

The Triumph of Czoth

By David Vickery

Aronal should have been happy. He stood on the platform, feeling the creak of the sea-wood planks as the power of the oarsmen surged through it, driving it on through the silky waters of *Kharr Itan*. Just a week ago he had been voted Leader following the death of old S'Krao. Now he ruled one of the greatest platforms on the endless ocean and his whim was law. It had been another good day for fishing with several of the Blues breaking their catch records. Later that day would come that rare and splendid event the meeting of platforms, with feasting, singing and games, and new blood for both parties with the exchange of females. And as though to herald that meeting the afternoon was particularly fine, the sun not quite burning through the pastel cloud layers but making them glow in rich blue-yellow ribbons, a warm breeze ruffling gently his fronds.

These were causes for happiness, but Aronal was not happy. His eyes looked north over the scarcely moving waters and a frown darkened his face. There was nothing to see as far as the horizon except the occasional water-bird, but the thought of what lay beyond was enough to turn his delights to ashes. He barked at a Yellow who had foolishly strayed into his sight. The Yellow cowered, terror in his face mingling with relief that Leader had nothing more to say to him.

Later, the skies flushing red-purple in starfall, his mood changed. He called his Senior Greys to him and watched as they lined up along the platform edge. They were magnificent: tall, well-groomed, strong, in their prime, armed with swords of bright metal. They were also his. And he was taller and stronger than any of them.

"Snart Ythu!" he shouted suddenly.

"Snart Ythu!" came a roar of exultation back to him, twenty voices as one without hesitation. Yes, he thought, they are *Snart Ythu*, I am *Snart Yth*. We are Floaters. I am a Floater. Using our skill to harvest the oceans for everything we need. This is life.

And as the other platform approached, as custom and etiquette demanded it should at that place and at that time, he felt better still. The Leader and his Greys faced Aronal and his across the waters and they exchanged an ancient greeting, its very antiquity charging it with power.

May the gods give strength to your spear arms.

Aronal read the gesture with ease and gestured in reply. *May they lead you to the deep shoals.*

It was a large platform, reaching back and blending into the shadows lit feebly by fish-oil lamps; and it was crewed by a multitude of strong Floaters. Yet Aronal saw in the stiffness of the other Leader's gesture respect and a hint of fear. And then he felt better than ever.

Sacred sea-twine, such as garlanded the ritual poles on both platforms, was used to tie the edges. A temporary unity, foreshadowing the eternal ties the exchange of females would give them. Then came the moment of choosing where the celebrations would take place. Sometimes this was not settled for hours as the rival Leaders sized each other up: but the Leader was quick to step onto Aronal's territory, his hand touching

his fringes in a way that was far more flattering than any speech. He introduced himself as Qabrith and brought with him all his Greys, his Senior Blues and his Green Headman. Just as tradition said. Aronal smiled and clasped Qabrith to him, welcoming him and his aboard.

The feasting began. Qabrith's men brought with them several superb king *teth'n*, the metal-blue fish splendid even in death with their array of fearsome spines. But Aronal's Floaters had something even better: a *kharr siyr*. The water-bird was a rare catch, and rarer still was it to find one whose flesh was still succulent. But here was a bird which had foolishly come within reach of a fishing line, deftly thrown.

Aronal took the bird, his mouth running over with water as he did so, and pulled from it a small portion, handing this to one of his Greys who disappeared with it into the Blue area. Even when the water-bird was presented at a platform meeting the catcher had to have his reward. Then he divided the remainder into halves and gave one to Qabrith, to be apportioned as he wished. The Leaders seated themselves, followed by their Seniors.

"I am honoured, Aronal," said Qabrith. Only a Leader could call another Leader by name and many of his own Floaters heard his name for the first time. They looked at the exalted ones with awe.

"The size and strength of your platform demanded no less, Qabrith. I am proud to honour one such as you. We shall go forward together down the generations as your blood mixes with ours."

"We shall go forward together," agreed Qabrith. "It is many years since I tasted *kharr siyr*, it is fitting that our union should be so blessed. And I shall do my part to make it special too." He gestured, and one of his Greys went back to his platform. He returned with a captive and some glass bottles. Many of Aronal's people looked at both with amazement.

"A sacrifice for Czoth at the height of the feast. That is the proper way for Floaters, not the killing of *perl* or *skral* or even king *teth'n*."

"It is proper," said Aronal; "but who is he? If one of your own has given up his life for Czoth, that is honour indeed."

"It is even better. He is one of those vermin who denies he is a Floater and comes from that place in the north his kind call Ykharr. He was on a tiny raft and was fishing alone. He had these with him." He gave Aronal one of the bottles, its smooth surface strange to his stubby fingers.

Aronal stood up, his fringes quivering with passion. Here at last was one of the hated ones. His glare met the vermilion eyes of the captive, despair and defiance in his answering look.

"So you are not *Snart Yth*. Let me hear you say it."

"Willingly. I am Saudeir, a Calderan from Ykharr."

"The names of sacrifices are not spoken. The names of vermin are not spoken. You are an abomination to all true Floaters. Even the name Ykharr is an insult: no-water! Water is our heritage and our destiny. I am Aronal, Grey Headman, platform leader, *Snart Yth*."

Aronal spoke in a great voice, flushed with pride; but even before he finished Saudeir had gestured rapidly. His arms were pinned to his side with twine, but still Aronal could read it: unimportant-worthless. Everyone could read it. The intake of breath all

around him proved that. Aronal's sword was half out of his belt before he remembered that the captive was needed for sacrifice. He spat in Saudeir's face instead.

"*Vai Czoth o yj'rrfar slafar,*" said Aronal. Prepare to die for Czoth.

"*Yj'r Calderan j'r Snart Yth vraub'th,*" replied Saudeir. Better a dead Calderan than a live Floater.

Aronal gestured angrily and the captive was hauled off to the central hut. All his pleasure at the age-old Floater traditions, at Qabrith's deference, at the meeting celebrations, had leached away. He had the feeling that even in death Saudeir would provide no satisfaction for him. Despite his best efforts of encouragement.

"I regret the taboos broken at the hands of the vermin, but that is the way of vermin," said Qabrith.

"We must wipe his kind from the face of *Kharr Itan!*"

Qabrith's eyes glowed even redder in agreement. "Would that we could, Aronal." He looked away in sadness, and Aronal understood. Every Floater had heard the story of the monster that dwelt beneath the waters, far larger than the largest platform, at the beck and call of the leaders on Ykharr. Any attack on a Calderan raft would surely be answered with terrible retribution.

"But we will make a start tonight. Only one, but with the aid of Czoth we will add others in the days to come. And in the meantime, try this." He gestured at the bottle Aronal still held. He opened a bottle himself and drank.

"What is it?" said Aronal absently, his thoughts still dripping with the blood of his enemies.

"He called it *mranth*, whatever that may mean," chuckled Qabrith. "Try it." Aronal opened the bottle and put it to his lips. At the first taste he forgot vengeance, Ykharr and everything else. His throat burned and he coughed uncontrollably. Qabrith laughed; he had seen this reaction in his own Senior Greys and was proud that he had stood up to the drink. Aronal recovered and relaxed, feeling unheard-of warmth bursting inside him. He took another drink, a sip this time, and felt it spreading all the way through his powerful Floater frame. He looked at Qabrith and laughed with him.

"So these Calderans are useful for something!" he grinned, passing his bottle to his fellow Greys as Qabrith did the same with his. They lit more lamps and the sounds of carousing came loudly across the still waters.

All the celebrants – the most Senior Floaters of both platforms – had left the hut. Now it was empty except for Aronal and the blood-matted body of Saudeir, silent at last. Outside came laughter and cries of triumph as the celebrations continued, the two tribes pitting themselves against each other in wrestling, in singing, in endurance trials in the supercooled water. This was a time of newness and change to break up the monotony of the endless round of rowing and fishing, and everyone down to the most junior Yellow felt that excitement.

Everyone except Aronal. The fish-oil lamps burned lower but still he remained kneeling in front of the altar, the sacrificial sword in his hand. There was only coldness and emptiness in his heart. And as he had foreseen, there had been scant joy in the kill.

"Czoth," he whispered. "How long must we live in dishonour? There is no joy in a world polluted by the vermin of Ykharr. Is it better for me to lead my people in an attack on one of their fishing rafts? At least some of them would fall to our swords before their

monster destroyed us – and we would be with you in honour forever. Give me a sign, Czoth. Give me a sign."

And as he spoke, the red shadows danced around the wooden walls of the hut and the sounds outside seemed to fade to silence. He looked up. The air was coagulating, concentrating into a formless opacity. Aronal was no coward, but sweat began to run down his fronds as he watched. He had called into the night – and something had answered his call.

The concentration, still formless, grew yet more opaque. A blur on the surface of the air. His fringes felt the air stiff with energy. The silence was immense, a bottomless well of anticipation.

"What are you?" he said at last.

"To you, I am a god." The voice was dark yet soft, menacing yet gentle. Aronal felt new lines of sweat break out on his face, but even as they did so his courage returned to him.

"We worshipped the gods, but they were weak and silent. They were not worthy of us. Now we worship only Czoth, god of sacrifice, god of war."

The voice roared out and the lamps flared blue-white, scattering the shadows. "I am Czoth! I am Fangul, I am Voradas, I am Yarseidon. I am Kysylan. On a thousand worlds proud and mighty beings trembled before my power. In search of my lawful prey I made devastations still unrestored after ten thousand years. But here on what you know as *Kharr Itan* I am Czoth. I am what you called upon. I am he who cannot die. Watch and understand!"

Aronal watched, and a vivid picture wiped away the tiny hut. He was looking down on two great Floater platforms, the sun warm through a sky choked with soft clouds of yellow and brown. On one of the platforms was a captive tied to a pole, awaiting ritual immersion. The other platform came on strongly and rode over the planks of the first, buckling them. Powerful Grey warriors armed with spines poured onto the enemy territory, impaling their opponents and rolling them into the numbing waters, urged on by a huge Floater who waved a spine like a baton. Then friends untied the captive and he reached for something Aronal had never seen before, a device of springy bark connected at both ends by sea-twine. He picked up a spine and used the device to shoot it straight at the head of the huge Floater. He collapsed onto the planks of the platform and without warning exploded, sending the placid waters dancing all around.

"I was distracted," growled Kysylan. "It was the only way to survive."

Aronal continued to watch; but he felt rather than saw what happened next. The essence of what had been the Floater spread through the darkness of the endless ocean, smeared like a thousand thousand fish-scales around the vastness of the world. Then, slower than the seasons, slower than a lifetime, the essence began to combine.

"So little energy to draw upon," said Kysylan, his voice sad and remote coming as though from beyond the world's birth. "No moon, therefore no tides. Most of the sun's force filtered out by the atmosphere. And spread out as thin as the wind."

But now the essence was back together again: no longer like a Floater, but an amorphous mass. Living below the oceans, tapping the power of fires far below the seabed. Growing. Expanding. Reaching out.

"My opponent claimed victory, as was his right; and my ancient and proud race, a thousand centuries in the making, is cast down never to rise again. But I have risen again,

and I will have my revenge. The Ceti may have won the war, but their champion will not long enjoy his spoils. Now show me your enemies."

"My ancestor, Towj, was destroyed by the Calderans. It was a hundred and fifty years ago, but I have not forgotten or forgiven."

"They killed him?"

"They let him live."

"Ah."

"He could not survive the dishonour. He ended his days in confusion and despair. His son was a mere Green, plying the endless ocean behind an oar. His son in turn was a Blue, a fisherman who tried by his record catches to overturn the shame of his ancestry – not for himself, but for his descendants. His son, my father, was adopted into a Grey family: an undistinguished family, but Grey again. And I myself have regained platform leadership, but still the dishonour remains."

"I understand. And there is more, I think."

"A relative of mine was on the platform commanded by Tomir, a Calderan who remained true to his Floater heritage. He intended to destroy the Calderan Leader and attack their place Ykharr; but Tomir, my relative and many other Floaters were killed when a monster rose up at them out of the sea."

"A monster!" cried Kysylan. "Think of it for me – all you have heard, all the stories of your kinfolk!"

Aronal's mind went blank and dizziness overcame him. When he came to seconds later he heard Kysylan chuckling grimly.

"Hyperdrive capability, plasma generator weapons, probably an epiforcefield. Metamorphosed from volcanic energy and transformed by nanotechnology, I presume. Yes. I think I recognise your handiwork, my old friend."

His words meant nothing to Aronal, but hope was growing in his mind.

"The one who fired the spine at me was the first of the Calderans, and Calderans dishonoured your ancestor and control the ship which killed Tomir and his Floaters. Your enemies are my enemies. Why do you not destroy them?"

"I live for nothing else. But the monster...there have been no attacks on Calderan rafts or on Ykharr in the fifty years since it first appeared."

"Fifty years is a long time," said Kysylan.

Far to the north lay the island of Ykharr, the sole area of dry land on the drowned world of *Kharr Itan*. It was populated by a race physically similar to the Floaters who celebrated at their time of meeting to the south; and yet they were not the same. Here, the hierarchies had been abolished. Males and females, released from the tyranny of having to eke out a living from the ocean, were free to build, to plan, to dream. They were prosperous; grain grew in the valleys, herds grazed the hillsides and flocks flew overhead, goods of all kinds from the trading world Parsis enriched their lives. Strong and comfortable buildings housed them, steam from deep springs warmed them.

A Calderan was out for an early morning walk by the sea. It was beautiful here, the shoreline dappled with fragments of pearl-pink seashells. Behind her stood the tall houses of stone built for an earlier generation. Then she looked out to sea and saw it. She stood dumbstruck for a moment, then sped off inland. In all their society there was only one person in authority, but that person was needed.

Thir'rk was old now. Streaks of silver flecked his fringes and his fronds were no longer luxurious. But as he stood looking out to sea supported by his two sons, a deep anger filled his eyes and he seemed briefly young again.

In the old days he would have ordered the bystanders to bring the raft to the shore. Now no orders were necessary. Despite the knifing cold of the water, the nearest Calderans plunged in and reached it. Fingers already numb pulled the dead from the oars and completed the raft's last journey.

One of the fishermen was still alive. Judging by the state of his companions, he had been allowed to live. But only just. They helped him ashore and laid him at Thir'rk's feet. Another gave him a reviving sip of *illnth*.

"*Snart Ythu*," he said weakly, but everyone had known that already.

"It seems that Floater memories are short," said Thir'rk. "We had peace for fifty years; now we must impose peace again. Floaters will die for this outrage."

"We have other fishing rafts far out to sea," said his son Rk'ster.

"That is well thought of," said his father. "We must protect the living before we avenge the dead. Choose a crew for the *Yanthir*."

"Father – " began his other son.

"No, Rkyan. Your place is here. While our ship is away we may suffer attacks on Ykharr. Organise the militia. Draw up shore patrols. Distribute swords." He paused with pain in his look. "I had thought we had finished with killing. But it is a Floater word."

The next day saw something never before seen on the waters of *Kharr Itan*: two great platforms moving together, side by side. When Aronal had told Qabrith that they were to unite and that the exchange of females was to be delayed, he had argued. The request – or order – was irregular and there was no precedent in his tribal memory. But he had entered Aronal's Leader hut at his request and emerged pale and shaking, and there had been no more debate after that. Now the two Floater bands were united into a vast force and Qabrith was Aronal's lieutenant.

And there was the prize: a Calderan raft. The Calderans saw the platforms and threw everyone to the oars; but they had no hope of outrunning the massed rowers of the two platforms. Aronal and Qabrith watched as the Calderans conferred, then ran to distribute the sharp spines of the king *teth'n*: ritual objects which were their only defence.

"They don't even have metal swords," laughed Aronal. "This will be a youngster game."

"The first raft was," said Qabrith doubtfully, "but what of the Calderan monster?"

"Trust in Czoth."

Their warrior Greys lined the platform edges as the vessels drew nearer, swords gleaming in their hands. The Calderans prepared to sell their lives dearly. Then the platforms crashed into the raft at speed, throwing the Calderans down. The Greys leapt aboard and furious fighting began. The spines were lethal, but the swords broke them in two. Three Calderans fell for every Floater.

Then it came. Out to starboard the sea frothed, foamed and boiled; and the immense metal shape emerged with silent menace, droplets cascading from its hull. Calderan lettering spelt the name *Yanthir*, the first Calderan. The ship executed a smooth turn and bore down on the platforms. The fighting ceased as everyone looked up: the Calderans with hope, the Floaters with dread. Now the great platforms were puny beside

its bulk. Qabrith flung his hands over his eyes in despair and even Aronal quaked at the size of the monster.

Gunports were uncovered and protrusions slid out on both sides of the craft. In a moment the awesome power of the *Yanthir's* plasma generators would rip the wooden platforms to shreds and leave the sea boiling in ferment. But that moment never came. A darkness like a huge hand reached out from Aronal's hut and wrapped around the ship. Its glistening hull strained, buckled and crumpled and the broken craft fell out of the sky. The roaring splash of the ocean was like the astonishment of the Floaters.

"Czoth! Czoth!" cried Aronal; and after an endless moment the Grey Floaters, and all the crews, answered: "Czoth!" And then the warriors turned again to the defenceless Calderans.

Rkyan had walked alone from the ancient house of the Leaders through the open countryside, the scrubland and the hills until he came to the natural amphitheatre. Behind it was a vast stone building. The Calderan Temple had stilled its joyful bells; instead, a single bell tolled like a lament. The door was flanked by two Priestesses. As he approached they opened the door and led him down labyrinthine passageways decorated with arcane friezes. And now he sat opposite the High Priestess herself. She was frail but there was a determination about her. Or perhaps a stubbornness.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"The loss of his eldest son was too great a shock for my father to bear. Now I am Leader. But before he died he told me to come to you, Vyrdeena."

"You know my name, then?" came the brittle voice. "I had thought it long forgotten."

"You are a legend."

"There is never just a legend," she murmured with a smile. "But I know the legend you speak of: how the Ceti chose me, young, a female, a lowly Green, to serve him and our society. When I became High Priestess I was able to help your father finally abolish the castes among us – precisely because of my humble origins. And now we are one."

"Vyrdeena, you must help us," urged Rkyan. "You are closer to the Ceti than anyone alive. Go to him. Tell him the buildings are chilled and our water runs cold again, as it did in the days of our founding fathers. Tell him of our dangers. Ask him for assistance."

"I doubt not that he knows more than we do. His guard told us of the loss of the *Yanthir*, remember," said Vyrdeena drily. "And as to assistance, I have already been to his wooden palace – and been refused admittance."

"Refused? You?"

"He will see no-one. His guard passed this message to me: that our greatest danger was upon us, one that he might not be able to protect us from. We are alone, son of Thir'rk." There was a pause as each looked into the red pools of the other's eyes and considered the enormity of her words.

"But he is the *Itan Hlan'k*." The protector of the world.

"He has protected us, for hundreds of years. Now it is time for us to stand up for ourselves."

Aronal had walked all the way to the rear of the joint platform, dismissing the Green helmsmen who idled beside the huge rudder and the Yellows who worked harvesting the sea-wood. When he was alone, he spoke to the voice in his head.

"Now, Czoth. Command me."

I have called other Floater platforms. They share your hatred of the Calderans and will be here soon. When they arrive, leave one with its crew here with Qabrith. Together they will hunt down any Calderan rafts that remain. You will lead the larger force and attack Ykharr itself.

"But what of weapons? These swords are all we have, taken from previous raids or given to us by Calderans who had not forgotten their heritage."

I will provide enough for all your force. And soon the last Calderan will lie dead and you will rule all of Kharr Itan.

Aronal's eyes shone with delight. "And what of you, O Czoth?"

My world lies in chains, its empire vanquished. All my power could not bring it back again. Kysylan's voice sounded desolate in his head.

"Then stay with us, lord. Mould us into a race fit to do your bidding."

The voice took on a new tone at his words. *Perhaps you are right, Aronal. I had looked no further than personal revenge. But one day with my help you Floaters could conquer worlds: the worlds of the accursed Ceti. That would be vengeance indeed!*

And as the Kysylani champion spoke to the overlord of the *Snart Ythu*, the last commander of Ykharr stood on a distant shore addressing his people.

"You know the dangers that face us. Those dangers are great. But we are greater; we are Calderans. The Ceti gave us a new destiny, one that set us apart from the brutish Floaters who seek to destroy us. Will we let him down now?" The crowd shouted their support.

"You, Ty'll, are the greatest of our remaining *Kharrna vystru*. Take a hand-picked crew of fighters and seek out the platforms of those who killed our people."

"Our rafts are no match for the Floater platforms," said the Sailing Master, "and there is no time to build larger ones."

"Ours are smaller and more manoeuvrable; take four rafts and attack from all sides. And you, Fenec: your lineage is Grey. And although we are casteless now, the Greys always had more skill with the sword. Take the most promising of us and train them in your best arts."

"Time is short, but I will do what I can," said Fenec.

Rkyan appointed leaders and divided his people into military units. Soon the whole island was mobilised, from Kkraubaunth in the east to Drgut in the west. Rkyan watched the last Calderan rafts sail away and wished in his heart that he was going with them, for now began the waiting. Numerous Calderans patrolled the shore; numerous, but never enough. Fenec selected his recruits and took them away for training, and the numbers thinned. Then one day it was reported to Rkyan that one hundred of his young warriors had disappeared overnight; whether from cowardice or desertion, no-one knew.

Each day the springs ran cold, and even the ground grew parched and cracked as though all the strength was being sucked from it. Great bubbles rose and burst from the sea around the island. Men saw omens in everything. Rkyan went himself to the wooden palace of the Ceti, but was turned away. And still he waited.

Then one day the platforms appeared over the horizon in the light of mid-day.

"No attempt at concealment," said Rkyan, "and no wonder when they come in such numbers."

"They may repent such foolishness," said Fenec, hefting his sword.

"Trust in the Ceti," said Vyrdeena.

From a dozen points the platforms rowed in to Ykharr. The Calderans drew their swords and braced themselves for battle; and as they did so, far out in the endless ocean Ty'll's rafts sighted the platforms of Qabrith.

Floater in vast numbers swarmed through the icy waters to the shoreline. Calderans looked on aghast; the *Snart Ythu* not only had metal swords, but pieces of metal covered much of their bodies. But the Calderans rallied to the war-cries of their leaders, and especially to Rkyan, who was everywhere. The battle joined, long lines of bodies swaying against each other, seeking advantage. Metal sword clanged against metal sword and against the armour of the Floaters. The placid world had never heard such uproar. The Calderans fell back from the onslaught but their lines did not break, many Floaters falling wounded or dying at the water's edge. Yet their numbers were greater and their armour deflected many blows.

Meanwhile, Ty'll's rafts closed in on the platforms of Qabrith, tied together to make a single fighting area in mid-ocean. The Floaters waited, sword in hand and armoured, as the rafts drew nearer. At the moment the unexpected happened: the giant hand reappeared and smashed into the water around the rafts. It looked like smoke, but where it struck the sea stood up in towers of foam. Then the hand crashed down on a raft, splintering the great sea-wood planks. Calderans fell into the supercooled water with cries of despair.

Before the hand could strike again there was a snarl that seemed to come from all around, and another smoky shape rushed over the horizon faster than the eye could follow. It stopped abruptly over the battle and took form: long, thin, a glossy coat, intelligent eyes, razor fangs. All the combatants recognised it as the *Itan Hlan'k*, a sea-creature held sacred by Floaters time out of mind. Except that it still looked like smoke and was impossibly large.

"I thought that would bring you out of hiding at last, coward," came a deafening voice.

The answering voice was quiet and irresistible. "It has, and you may yet regret it, *ryshyyr*."

There was a growl and a laugh, and the hand reached for the sea-creature as it sank its fangs into the arm. A bellow of rage shook the planks of the platforms and made the waters undulate; and then the shapes changed and expanded, bubbles rising from the ocean as power streamed into them.

Now they no longer looked like a sea-creature and a hand or like smoke, but like two dour warriors locked in combat. They wore body armour and helmets, parts of their clothing flashed, electric fields surrounding them interfaced with ozone sparks. They stood like Colossi over the platforms, filling the cloud-stuffed sky, trading grip for grip as waves of force poured out of them.

"Where is Fenec? Has he fallen? I suppose it doesn't matter whether it happens now or later," said Rkyan.

"Without you, Ykharr would be theirs already. Don't give up. Trust in the Ceti," said Vyrdeena.

Rkyan would have replied, but the ranks of Floaters were coming at them again. The lines clashed with a metallic ring. Now the fighting was even fiercer. The young Leader saw his comrades falling on all sides, but still the main force held together. Then he heard a voice in his head.

Go to my palace, Rkyan.

He had never heard the voice before but knew it had to be obeyed. "To the palace!" he cried; but at that moment he turned and saw that their way was blocked by another strong contingent of Floaters. Despair flickered across his mind: and then Fenec and his trained bodyguard burst from cover, surprising the Floaters. Rkyan heard him shouting ancient Grey battle-cries, and then the bodyguard smashed into the Floaters, carrying all before them for the moment. The way was clear. With a strong rearguard action Rkyan's fighters fell back to the wooden palace. It was traditionally a taboo area, but there was no time for such things any more. They was no time for anything but sword strokes and staying alive.

The surviving Calderans poured through the gates of the palace and into the first timber-lined room. There, where legend said a wooden throne stood, was a doorway, with stairs leading downwards. The Calderans ran forward and clattered down the steps. But now the Floaters had disposed of Fenec's bodyguard and had regrouped. They surged after them on all sides. Rkyan was among the last of the Calderans over the threshold and he stood eye-to-eye with Floaters. They pushed forward and began to cross over too.

One of the gigantic warriors turned his head at that moment, looking north: and a thick metal door forced itself down from the doorway, dividing the Calderans from the main body of Floaters. The other warrior broke the grip of his opponent and locked his enormous hands around his throat, but still he did not turn away. The door dropped further. Several Floaters who were too late in moving forward or back were severed as the door slammed down, dying in agony. The rest were left outside, Aronal among them.

Now the Kysylan had too strong a hold and the Ceti began to weaken. Even so, he managed the ghost of a smile. The Kysylan saw it and laughed at his opponent's weakness.

"My triumph," came the deafening voice.

Enjoy it, said the quiet voice inside the heads of the watchers.

Then the Ceti's shape began to break up and dissolve, pouring like heavy smoke, like a sigh of resignation, back to the tideless waters of *Kharr Itan*.

The Kysylan stood for a moment and shouted his victory in a terrible cry; and the platform fighters answered him with cries of "Czoth!" Then his form became the smoky hand once more and smashed one of the rafts to pieces, while the platform moved on the rest. Armoured Floaters leapt aboard and Ty'll and his Calderans fell in death.

Several Floaters were on the other side of the metal door, and in the confusion on the stairs Rkyan tripped and fell. One of the Floaters flung himself at him. Only Vyrdeena saw him and dived in front of Rkyan, taking the sword thrust. Her cry of pain brought the other Calderans back and they finished off the Floaters.

Rkyan held the High Priestess dying in his arms. "Why?" he asked.

"My legend is ended, but yours is just beginning. Go," she smiled.

Her eyes closed for the last time and they laid her down; then they followed the steps downwards.

Aronal heard the voice in his head and stood up.

The Calderans who attacked Qabrith's platform are all dead. I detect no other rafts on the seas. You are master there, Aronal.

Aronal felt the sweetness of victory, of lordship. "And here too, Czoth. A few hundred Calderans escaped us before this door fell, but we will catch them when we break it down. And the rest are being rounded up throughout Ykharr. It is over."

There may be another way down. Search the palace. I will look through your eyes.

Aronal posted guards around the door and detailed other Floaters to fetch stones to break it down. Then he wandered away from the celebrating fighters past the huge doorway into another chamber, then another, then another. All were empty. And finally he came to a room with boxes of metal fashioned into complexity beyond his understanding, with lights and small protrusions and little levers. But all appeared dead here, the lights were dim and wisps of smoke trailed languorously from one of the boxes into the ceiling.

Bitter laughter sounded inside his head. *Here was my enemy's sanctum. Here he stretched out his hand and covered the whole world; but still I brought him down to dust.*

Aronal was turning away when a sharp sound came from the voice: almost like panic. *Turn back!* Aronal turned. One of the panels was not dead, and a meter was slowly climbing. Dizziness seized the Leader as, faster than thought, Kysylan followed the sensors to their sources: the fiery heart of *Kharr Itan*, long dormant, was growing hotter by the second.

Get out! screamed the voice, and the Kysylan pulled together all his force to damp down the prodigious energies.

The steps led down to a vast chamber. Waiting for the last Calderans were the hundred fighters who had disappeared in the days before the battle. They greeted the survivors and led them onward. Hundreds of shining metal ships stood waiting, small and sleek like streamlined tears. There was room for a dozen or more Calderans in each ship, and the pilots showed them to their places, pointing out the provisions stored at the back. Then they took their seats, lowered helmets over their heads and plugged lines from the helmets into the control panels. Their eyes glazed, but their hands moved over the controls with practiced skill.

A hole appeared in the roof of the chamber, steadily irisng out until the whole pastel canopy of the world was visible. Engines fired and the ships, the last creations of the Ceti warrior, rose silently on gusts of air and moved towards the opening. They streamed through into the sky turning rosy with the last starfall.

Steam began to irrupt from a thousand points on the endless sea and Floaters on ten thousand platforms trembled. On Ykharr, stone moved against stone and the buildings began to crumble: the disused Speakers' Assembly, the house of the Leader, the Calderan Temple and the palace of the Ceti along with the rest. The stylish houses built by the brothers Astaru, once the last word in elegance, were transformed into rubble. The Floaters on Ykharr clung to each other and called on Czoth. But Czoth was powerless to help them – or himself.

In a hundred trajectories the shining ships sailed forth towards the setting sun. Kysylan in his fury stretched out his massive hand, now bigger than ever, and crumpled

ships like paper. But dozens more escaped him, rising far above the planet's death-throes. Soon they were out into the blackness of space studded with stars and many gasped at the beauty of it.

Before the jump they turned their ships and looked back: the giant hand reached out towards them as if to crush them even at this distance, and then the fingers closed slowly in a gesture of utter despair. *Kharr Itan* tore apart at the same moment, imploding into fragments beyond even the Kysylan's abilities to reunite.

A great Calderan tear welled up in the man beside Rkyan.

"Our home is gone forever, Leader," he said.

"But a new home awaits us somewhere; one free of hatred," he replied.

Simultaneously the pilots closed a contact on their control panels, and the glittering ships winked out of that time and that reality forever.