

The Voyage of the Last Platform

By David Vickery

Rain was softly dappling the calm waters of *Kharr Itan* as the last platform eased away from the land. The Calderan crew were silent, and silent too were the Calderans watching from the pearl-studded shore. Beyr was glad of the rain matting his fronds and streaking his fringes. He was proud to be aboard, prouder still of his rank, but to say goodbye to his home perhaps forever was hard. And no one should see a Grey shed a tear.

Finally the order came for the full banks of rowers to pull on their oars. The platform shivered underfoot. Beyr turned and walked away.

Hours later, Leader stood, watching the waters ahead as he had done since the launch. Beyr was nearby, respectfully waiting.

“Sad to leave Ykharr?”

“Sad and glad,” said Beyr. Leader turned, a timeless empathy in his look.

“Just how I feel,” he said.

Beyr met his gaze. Although only two years had passed since the Great Revolt on the island of Ykharr, his closest friends of that time might not have recognised Steryan. He seemed far older, far quieter, with a calm determination about him. And in any case none of the tavern-haunting idlers of his old days had been invited aboard the platform.

“I didn’t want to look back,” said Steryan. “Cla’esset promised me she wouldn’t be at the shore, but I would have looked for her anyway.”

Ribbons of red and purple interweaved in the cloud-choked sky as the starfall continued its even way. Beyr looked round at the banks of rowers.

“This is all so unfamiliar,” he said. Steryan laughed.

“Your ancestors plied the waters for untold centuries,” he said.

Beyr smiled. “But I have never been to sea.”

Steryan waved a hand around him. “Sea? This is the endless ocean, this is *Kharr Itan*, Waterworld – what the Young Greys were ready to kill for, and what they died for.”

Beyr looked away. “A set of hotheads,” he said dismissively.

“For a moment, you sounded just like one of them,” said Steryan. Beyr’s eyes met his in indignation for a second, only to see a memory of the joker there. They both laughed. “No, they were right about many things. I’ve felt that more and more over the last months,” continued Steryan. “Their methods were unforgivable, of course, and their end was misguided. But our society had begun to stagnate.”

“You’ve made so many changes in the last two years,” said Beyr. “Now the old divisions between us are fading, thanks to you. Merit, hard work, achievement, those are what count now.”

“It hasn’t made me universally popular.”

“There will always be those who criticise. It’s far harder to achieve.”

“Well, I hope Cla’esset can handle things if any more young hotheads arise,” said Steryan.

“You know she will, or you wouldn’t have left.”

Steryan smiled, stroked his fringes. “I miss her,” he mused.

“Ykharr misses you,” said Beyr.

“It misses my father more,” answered Steryan.

Over the next few days the rain came and went. When the sun oozed bleakly through the soupy atmosphere of *Kharr Itan*, Beyr would train the strongest Calderans in the use of the metal sword, the gift of the Greys, as he had promised. They still looked clumsy and awkward; those who had used weapons before had known only the bow and arrow and the spine of the king *teth’n*. But they would learn. Steryan was sure of that, as he watched the training.

“But what are we training for?” asked Beyr of him one day, his fringes streaked with sweat.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Steryan replied. “But since the Revolt I’ve had a horror of being unprepared. This time, no one is going to catch me unawares.”

During the purple-shadowed nights, the Calderans slept; all except the watchmen standing at long intervals, their fish-oil lanterns punctuating the murk. And often, Steryan would come to the largest ritual pole, located in the centre of the vast platform, away from any sleepers. Here it was, he reflected, that my ancestors would tether the *Itan Hlan’k*, the Protector, for luck and guidance. Or so they believed. But now he had something much more practical: a gift from the Ceti, their real guide and protector.

He lifted the sea-grass cover to reveal the object tied to the foot of the pole. Although he had abolished the taboo areas and the distinctions between the Calderans – the different castes of the Blues, the Greys, the Greens and the rest – he noticed that they still avoided the great ritual pole, once the preserve of the Greys alone. They also kept away from the front of the raft, where Steryan often stood. Obviously, he was still Leader in their minds.

Part of Steryan was pleased. He looked at the metal object below him, and still felt awe. Part of him still felt that only a Leader – only someone who had actually spoken with the Ceti – should look upon this thing.

It was a thing far beyond them. That much was obvious. The metal sword, itself an astonishment at the time, was nothing compared to this. Lights came and went inside it; and one of them told Steryan where the nearest platforms were. He used this knowledge to give the course changes to the *Kharrna Vystru*, his Sailing Masters, during the day. He could have told them about this wonder, but he preferred to keep it as his secret. To the rest of the Calderans, it was just a talisman, and the last taboo. To him, it was his gift from the Ceti, that creature of myth and legend to those Calderans who had heard the name. And even those few were dying out. But the potency of the legend was not diminished; if anything, it was greater.

And Steryan believed it was something more than a gift to guide them. It was a connection between them and the Ceti. He might have gone, but he would not have forgotten them; hadn’t he said that he would remain their Protector?

Knowing that gave Steryan confidence. He touched the faintly warm sides of the metal box reverently before replacing the sea-grass cover.

The next day the rains came again. Beyr sat, watching the placid sea lap gently at the platform, watching the raindrops dance off the surface of the waters. The rowers maintained their even pace, a pace as gentle and as continuous as the rain itself. In the old days, those rowers would have been exclusively Greens; now, all castes took their turn at the oars.

Beyr looked around him. Far ahead he could just make out Leader, standing and looking out to sea as he so often did. Something bright caught his eye nearby, and he turned to see a fisherman spear and land the floppy weight of the metal-blue king *teth'n*. His neighbours congratulated the angler while staying clear of the fish's spines until it had stopped struggling.

Beyr glanced back to the interior of the platform. Two females were walking, one of them carrying a supply of sea-twine for repairs to the fishing lines. Just then, one of them slipped on the slick planks. Water could not soften sea-wood once it had dried out, but the very drying closed up the pores of the material, causing any water to lie treacherously on top. As happened not infrequently, the size and weight even of female Calderans proved too much. So one of them lost her footing, her legs going from under her and sprawling her onto her back.

Beyr stood and walked over to her. Sreina's companion, recognising him, moved away awkwardly. He knew her to be Sreina, who had once been what they called a Green. And he had once been a Grey, of the proud and haughty leader caste. But the only colour on his mind at the moment was the delicate carmine of Sreina's eyes. He helped her easily to her feet. Her liquid eyes caught his in a half-gesture of relief-gratitude-undamaged, and as they did so something remote stirred within Beyr. He walked away, watched by Sreina, her companion, and her brother Sroth, who was rowing one of the portside oars but whose eyes were looking angrily into the platform.

Two days later, they caught up with the first platform. As the vast structure came in sight many Calderans felt humbled. The platform dwarfed theirs, which despite its size was now revealed as nothing more than a large fishing raft. This was the real thing: tens of thousands of sea-wood logs, grey and smooth with age, individually harvested from the endless ocean, shaped and lashed together, a continuous home for centuries.

And those individuals were the real thing too. Floaters, *Snart Ythu*: born, living and dying at sea, never even dreaming that land existed far to the north of their fishing runs. More than a few of the Calderans felt that this was their heritage, and that life on Ykharr had somehow been a betrayal.

The Floaters looked up in surprise as the last platform drew nearer. A hastily summoned conference broke up and the biggest and strongest Floaters thronged the front of their platform. One Floater, necklaced with ritual sea-flowers, made an elaborately formal gesture. *May the gods give strength to your spear arms.*

Steryan struggled for the response but remembered it in time. His arms and hands replied. *May they lead you to the deep shoals.*

Then the Floater spoke, in a powerful voice. "This is not the time for the meeting of platforms, nor have we yet chosen our females for the exchange. What do you wish?"

"We wish information about one of our number. May we come aboard and speak with you?"

The Floater Leader seemed to have difficulty digesting this unusual request. Clearly, it fell outside the bounds of his tribal memory. But there was always etiquette. "We would be honoured," he replied. "Bring your senior Greys and your caste leaders, and we will meet in Open Council."

Steryan looked round at Beyr, standing beside him. "Well, you're a senior Grey: as senior as we've got, anyway," he murmured.

Beyr grinned. "In that case, I hereby promote you to honorary Grey Headman," he whispered.

Steryan called his Sailing Masters together and made the acknowledgement-gratitude gesture. Then the Calderans stepped onto another platform for the first time in their lives. The Blue and Green Floaters looked on with rare curiosity, while the Yellows simply stood and gaped until the junior Greys cuffed them back to their menial tasks.

It was many days later and the third platform was slipping out of sight on the horizon. Steryan stood looking at it and at the soupy sky. The rowers took up the rhythm and the last platform moved gently, steadily away. He looked back along its length to the fishermen trailing their lines for the evening meal of *skral* and *teth'n*.

Beyr walked over to the Leader, a piece of the long, thin, silvery-olive *skral* in one hand.

"Another waste of time," he said. "Thir'th didn't come their way either – unless they were lying."

"You saw their faces," said Steryan. He knelt and sipped from the super-cooled water at the platform's edge. "Lies are as foreign to them as we are."

"It's strange, how far we've advanced over these, in just a few years."

"Yes. But you notice one thing? Every platform we've seen: they're all divided into Greys, Blues, Greens and Yellows, just as we once were. What's the significance of these colours? What does it mean?"

"I don't know," said Beyr, biting into raw fish. "Ask the Ceti next time you see him."

Later that night, as the platform drifted softly in the softest currents, he stood apart with Sreina, as he had done several times before. A nearby fish-oil lamp cast a gauze shadow over her fringes. His powerful fingers stroked her fronds with surprising lightness of touch.

"So still we search," she said.

"*To the farthest reach of the endless sea,*" he quoted the youngster rhyme.

"I've never even seen Thir'th. I was an infant when he left."

“If you ask me, this search isn’t about him at all. Steryan’s not looking for his father, he’s looking for himself. The Revolt still troubles him. He feels he should have done more.”

Sreina’s carmine eyes shone warmly in the lamplight. “What more?”

“Why ask me? Such questions are for Leaders.” In the warm darkness, their lips met.

The sky was the brightest it ever became to the Calderans: a sign that the time was mid-morning. The clouds were pastel-bright, light blues, greens and browns swirled against each other; but Waterworld’s star never quite burned through their cocoon.

Beyr was strolling near the rear of the platform, his eyes searching for the familiar grace of Sreina’s walk. Then he saw her, alone with her brother, deep in angry conversation.

“He loves me,” she said.

Sroth snorted, his fronds quivering with agitation. “A Grey word,” he said. “And he is a Grey, and we are Greens. We should keep to our own. And you will – “

Beyr walked over to the pair. “All that is in the past,” he said lightly. Sroth glared up at him. He rose heavily to stand on his thick yet agile legs. Then he drew his sword from his sea-twine belt, the sword that Beyr had taught him how to use.

“Another platform, just as you promised, Leader,” said Fy’ll, one of Steryan’s Sailing Masters. Steryan looked over to where Fy’ll pointed.

“It looks larger than the others,” said Steryan. He glanced around him. “Where is Beyr? He should be here. Bring him to me, *Kharna Vystr*,” he asked; and Fy’ll made the gesture of obeisance and departed to search.

As the other platform drew nearer, Steryan saw that it was also more crowded than the others. And eventually, when he could make out the faces, he saw that some looked disdainful, even for typical Greys, while others had a haunted, fearful look he hadn’t seen before.

A shout rang across the intervening water, scattering several water-birds into the air. “I am Towj, Grey Headman and Platform Leader. Who speaks for you?”

“Steryan. May we come aboard? We seek information.” Towj gestured the invitation-welcome. Neither Fy’ll nor Beyr had returned. Taking his remaining three Sailing Masters, Steryan stepped onto the new platform. Nearby fishermen and oarsmen cringed away from him in unexplained fear.

Towj moved forward, through the crush of Floaters, which melted away as he walked. He made florid gestures of greeting; but Steryan noticed him eyeing the sword in his sea-twine belt with puzzlement.

“Well, Platform Leader,” he began, “What is your need?”

“We are searching for one of our number, who left us seventeen years ago to speak with Floaters on other platforms,” said Steryan.

“I see,” said Towj. “You are a Calderan?” he asked, casually.

There was a hushed intake of breath at the word; but even as Steryan registered this he had already answered "Yes."

As he did so, Towj gave a strange cry, almost a howl: "*Czoth g'nrhh!*" Czoth eats! The phrase meant nothing to Steryan, but the next required no interpretation: "Take them!"

"Beyr!" Steryan roared, as the crowd of Floaters surged forwards. One of his *Kharna Vystru* was already down. Steryan drew his sword and flailed it in an arc, felling a handful of hostile Floaters. Encouraged by the sight, the surviving Sailing Masters put their training into action. The Floaters had no immediate answer to the Calderan metal and hung back, long enough for Steryan and the others to hack their way to the front of the platform and jump the gap to their own raft.

"Calderans! Draw your swords!" called Steryan, and the fighters rallied to him. But already the Floaters were jumping the gap between the platforms, and now they were better armed. Some carried fishing spears, others clubs of sea-wood with *teth'n* jaws set in them. Still others had the spines of the king *teth'n*. All such weapons individually were no match for metal swords. But sheer force of numbers looked likely to decide that battle.

The swords took a heavy toll. Floaters were cut and dying on all sides. Even the untrained Calderans took a part, pushing weakened and wounded Floaters into the icy sea, whose razoring cold was quickly as effective as any sword. But the Floaters kept on coming, holding off the swordsmen with oars, throwing fish-spears, hacking with clubs, stabbing with the dagger-like spines.

Looking around him, Steryan saw that only about a quarter of his people were left standing. Even so, those who were left would have fought to the end, if he hadn't broken ranks and sped for the central ritual pole. He tore off the cover and seized the metal box in both hands.

"Ceti!" he called. "Ceti!" and finally, in desperation, "*Itan Hlan'k!*" But nothing happened. His sword was knocked from his hand and he spun round to see a huge Floater, one of Towj's Greys, standing over him. His Calderans had lowered their swords and were being herded together.

"So," grinned the Grey, "you have your own god, just as we have ours. But it seems ours is the greater." And he hefted his club and sent the full weight crashing into the box; and instantly, white-hot liquid fire roared from the box and engulfed the Grey. When Steryan could look again, only a scorched section of platform remained; both Grey and box were gone. And a cheer was half out of his scarred throat before he saw that all the other Floaters were still alive, and he had lost the battle.

Steryan awoke from dreams of blood and vengeance. A thousand aches returned to his body. He looked around the darkened room. Groans came to him from all sides. Next to him lay Beyr, a bloody well in his side where Sroth's sword had entered. Sreina watered his wound with her tears.

"Leader," said Beyr weakly, and tried to smile.

Peering further into the gloom, Steryan recognised Fy'll, his left arm a dripping stump. No more of his Sailing Masters were left alive that he could see, and all his best fighters were gone.

Light tore away the darkness, temporarily blinding the prisoners. When Steryan looked again he could see Towj standing in front of him, flanked by massive Floater Greys. In his hand was a metal sword.

"Greetings, Steryan," said Towj. "So Czoth triumphs again."

"Czoth?"

"Our god. Later, perhaps, you may meet him." The Greys, dark-framed in the doorway, laughed quietly.

"Take a section and put them to work," said Towj to a nearby Grey, who immediately began rounding up some of the Calderans. "As for you, perhaps you'd like a walk on deck." His gesture took in Steryan and Fy'll.

The two followed Towj outside. The prisoners were led out after them and the door was slammed shut. A sad sight met Steryan's eyes as he stood blinking in the hazy sunshine. Floaters were everywhere on the last platform, tearing it apart, transporting the sea-wood planks back to their own raft. The placid sea was littered with debris. The last platform, loving built, polished and decorated by Bel'ath and his Young Greys, was no more.

"The world is divided into things I can use, and things I can't," said Towj by way of explanation. "I can use your raft: small though it is, it's easier to use its planks than harvest new ones from the sea. And these are already shaped and dried."

"Why do you need any more wood?" asked Steryan dully. "Your platform is already larger than any I've seen."

"Because this is a platform of conquest," said Towj. "We take what we want from other Floaters – and we continue to grow."

"Floater against Floater?" said Steryan. "That is –"

"Taboo? As I said, we have our own god. Czoth takes a different view of the matter. Besides, we are a violent race, we *Snart Ythu*."

"I'm coming to realise that."

"I myself was once seized from a platform by conquerors. No, what we're doing is nothing new. We're just more successful."

Steryan looked around him. More Floaters than he'd ever seen were working feverishly away, as though their lives depended on it.

"And I can certainly use these," continued Towj, flourishing his captured sword. "You put up a stronger fight than any I've taken before," he said ruefully. "For that, you get to stay alive, for now. But some things I can't use. Like this, for instance." He prodded Fy'll with his thick Floater fingers. The wounded Calderan looked up at him hopelessly.

"Czoth must eat. Ritual sacrifice for this one," said Towj, and at once Floaters grabbed Fy'll and carried him off. Without delay he was garlanded with sea-flowers and thrust overboard. He struggled briefly, but in his weakened state the waters quickly overcame him, and he sank with scarcely a ripple. A water-bird called remotely from overhead, untroubled.

“*Kharr ne stru m'tharr se ythu,*” Towj observed proverbially. We depend on the sea yet it kills us whenever it can.

“Fy’ll was a Green, one of the most successful fishermen in the days of the Speakers. He won much praise, many free days. I chose him for one of my *Kharrna Vystru* for his skill at sea. He served me well on the voyage of the last platform. Then two days ago I sent him to look for Beyr. He saved him from Sroth’s jealous anger. He fought fiercely against the enemy. And was cruelly put to death. We give honour to his spirit.”

Steryan finished speaking and looked around the darkened room. His people had their heads bowed. The funeral oration, traditionally formal and in blank verse, helped his people and by standing for stability in uncertainty gave them a morsel of hope. Steryan had none for himself.

Outside, hundreds of Floaters hunched over their oars and pulled, their backbones creaking with the strain. Relentlessly. Over and over.

Towards the rear of the platform, a fisherman stood, Kalnth by name. He gestured, ostensibly for the benefit of his neighbour, that he needed more twine for his fishing lines, and a twinesman walked languidly toward him. Only when the two Floaters were within touching distance did Kalnth make the minutest gesture. A flicker of the vermilion eyes, a twitch of the thick finger. *Fr’hl veer*, the gesture said. Sky speaker. An invitation to meet later, when eyes were elsewhere.

And while the two Floaters met, a contemptuous Blue collected Steryan and took him on deck. He noticed that a new shift of rowers was straining away, new fishermen trailing their lines and catching their fish.

Towj was waiting for him in a secluded area. Flanked by two Blues at a respectful distance, Towj gestured to Steryan to walk with him.

“You’re taking more and more of my people to work for you,” said Steryan.

“Naturally. That’s what they’re for.”

“We are not used to working at night.”

“You soon will be. And there’s no need for that phrase ‘my people’. You are not a Grey, or even a Headman, so you can hardly be a Leader.”

Steryan looked at Towj, who smiled.

“Yes, I’ve been talking to some of them. But they won’t tell me where you come from. We found this, by the way.” Steryan saw that he was holding a bottle towards him. He took it and opened it. A fragrance and a strength, once so familiar, hit him.

“We call it *mranth*,” Steryan said, taking a sip. The liquid burned and yet soothed his throat. The memory of his old friend Mogil, who also stood against a tyrant, returned sharply to him. “We carried it as a medicine.”

Towj took the bottle and drank. “Interesting flavour. Personally, I don’t believe in medicines. The strong survive and the weak don’t. But more to the point, you never made that on a platform – or these,” he said, touching the metal sword in his newly-acquired belt. “Incredible though it seems, apparently you come from somewhere beyond the seas.”

“Where is Thir’t’h?” asked Steryan.

"We killed him, of course," said Towj casually. "What was he to you?"

A shock like a sword blow ran through Steryan. He took the *mranth* again and drank deeply. The days of his youth, the launching of the platform with his father on board, the dreams of a new *Kharr Itan*, all returned to him. "I didn't know him well," he replied at last, "but he was one of us. Why did you kill him?"

"He came saying words that would have disturbed these Floaters, if I had let him continue. He spoke about intermarriage: males and females from the same platform. Towj spat in disgust. "And that Floaters were not to be separated into castes. As if Greys and Yellows could share anything! But most worryingly of all, he said that we were not *Snart Ythu* at all, but Calderans, and spoke about a better life to come. So I introduced him to it, there and then. Death shocks you," he suggested.

"No," said Steryan. "Once it did, but now I know that some things are worse. But your way is the old way. We have gone beyond that."

"You're wrong!" said Towj, animated for the first time. "The old way is all around us on the endless ocean: Floaters who fish, sail, and meet once in years to exchange mates. That is losing their sharpness, their curiosity. Conquest is the new way: it has given my Floaters a goal, they're changing. Even the organisation here is different: the Yellows row and steer, the Greens fish, the Greys rule, and the Blues – they keep order for me."

"There are better goals," said Steryan.

"This one suits us at present," said Towj shortly. "Besides, you are in no position to argue about it. I am in authority here. And what I require is for you to take me to this waterless place of yours. With a base like that, and weapons like these, anything becomes possible."

"And what is my reward for such treachery?" asked Steryan.

"You remain alive," said Towj.

Kalnth and the twinesman spoke in voices so low even they could hardly hear them, eyes constantly searching for approaching Blues. Kalnth fingered the deep scar on his cheek, inflicted by a king *teth'n*. He knew that far worse awaited him if they were caught. But it had to be done. He slipped away to the back of the dark enclosure, and silently made and widened a hole with his *perl* jaw knife. Then he whispered Steryan's name.

Inside, woken by Sreina, Steryan could see nothing; but he could feel Kalnth's hot, fish-tainted breath on his face as he whispered.

"I had to speak to you," he breathed. "You are really a Calderan?"

"Yes," answered Steryan softly. "We are all Calderans."

"At last!" said Kalnth. "I am a Calderan too, and many of us on board. It is good to greet a brother."

"Then cut open a gap and get us out of here."

Kalnth pulled back in shock. "But we are Calderans! We cannot fight. To do so would forfeit the life that is to come, as promised by the *Fr'hl veer*."

Steryan frowned in the darkness. "You have misunderstood. The life to come is here on *Kharr Itan*; and I can take you to it. That is what it means to be a Calderan."

“But the Sky speaker promised to protect us. Thir’t h his prophet told us, before he was killed.”

“The Sky speaker is still alive. I have spoken to him myself: his name is Ceti. And I can take you to him.”

“I must go,” said the confused Kalnth.

“Go, then. But think about what I have said,” said Steryan.

The next day found Steryan, Sreina and his few surviving fellow captives on deck, surrounded by a vast ring of watching Floaters. In front of them was Beyr, tied to four poles by wet sea-twine that was rapidly drying out, pulling him towards sharpened fish-spears.

“The embrace of Czoth,” said Towj. “Or he goes free. You choose. Just agree to take me to your waterless place.”

“Don’t Steryan,” croaked Beyr. “Let him see how a Calderan can die.”

“I’ve seen how, many times already,” said Towj. “Take them back inside.”

The hours passed, and the screams of Beyr grew weaker; yet still they seared the brains of the prisoners, shut in and surrounded by clammy darkness. *Once I did nothing to stop a tyrant, thought Steryan, and now I could stop this one with a word: but thousands more would die on Ykharr.* And then he heard the almost silent scratching at the rear of the enclosure.

“The Calderans have risen up,” said Kalnth, as he pulled away the confining planks. He handed Steryan a metal sword. “We hold the Greys and the Blues, and await your orders.”

Dawn lightened the vast purple blackness with a tender yellow as Steryan made for the place where Beyr, now silent, lay tethered. But Towj appeared in front of him before he could reach him. Their swords sang, metal on metal, for the first time ever on Waterworld’s endless ocean. Towj was strong, fit, a powerful Floater and a conqueror, with nothing to lose. But Steryan had his anger: for Thir’t h, for Beyr, for Mogil, and for his own mistakes and failings. They circled, Towj lunged, and then Steryan had his sword point under the fronds of his enemy.

For a long moment he held it there, his eyes on the eyes of Towj.

“Kill me then,” he said. And Steryan could feel his sword-arm muscles tensing for the thrust. But instead he gestured to Kalnth, and the fisherman bound the arms of the Floater behind him, and Steryan flung his sword into the sea and walked away.

Golds and pinks ran together overhead as the dawn, a beautiful Waterworld dawn, washed the sky. Sreina wiped Beyr’s brow. Steryan held his broken body in his arms and watched the pain in his face. A great Floater tear welled up in his face for his friend.

“No one should see a Grey shed a tear,” Beyr whispered.

“I’m not a Grey,” Steryan murmured.

“Honorary...” said Beyr, and died.

Two days later the new platform moved off. Steryan stood looking back at what was left of Towj’s platform: nothing more now than a small fishing raft, with Blues,

Greys and the conqueror himself watching him silently. The rest of the platform was under Steryan's feet, a vast edifice which shuddered gently as the course changed.

The new platform was crowded with fishermen, oarsmen and steersmen.

"At least part of Thir'th's dream came true," said Steryan. "A platform is returning with new Floaters, just as he'd hoped."

"New Calderans," said Kalnth; then he looked up into the sky. "*Fr'hl veer!*" he called. A bright streak, a single line of light, lit up the gathering starfall.

The streak was the afterburn of a hyperdrive ship. The ship was a form metamorphosed from volcanic energy tapped deep below Ykharr and transformed from common matter by nanotechnology. Inside the ship was a Ceti warrior, his mind ready to flip the ship out of the atmosphere and into the n-dimensional interstices of hyperspace. But at the last moment he held back.

"Not yet," he said aloud. "Not quite yet."