sound she received.

"Who are you?"

She could see the flickering light from the fish-oil lamps of the palaces through the gaps in her wall. Nothing else was visible.

"Who are you?" she cried.

The sea-rushes under her were warm with the received heat of her body. She could feel nothing else. But something was touching her, reaching into her mind. Her brain whirled. She fought for sanity. If only her parents had still been alive, the stern-gentle Deenath, the lithe Arneh. If only Ha'nen were here. If only she had someone to turn to.

*You have me.*

"But who are you?" Her voice this time was a whisper; and a whisper came in reply, filling her mind, reassuring yet confusing.

*I am a warrior.*

"A warrior?"

*I am a warrior and a protector. I have been a lover and a destroyer of love. I enslaved an empire and set another free. I was alive before your race was born and I am still young.*

"Who are you?"

*I have had a thousand names in a thousand tongues. But here on Kharr Itan I am known by the name of my people. The Ceti.*

Fear returned in a tumbling wave: and with it, curiosity, the torture of hope and the stirring of new-found strength.

"But the Ceti is just a legend...."

*There is never just a legend. There is always more. And I am the more in this case.*

She pondered, the cool dark wrapped around her, in the listening silence. Into her mind came a jumble of images: a giant wielding a sword to bring the palaces tumbling down, and a sleek sea-creature. Faint laughter came to her like the movement of the wind in the houses. She relaxed.

"But what is there to do?"

*Go to the Temple as I said before.*

"They won't admit me, a Green."

*Maybe they will, maybe they won't. But whatever happens, can it be worse than this?*

“Do you believe in the Ceti?”

It was the next morning, and they were even later than they had been the day before. Yet still Vyrdeena insisted on stopping, to the accompaniment of annoyance/irritation gestures from passers-by.

“I believe in the power of Headman to make our lives miserable if we keep him waiting again,” replied Ha’nen, her cherry eyes smiling. They walked on.

“No, but seriously.”

Ha’nen looked at Vyrdeena with something between puzzlement and alarm.

“I’ve heard stories,” she said at last. “Old Believers they call themselves. And if my old gran was right, they’re still scattered across the island.”

“Ha’nen, I believe I’m one of them.”

“You can’t be!”

“Well, at least a Young Believer, then.” Vyrdeena smiled; but there was no answering smile on the troubled face of her friend.

“There’s only one religion that’s tolerated, as well you know. We’re all Calderans now, as the saying goes. Though if you ask me, such religion is only for the rich and powerful.”

“And what about us? What is there for us?”

“There’s hard work and short lives – and punishment if we don’t look out.”

“But what about the Ceti?”

It was Ha’nen’s turn to stop still.

“Listen, Vyr,” she said. “The Ceti died centuries ago – if he ever lived in the first place. He’s just a legend.”

“There is never just a legend.”

Ha’nen looked into her friend’s eyes with amazement, but said nothing.

“Look, Ha’nen. You run for the raft. I’m going to the Temple.”

“To throw your life away on a legend? You know what will happen when they catch you: punishment, maiming, perhaps even ritual immersion. Don’t do it, Vyr!”

“Vyrdeena! Ha’nen!” They looked round. The Green Headman, walking angrily towards them. Not only was the launching delayed, it was delayed by two junior females standing gossiping in the street! His fronds quivered with righteous passion.

Ha’nen, with a last despairing glance of appeal at her friend, scurried past the Headman heading for the raft. Vyrdeena stood looking at him. Unmoved despite his command.

“Vyrdeena! Come here!” he bellowed, accompanying his shout with the obey/imperative gesture. The one gesture that was never ignored.

Only this time it was. With sudden decision, Vyrdeena turned and ran into the streets of the Blue palaces.

The Headman stood, reeling from the broken taboos. Not only had this slip of a girl ignored him, she had deliberately entered the precincts of the leaders! But he was so angry that he ran after her – only to be pulled up short by two Senior Blues strolling towards him. Their look of shock and contempt at the idea of a Green barging into their enclosure when anyone other than a Blue or Senior

Grey would have asked permission brought him to his senses. He turned quickly and hurried away: not to the raft, whose launch would be further delayed, but to the quarters of the officers to issue a prohibition on Vyrdeena.

She ran on through the streets of the Blues. Heads turned as she passed and shouts of surprise and alarm followed her, but she never heard them. She had overturned her world with a single defiant act. Wretched shame filled her mind; but then came an unexpected sense of freedom. Whatever happened now, she would never return to the fishing raft, never again spend unending days toiling for others. Her spirit soared and gave her new speed, and soon she was outside the Blue enclave, heading for the Temple.

Parting a barricade of scrubby plants, Vyrdeena looked down into a natural amphitheatre in front of a vast stone building. Many adherents sat on benches. Below them in a levelled area two Priestesses moved sensuously in ritual dance, the thin, clear note of their finger-cymbals punctuating the sing-song drone of the High Priestess. She stood thrice-garlanded with sea-flowers, arcane gestures flowing continuously from her arms. But what Vyrdeena noticed first was the tolling of the Temple Bell, not loud but continuous, a deadening sound.

How mournful, Vyrdeena thought.

*Calderanism is a mournful religion. And yet originally it was not a religion at all. Strange how things change.*

"Ceti!" she whispered in delight.

*The Temple has other, more joyful bells. But it is many years since any of those sounded.*

"How do you know?"

*Those priestesses just told me.*

"They told you!"

*Oh yes. They'll tell you anything if you know how to ask.*

For the first time, Vyrdeena sensed strain in the voice despite its light tone.

"Are you hurt, Ceti?"

*Not exactly. But I'm growing weaker. Fewer words from me; and from you, too, Vyrdeena. It'll soon be too dangerous. Just think what you want to say, and I'll hear it.*

The High Priestess finished her address, bowed, and went inside the Temple. The ritual dancers followed. Guards took up their post at the Temple gate, and the crowd began to disperse, talking in quiet, dreamy tones.

*Give things a while to settle down.*

Then what? I can't get past those guards.

*There's a side door.*

After a long wait, Vyrdeena scrambled down the hillside. Close to, the Temple seemed even bigger. To one used to a hovel it seemed to go on forever.

Following the building round, Vyrdeena eventually came across a small door. It looked forgotten, unopened for decades.

This one?

*Push.*

She put her shoulder to the door and gave all her weight to it. It resisted stubbornly and then flew open with an alarming creak, dust whirling into the corridor.

*Close it.*

Vyrdeena quickly shut the door and looked around her. A corridor, richly ornamented with a frieze showing legendary stories, illuminated in flickering light from fish-oil lamps in sconces. There was no time to see more.

Someone's coming. They must have heard the door.

*Climb.*

The inner wall had niches that might serve as handholds and footholds. But climb to where? The footfalls were growing louder. She scrambled up.

*In there.*

Swaying precariously in her narrow niches, Vyrdeena saw a narrow opening where the wall met the ceiling. All the centuries of Floater distaste for confined spaces rose up in her.

*Do it!*

She squeezed inside. There was just room. Her feet disappeared from view as the guards appeared below. She heard their voices as they looked around them. Perspiration trickled down her fringes and streaked her face. There was no air. Tons of solid stone were pressing down on her. She couldn't see. She couldn't move. She couldn't turn round. She would never get out.

*Come on. It's all right.*

Some of the panic ebbed at the sound of that voice. She began to crawl further into the tunnel, thinking and trying not to think of her days fishing on the endless ocean when she had all the space she wanted.

*This way...this way...this way....*

The voice drove her onwards.

*This way...this way....*

Until she seemed to have known nothing but the enclosing darkness.

*This way...this way...stop. Listen.*

Fish-oil light came through a grille ahead. She inched forward. Voices, male and female. She looked through the grille, vermilion eyes smarting at the brightness.

Below her sat the High Priestess and a big, powerful male. From his assured manner she guessed him to be a Blue...no, a Grey. She noticed the colour of his splendid sea-twine belt. He poured liquid into two goblets and passed one to the Priestess.

"So it is true," she said. "Leader has deceived us."

"Yes," smiled the Grey. "There is no such place as Parsis."

"Then he is unworthy to lead the Calderan people."

"You will testify to that in the assembly?" asked the Grey, leaning forward.

"If what you say is true."

"You know it is. Your acolyte heard the words from the mouth of the captive. Or come yourself and listen. He still lives."

"Torture is barbaric to me, Tomir."

"And to me, reverend mother. But we needed to know."

“Then where does the Leader go on that raft of his? The goods that are poisoning our society and turning us away from the old values must come from somewhere.”

“As to that, there are several theories – “

*And all wrong. Stay silent and see the truth, Vyrdeena.*

It was as well that he had warned her. For in an instant the confining walls were swept away and she seemed to be on a raft, larger than the one she had fished from for so long. And astonishment: high-born Blues pulled at the oars and steered with the great rudder! But there was no sense of hardship here. Rather, the raft sang with good spirits and laughter.

The scene changed. Now the raft was far from Ykharr. The young Leader conversed with his Council and gave a sign. The rowers pulled in their oars and the raft came to a standstill in the gentle waters. One of the Blues dragged out a large chest from the central cabin and opened it. The Blues gathered around him and took out brightly-coloured things...that they stepped into and pulled over themselves. Things like cloths went over their mouths. Bulky objects covered their heads, obscuring their fringes entirely. Now they no longer looked like Calderans.

They walked to the side and, with a gesture from the Leader, stepped off into the icy waters. Vyrdeena started.

They sacrifice themselves!

*No. Watch.*

The strangely-clad Blues sank through the waters, fish shoaling around them. One shone a kind of light at a king *teth'n* that approached, and it fell away from them like a stone. Moving their arms and legs in a rhythmic motion unknown to Vyrdeena, the Blues finally came to what looked like a house on the sea bed. Vyrdeena waited.

And next, from nowhere, a huge object bigger than a palace rose up and out of the waters. Metal like the swords of leaders, yet moving, alive. Fear gripped her.

*It's all right. It's not a creature. It's a ship: a sort of enclosed raft.*

She saw Calderan lettering on the side of the ship: YANTHIR. Myths stirred again in her mind.

How can that be Yanthir? Was he not a Calderan – the first Calderan?

*The ship is called Yanthir in his honour. Yanthir is also the ancestor of the present Leader, Thir'rk.*

Now Vyrdeena seemed to be inside the Yanthir. The Blues sat in chairs, recognisable again but for the objects on their heads. They seemed to be asleep. But the ship didn't need their help. Outside again, Vyrdeena watched it fly through the clouds faster than the fastest sea-bird. Then without warning the Yanthir left the world entirely: and there was an immensity of lights glittering in the deepest black. Beauty beyond anything *Kharr Itan* had ever offered transfixed Vyrdeena.

There was more: the way the ship shivered, disappeared and was instantly elsewhere, a distance Vyrdeena somehow knew to be almost unimaginable; the descent to the rocky planet; the landing; and the emergence of

the Blues, greeted by strange-looking others. But the lights in the darkness remained her strongest impression.

*Those others are Parsisans, Vyrdeena. People in another place eager to trade with Thir'rk to benefit both sides. But the discussion ends.*

"When Leader is deposed, reverend mother, I'll keep my promise to strengthen the Temple. But if violence is inevitable...."

"I pray it will not be. But if it is, the Temple will support you."

Tomir bowed and left.

*Quick. Follow him. This way.*

With the brilliance of her vision still filling her, Vyrdeena followed directions through the cramped shaft, turning this way and that until light, darker and redder than before, came through another grille. She stopped and looked.

There below were two Calderans hanging by arms tied with sea-twine. Blood matted their fringes. Red coals glowed in a brazier, studded with irons. Temple guards stood at attention, leaving quickly when Tomir gestured dismissal.

One of the captives raised his head to look at him. Tomir lifted the eyelids of the other and let them fall back.

"*Eksth thu yj'rrfaru vai j'rrfaru ythu,*" he said, voicing the age-old Floater saying. Others must die for us to live.

Bitter anger gave the surviving captive strength to reply. "*M'tharra vai thu yj'rrfarult.*" You kill merely that others may die.

"Not so," said Tomir. "As a worshipper of Czoth, I must provide sacrifices."

"Czoth!" the prisoner croaked. "An obscenity and an outrage that should be wiped from *Kharr Itan!*"

"It's true that worship of Czoth has been banned on Ykharr, though even here it still has its bastions," replied Tomir placidly. "But it remains strong on the endless ocean. Czoth worshippers would love to wipe *you* from Waterworld, you and all you milk-weed Calderans. And thanks to your information, I'll be able to help a platform of my Floater friends make a start tomorrow – while incidentally putting us Greys back on top here in Ykharr." Tomir turned to a bench and picked up an ornamental knife, gleaming blood red in the half-light, which he began to sharpen. "Perhaps you may change your opinion of Czoth when you meet him. There's no reason to delay that now, since the High Priestess has denied herself the pleasure of your company."

He turned back to the prisoner, knife in hand; but as he did so, he saw the light go out of his eyes and his head fall. Tomir looked closely at him.

"Too bad," he said. "We must take the thought for the deed." He left.

"Help them, Ceti," whispered Vyrdeena.

*Too late for those two. You must warn Thir'rk. Only hours remain.*

The voice sounded nearer, yet weaker, than ever before. Vyrdeena pushed through the grille and dropped awkwardly on stiff limbs onto the floor of the chamber. Then she followed cautiously after Tomir.

Inside the chamber, something strange was happening to the body of the first prisoner. An observer would have seen it apparently liquefy, starting with the hands which poured themselves through pinching sea-twine bonds, then the

whole body becoming amorphous. Whatever it was, it was not a Calderan. If it ever had been one.

*Yes, I really must be getting old. But I'd be a liar if I didn't say it was neatly done, the way Tomir's team plucked C'ryf and me out of the line as we walked to Thir'rk's palace for tomorrow's launch. No one suspected a thing.*

*One of the downsides of sustaining myself as a Calderan is the atmospheric pressure here on Waterworld. It's really quite draining. But what's the alternative. The Parsisans still expect to see me, since I was the one who made contact.*

*It's no problem once I get to my generators and top up my energy. But since, for safe keeping, they're ensconced on the sea bed, getting to them would have been a problem. Form-changing takes too long for me to have done anything dramatic to Tomir's men; and in the meantime as a Calderan I'd have been vulnerable to anything fatal to a Calderan.*

*So there I was, captured with C'ryf. It was definitely a question of torture first, ask questions later with Tomir, so I had to conveniently "die" before his efforts sapped too much of my energy. There wasn't even time to save C'ryf. I'm depressed and even annoyed by that. Someone will suffer for this needless barbarity if I have my way.*

*Talking to Vyrdeena, especially at long range, was also a big energy drain. Speaking of whom, I sense she's just been caught by the Temple guards. Unfortunate, but at least they're not Tomir's henchmen.*

*So, let's see. My part in all this is effectively over unless I can get out of here, make it to the sea, get to the under-sea generators and restore myself – while liberating Vyrdeena on the way. Given all that, and my loss of energy, there seems only one choice for my form-change.*

*It'll be just like old times.*

Vyrdeena awoke from a fitful sleep. Then she remembered. Her arms were tied, just as those of the prisoners had been – but fortunately without torture equipment in evidence. But how could she sleep, with time running out for Thir'rk and all his people. She strained her arms fruitlessly against the twine.

Something moved in the shadows beyond the reach of the chamber's fish-oil lamp, and a faint noise came to her ears. She peered into the blackness.

"Who is it?" she whispered. Then the shape emerged into the light. She stiffened. It was a long, thin animal with a glossy coat and an intelligent expression on its face. Its eyes were weirdly blue instead of red. But what struck her most of all were the fangs that protruded over its lower lip. Sharp enough to kill.

She pulled back to the limit of the twine, perspiration soaking her fronds. But it was no use. The animal came closer. Then it jumped onto her with agile grace and those impossible eyes were inches from her. She turned her head unwillingly. Its glance was darting and its eyes were strangely beautiful. It nuzzled her fronds, whiskers tickling her face. Then it bit through the twine bonds with astonishing delicacy, those lethal fangs never once scoring her flesh. She

stood dumbfounded, rubbing her wrists, while it crouched on the ground, its eyes sparkling. Then it turned with a flick of its body and was gone.

More carefully this time, Vyrdeena made her way along the frieze-lined corridors, jumping back at every sound. But then came a moment when voices were in front and behind. She dived into a room just in time to avoid being seen. There, frozen in amazement, stood the High Priestess in the act of garlanding herself for another ceremony. Vyrdeena didn't think. She seized a pottery vase and brought it down sharply on the Priestess's skull. She collapsed in a heap.

Vyrdeena stood trembling, expecting the sound to bring guards running. But although she could still faintly hear the sound of voices, no one entered the room. Still, no way out through the door she came in. The other door would have to do, wherever it led to.

But first, she divested herself of everything that identified her as a Green: her miserable thin belt and her frond ribbons. Then she stroked her fronds and fringes to bring some order back to her appearance. Finally, she picked up the triple sea-flower necklace, put it over her head and opened the door.

Outside, a crowd of Calderan faces swam in the light from a hundred fish-oil lamps. Waiting. For her, it seemed. The mournful bell clanged insistently. The two Priestesses ceased their swaying dance and stared at her. She adopted a haughty demeanour and gestured them over.

"The High Priestess is unwell. I will be taking this service." Still they stood gaping at her. Inspiration struck. "Stop that bell! And have the others ring out!"

"But, reverend mother, it is forbidden –" began one.

Vyrdeena touched her necklace. "It is forbidden no longer. Go!" They ran off to the bell-tower, amazement and perhaps a new-found joy in their faces. Vyrdeena turned to the crowd.

"Citizens, why do you sit here?" she began, as she had heard the High Priestess do so.

"We wait for the life to come," came the flat response.

"But the life to come is here on Ykharr, waiting for you!" The great Temple bell suddenly stopped, for the first time in uncounted years, and the crowd stirred in wonderment. "Is it right to sit here, you leaders, while others are chained to a life of grinding toil? Where is the promise of a new and equal society that led us from the endless ocean to this island, as the scriptures say?" The bells began to peal, and the crowd rose eagerly. The mournful sound had been replaced by a clangour of freshness and expectation. "You sit here on Ykharr and drink and feast – and nothing changes. What have we gained by leaving the ocean? *Snart Ythu* have no choice. But Calderans have a choice. That is what it means to be a Calderan. And you should choose to change this place, this island, for the better. Free the slaves. Share the work. Build something new for your young."

The crowd was buzzing, faces flushed by the words of Vyrdeena and by the glad carillon of the bells finally liberated from their long silence. She took the opportunity to slip away, as amazed as any of her audience by what she had said.

Dawn was breaking, as cold as ever. She knew that both the Green officers and the Temple guards were after her but she had managed to evade them all, using side streets and unfrequented ways to come finally to the shore. But even now, when all she wanted was to crawl away and sleep for a week, there was no rest for her. There, pulled up on the sand, was a tiny sea-wood raft such as Senior Greens were allowed to use in order to supplement their diet. She pushed it into the waters, clambered aboard and gripped the small oars.

Minutes turned into hours as she rowed, scarcely daring to rest. Was Ha'nen still fishing on the raft, watched by a stern Headman? What had happened to Ceti, who had never answered her after she dropped into the torture room? Or was that animal somehow the Ceti? A name came to her out of the legends: *Itan Hlan'k*. Protector of the world. He had called himself a protector, she remembered.

But there was no time for such musing. She had to get to Thir'rk. She pictured once again the course she had seen in her vision in the Temple ventilation shaft and rowed with renewed vigour.

Still she rowed, far beyond the limits the tiny raft had been intended for; and tried to ignore the fact that it was breaking up. The sea-twine holding it together was giving out, and she had nothing to replace it with.

And finally the raft broke up completely, the sea-wood logs barrelling away from under her and pitching her into the sea. At once, supercooled water bit ferociously into her legs as she tried without success to clamber back onto what little remained of the raft. Time was very precious now.

"Something in the water, Leader," said the Sailing Master.

Thir'rk followed the stubby finger. "You're right, Ghail," he answered. "A new course, *Kharrna Vystr* – and you others, pull on those oars!"

Vyrdeena had lost all feeling in her legs and the world was darkening in her eyes. And then she was being hauled up and out of the water, Calderans clustering round her. She recognised the young Leader and called weakly to him.

"Thir'rk."

The Blues gasped. The great taboo, that no one should pronounce Leader's name, still held even them, space-travellers though they were.

"Ritual immersion," muttered one; but Thir'rk intervened.

"Wait, Kynet. How could she even know my name? There's something more than appears here. Bring blankets, *mranth*, and some of that medicine we got from Parsis last time out." And while the Blues bustled to and fro, he said gently to Vyrdeena, "What is it about?"

"Ceti," she stammered out through bluing lips; and while most citizens of Ykharr would have looked blankly at her or even laughed, Thir'rk was all attention at once. As the liquor warmed her, the medicine smoothed away the pain and the *blankets* – softer than anything she'd known – were wrapped around her, she told her story to Thir'rk and his Blues.

"Serious," said Ghail when she had finished. "We're forewarned – but what can we do?"

"That's right," said Kynet. "On a trading mission we don't even have a sword between us!"

"What course, Leader? Back to Ykharr?"

"No," said Thir'rk with decision. "Let's go on. Perhaps we can outrun them. If we get to the underwater chamber, we're safe."

But even as he spoke, that seemed unlikely. A large platform appeared in view. Floaters thronging the edge wearing metal swords in their belts. The Blues pulled strongly on their oars, but the massed banks of rowers on the platform allowed it to overhaul the raft effortlessly.

"Spines, Kynet; quickly," ordered Thir'rk; and Kynet ran to the central cabin to pull out and distribute the sharp fish spines. But it was clear to all concerned that these would be no match for the swords of their opponents.

The platform moved ever closer. The Blue oarsmen gave up the useless struggle and stood ready. They prepared to sell their lives dearly, but at ten to one and without proper weaponry they knew it was no more than a gesture.

Tomir moved to the front and made an elaborate greeting/salutation gesture. From one platform to another. But Thir'rk called over the waters to him. "I'm told your name is Tomir. I don't know the rest of your rabble, but I can see you've been giving them swords. That will cost you dear, Grey."

Tomir paled on hearing his name; but he quickly rallied. "Empty threats, Leader. For those words you will die slowest and last today." And all around him, his fighters cried "Czoth! Czoth!" and drew their swords. But as the platform closed on the raft and hooked lines flew across to pull them together, Vyrdeena was trying to walk to the cabin. Her weakened legs gave way but still she continued, crawling frantically until she reached it.

"Thir'rk!" she called.

He turned, in time to catch the helmet she flung at him. He understood and pulled it on. "Yanthir!" he shouted.

The Czoth worshippers stood, laughing at Thir'rk's antics and strange headgear.

"He calls on his ancestor!" Tomir mocked. "They'll be together soon enough!" He raised his arm for the signal to jump onto the raft: but as he did so, a cry from behind him stopped him in his tracks.

"*Jow'r Kharr!*" The sea boils! There, some distance to the starboard of the two vessels but clearly visible, was an unheard-of convulsion in the water. Great bubbles frothed to the surface and waves rocked the timbers of the platform and raft. Then it came, rising like a behemoth from the waters, all gleaming metal in the hazy afternoon sunshine, dwarfing them. Even Vyrdeena who had seen it before reeled from the size, the bulk, the sheer otherness of the ship; and most of the Czoth worshippers fell on their faces in terror.

Most, but not all. Tomir, stunned though he was, did not lack courage. He pulled Floaters to their feet and encouraged them onwards. As he did so, the Yanthir swung round majestically and bore down on them. A protrusion on the port side flickered, almost faster than the eye could follow: and half the platform, Tomir included, had been torn away, the ocean seething in furious motion around the wreck.

*I should think so. A plasma generator is a weapon capable of crippling a hyperdrive gunship – firing, at a speed fast enough to produce fusion, a gas so completely ionised that the nuclei of its atoms are stripped of electrons – but I was provoked.*

Vyrdeena understood scarcely a word of the voice in her mind. But she knew that the Ceti was alive, and that they had won.

Gentle rain was falling as the raft made its way back to Ykharr, but it failed to dampen the spirits of the Blues. Only Vyrdeena was anxious as she stood before Thir'rk.

“I’ve decided what to do with you,” he told her. “You’re going back to work.” Her face fell, and he grinned. “Back to work as the High Priestess. It’s time we had a change. From what you’ve told me, the people would rather listen to you. And besides, with the Green officers *and* the Temple guards after you, it’s the only job outside both their jurisdictions.”

Vyrdeena smiled. “It won’t be easy.”

“Nor is my job easy.” She looked at him, and saw that he was laughing.

They turned together and watched the red-purple starfall shepherding them home.