

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

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Feature Novels:

CLANSMEN OF FEAR Henry Hasse 5

Helpless, Donal watched the embers of Terran civilization grow dim—as one by one the women of the zone changed and became oddly alien. . . .

GULLIVER PLANET Daniel F. Galouye 45

Mankind was doomed to slavery under microscopic masters, who could live within the bodies of human beings and control their every action!

SPAWN OF THE DEADLY SEA . . . Robert Silverberg 89

The Earth itself had suffered a sea-change at the flick of an alien hand. The Sea-Lords ruled, but now the aliens were returning to take over. . . .

Departments:

THE EDITOR'S SPACE 4

THE FAN-SPACE 86

THE READERS' SPACE 128

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*The Earth itself
had suffered a
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Spawn of the Deadly Sea



by Robert Silverberg

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CHAPTER I

THE SEA-LORD SHIP was but a blurred dot on the horizon, a tiny squib of color against the endless roiling green of the mighty sea. It would be a long time before the men of the sea would draw into the harbor of Vythain—yet the people of the floating city were already congealed with terror.

The whisper shuddered through the city: "*The Sea-Lords come!*" Old Lackthan in the spy-tower saw the black sails first, and relayed the word down to those below. "*The Sea-Lords come!*"

In the streets of the city, life froze suddenly. The purchasing of fish and the scraping of scales ceased, the writing of books and the making of songs. The Sea-Lords were making their way across the panthalassa, the great sea that covered the world, heading for Vythain to collect their annual tribute.

The hundred thousand people of Vythain awaited their coming with fear. One—*one*—stood on the concrete pier, down where the oily slick of the sea licked angrily against the base of the floating city, and stared outward with open, unashamed curiosity.

For Dovirr Stargan, this was a long-awaited day. He was eighteen, now; tall and broad and with the strength of a young shark. Looking out across the darkness of the sea, he scowled impatiently as the Sea-Lord vessel slowly crawled toward Vythain.

From somewhere above came three shrill trumpet-blasts. Dovirr glanced up. At the parapet atop the sweeping flat face of the Council House, Councilman Morgrun was giving the warning.

"The Sea-Lords approach! Remain in your houses, make no attempt at resistance while the tribute is being delivered. They will not harm us if we do not give them cause."

Morgrun's words rolled out over the amplifiers left behind by the *Dhuchay'y*, the long-forgotten, long-departed conquer-

ors of abandoned Terra. And down by the pier, Dovirr spat angrily. *Craven!* he thought.

"The piers are to be cleared!" Morgrun ordered, and the amplifiers roared out his voice. Dovirr realized that the Councilman's words were aimed directly at him; all the sensible citizens of the floating city were long since snug in their cozy nests, huddling till the men of the sea had snatched their loot and gone on.

Dovirr turned, saw a swarthy red-clad officer come running toward him. He recognized the man: young Lackresh, son of Vythain's lookout.

"Dovirr, you madman! Get off the pier before the Sea-Lords arrive!"

"I'm staying here, Lackresh. I want to see what they're like."

"They'll kill you, idiot! Come on—I have my orders." Lackresh brandished a neuron-whip—another legacy from the *Dhuchay'y* conquerors of old. "Get up to your place, fast!"

"Suppose I don't go?"

Sweat poured down Lackresh's face. Life was peaceful, here in Vythain; a policeman really had little to do amid the everlasting calm—the calm Dovirr hated so violently. "If you don't go—if you don't go—"

"Yes?"

The Sea-Lord ship was near the harbor now, and drawing nearer rapidly. Lackresh's wavering hand unsteadily grasped the compact neuron-whip. Looking at Dovirr with blank lack of comprehension on his face, he said: "Why don't you act like a normal person, Dovirr?"

Dovirr laughed harshly. "You'll never get anywhere *reasoning* with me, you know. You'd better use force."

Lackresh's lower lip trembled. He raised the neuron-whip and said uneasily, "All right. I'm ordering you to return to

ROBERT SILVERBERG is the only writer to appear in all three issues so far of SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES—and for good reasons! Here again, he paints a picture of an Earth that has changed completely from the one we know—but a picture so convincingly detailed you'll forget the present-day Earth until you've finished the very last word of the story!

your dwelling. I've wasted too much time as it is and—"

Dovirr leaped forward, grinning, and clamped one powerful hand on Lackresh's wrist. Twisting downward, he forced the officer to release the neuron-whip. He grabbed the weapon and shoved Lackresh back a few feet.

"Go," Dovirr ordered hoarsely. "Get moving, Lackresh—or I'll whip you right into the water!"

"You're—crazy!" Lackresh whispered.

"Maybe so—but that's not your affair. Go!" He tuned the aperture of the neuron-whip down to *Low Intensity* and flashed a stinging force-beam at the officer. Lackresh quivered under the blow, seemed almost ready to burst into tears—and then, recovering himself, he stared evenly at Dovirr.

"You've beaten me," he said. "I'll leave you here—and may the Seaborn pick your bones!"

"I'll worry about that," Dovirr called laughingly, as Lackresh retreated. The officer scrambled without much dignity up the carved stone stairs that led from the piers to the city proper, and vanished into the tumult of winding streets that was Vythain.

Dovirr turned and planted one foot on the very rim of the sea-wall. The sea rolled on—the endless sea, the sea that covered all of Earth save where the floating cities of the conquering *Dhuchay*'y broke the pathless waves.

The Sea-Lord ship made for the harbor. Dovirr could almost hear the raucous chanting as the rough kings of the sea hove to, drawing back the oars. He narrowed his eyes. The black sail billowed, and the ship was close enough to count the banks of oars.

There were four. It was a quadrireme—that meant the Thalassarch himself was coming to collect the gold! Almost sick with impatience, Dovirr waited for the ship to arrive.

GOWYN, THALASSARCH of the Western Sea, was a tall, heavy man with the thick, brutal jaw of a ruthless leader. He wore a tunic of green wool—wool, the precious product of the floating city of Hicanthro—and affected a curling black beard that extended from his thin, hard lips to the middle of his chest.

The Thalassarch stood six-feet-six; around him were his

underlings, buskin-clad, all of them over six feet. They were a proud group. The Sea-Lord vessel lay at anchor in the suddenly quiet harbor at Vythain, while tethered to the side of the pier was Gowyn's richly-carved dinghy. Dovirr, squatting down out of sight, squinted at the letters inscribed on the black ship's prow: *Garyun*.

He smiled. *Dovirr Stargan, Master of the Ship Garyun*. It was a worthy title, a noble ambition.

The rulers of Vythain now came in solemn procession to greet the waiting Gowyn. Dovirr watched them scornfully; eight doddering oldsters, led by Councilman Morgrun. They advanced, bearing the coffers.

Gold—gold laboriously dredged from the sea by the painstaking hydride process. A year's work to reclaim a few handfuls of the precious metals—and the Thalassarch claimed what was his due, in payment for guarding the seas.

Some said there were no pirates, that the Sea-Lords had created them as a convenient fiction for the purpose of keeping the floating cities subservient. That was as may be; it yet remained that ships *did* disappear, whether at pirate hand or Sea-Lord. And the inter-city commerce was vital to the existence of the floating cities.

Vythain produced vegetables; Korduna, meat. From Hicanthro came treasured wool, from Dimnon rubber, from Lanobul machined goods. No city was self-sufficient; each of the floating communities that drifted on the great panthalassa, anchored securely to the sunken ancient world of lost Terra beneath the sea, required the aid of the Sea-Lords' ships to survive.

"The tribute, sire," Councilman Morgrun said unctuously. He knelt, soiling his costly robes in the dirt before Gowyn the Thalassarch. His seven confreres came forward, set the coffers of gold before the Sea-Lords.

"Take it," Gowyn growled to his underlings. Each of the subordinates stooped, easily lifted a heavy coffer, and deposited it in the dinghy. Gowyn struck a demoniac pose, one foot athwart Morgrun's debased body.

"For another year," the Thalassarch rumbled, "I, Gowyn of the Western Sea, declare the city of Vythain under my protection. The gold is solid weight, is it not?"

"Of course," Morgrun mumbled.

"It had better be." Gowyn kicked the Councilman away from him contemptuously. "Back to your shelter, guppy! Run! Hide! The Sea-Lord will eat you unless you can flee!"

With undignified haste Morgrun scrambled to his feet. He gathered his robes about him, made a perfunctory bow and muttered thanks, turned, and, flanked by the other seven Councilmen, retreated swiftly toward the carven stairs. Gowyn's sardonic laughter echoed through the silent city as they ran.

The Thalassarch turned to his waiting comrades. "This city has no fight," he remarked. "Each year they hand over the tribute like so many frightened fleas. Damn, but I'd love a good fight some year from one of them!"

A heavily-tanned, red-bearded man in jeweled helmet said: "Never, sire. They need your protection too desperately for that!"

Gowyn roared in laughter. "Protection! Imagine—they *pay* us for what we most dearly love to do!" He looked up at the massed bulk of the floating city, and chuckled scornfully.

The Sea-Lords turned to enter their dinghy. Suddenly Dovirr rose from his hiding-place.

"Wait, Thalassarch!" he shouted.

Gowyn had one foot already in the dinghy. He drew it back in utter astonishment and looked up to see who it was had spoken.

Dovirr faced him squarely. "The tribute is yours, mighty Gowyn—but you leave too soon."

"What want you, boy?"

Dovirr bristled at the offhand, impatient "*boy*." "Boy no more than any of you, Sea-Lords. I seek to leave Vythain. Will ye take me with you?"

Gowyn roared in amusement and nudged one of his companions. "Ho! A sucker-fish wishes to run with the sharks! Into the water with him, Levrod, and then let's be off for the ship."

The Sea-Lord named Levrod smiled eagerly. "The work of a moment, sire." He stepped toward Dovirr, who backed away half a step and then held his ground. "Come to me, landman," Levrod crooned. "Come and taste the sea-water!"

"You come to *me*," Dovirr snarled back. "I'll stand my ground."

Angrily Levrod charged. Dovirr waited for the enraged

Sea-Lord to cover the concrete pier and draw close. Levrod was wiry and strong, Dovirr saw. Levrod was planning on a running charge, a quick flip—and a dunking for the rash townsman who delayed the Sea-Lords. Dovirr had other ideas.

Levrod reached him; the Sea-Lord's strong fingers clutched for his arm and leg. Deftly, Dovirr stood to one side, stooped, caught the astonished Levrod by the crotch and shoulder. In one swift motion he straightened and catapulted the Sea-Lord into the water. Brine splashed on the pier as Levrod went under.

Dovirr whirled, expecting the other Sea-Lords to retaliate. But they were holding fast. Levrod swam rapidly to shore—there was never any telling what lurked in the offshore waters—and clambered up, cursing and spitting salt-water. Red-faced, he groped for his sword.

Dovirr stiffened. Unarmed, he could hardly hope to defend himself. Levrod whipped forth his weapon—

And Gowyn the Thalassarch drew his, crashing it down ringingly on Levrod's blade. Stunned, the Sea-Lord let the sword drop from his numbed fingers.

Gowyn glanced at Dovirr. "Pick it up," he commanded.

Silently, Dovirr obeyed. He gripped the jeweled hilt firmly and looked at the Thalassarch.

Gowyn was smiling. "Run this carrion through," he said, indicating the dripping, shivering, utterly miserable Levrod.

Dovirr tightened his grip. *Strike an unarmed man? Why—*

He banished the thought. Levrod would have killed him unhesitatingly; besides, Gowyn's orders were orders. He lunged; the stroke was true. Levrod crumpled. Gowyn kicked the corpse over the side of the pier. Slowly, a red stain seeped out over the oily harbor water.

Instantly there was a flutter of fins, and the body disappeared. *The Seaborn*, Dovirr thought moodily. *Feeding on their landborn brother.*

"We now have one vacancy aboard the *Garyun*. Your name, youngster?"

"Dovirr Stargan," he stammered. Could it be possible? Was it really happening?

"Welcome to the *Garyun*, Dovirr Stargan. You're young, but I like your spirit. Besides, I long suspected Levrod's loyalty."

THE WIDE, UNEASY SWEEP of the sea spread out before Dovirr as he stood near the prow of the *Garyun*, feeling the salty tang blow sharply against him. The sky was dark; overburdened clouds hung low, threatening cold rain, and the golden-brown fins of the Seaborn broke the surface here, there, cleaving the sea at random.

Looking outward, Dovirr thought of the Seaborn—those strange once-human things man had created centuries ago in a fruitless attempt to halt the onslaught of the unstoppable *Dhuchay'y*.

"Thinking, Dovirr?" a deep voice said.

He turned. Gowyn stood beside him. In the six months he had been aboard the ship, Dovirr had won a firm place in the grizzled Thalassarch's affections. Gowyn was near middle age; he had held dominance on the Western Sea more than twenty years. Time ran against him. He sought a successor—and, Dovirr hoped, he had found one at last.

"Thinking, sire. Of the Seaborn."

Gowyn squinted at the flashing fins. "Our brethren of the deep? Someday you'll taste their teeth, young one."

"Is it true, sire? That they eat humans who fall below?"

Gowyn shrugged heavy shoulders. "You will find that out the day you topple overboard. I've never had cause to know—but a dying seaman will draw their fins within an instant."

"Strange," Dovirr said, "that they should prey on us. They were men once themselves, weren't they?"

"The sons of men only." Shadows swept the Thalassarch's face. "Years past—when the Earth was dry land, when the *Dhuchay'y* first came—man created the Seaborn to fight the alien conquerors." He chuckled sardonically. "It was hopeless. The *Dhuchay'y* defeated the Seaborn legions with ease, set a mighty rod in the ocean—and the spreading seas covered the land."

"What were they like, the *Dhuchay'y*?"

"Amphibians! They lived on sea, on land. They flooded our world to provide breeding ground for their spawn, who live in the sea until grown—and also to rid themselves of the troublesome beings who lived on the land. It was the *Dhu-*

chay'y that built the floating cities, and kept a few of us alive to serve them." Moodily, Gowyn clenched his fists. "Oh, had I been alive then, when they trampled us! But there was no stopping them. The sea covered all of Earth, save only for the cities they built. The world of our fathers lies a thousand fathoms down. The Seaborn sport in the drowned cities."

"And they left," said Dovirr. "Every *Dhuchay'y* on Earth suddenly left one day. They gave no reason?"

"None."

Harsh clouds seemed to bunch on the horizon. Dovirr shivered as the chill, moisture-laden wind filled the sails. The rhythmical grunting of the oarsmen on the four decks below formed a regular pattern of sound that blended with the beating of the sea against the *Garyun's* hull.

"Some day the *Dhuchay'y* will return," Gowyn said suddenly. "Some day—as unexpected as their first coming, and as unexpectedly as they departed, they will come back."

Fierce salt spray shot up the bows. In a lowered voice, Gowyn said, "Dovirr—should I die before they come—"

"Sire?"

"Should I die—and my time is long since overdue—will you swear to destroy them in my place?"

Dovirr nervously fingered his sprouting black beard. "I swear, sire," he said huskily.

Gowyn was silent for a moment, his thick fingers digging into Dovirr's shoulders. Then he pointed toward the lee.

"From there, this afternoon, will come a ship of Thalassarch Harald. Fight you at my side, Dovirr."

"Thank you, sire." Dovirr bowed his head. To fight at the Thalassarch's side was a deep honor—a sign that the mantle had been confirmed. Gowyn had named his eventual successor.

The Thalassarch strode away. Dovirr remained looking outward. Somewhere far to the east was the island city of Vythain. *Work and slave, ye landbound lubbers!* Dovirr thought defiantly. *You'll pay tribute to Dovirr yet!*

AS GOWYN FORETOLD, Harald's ship did indeed come from the leeward that afternoon, sailing into the wind. The cry resounded from aloft shortly after midday mess, and the *Garyun* prepared for war.

There were nine Thalassarchs, each boasting a roughly-hewn section of the globe. Gowyn called his domain the Western Sea; Harald was lord of the Black Ocean, a vague territory lying to the west of Gowyn's waters, and including the floating cities of Dimnon, Lanobul, and Ariod, among others. But there were no borders in the ocean, and each Thalassarch disputed hotly the extent of his neighbor's sphere of dominance.

Harald's ship approached. Aboard the *Garyun*, the uppermost bank of oarsmen docked their oars; with the wind blowing strongly, the vessel could maneuver with only three banks, thus freeing twenty men for bearing arms. All of the women of the *Garyun*, wives and daughters of the Sea-Lords, were safe in their quarters below-decks.



The *Garyun* ran up a war-flag. Gowyn strode to the deck, armed and ready, and Dovirr took his place at the Thalassarch's right hand. He saw several of the ship's officers staring at him enviously, but ignored them. He was Gowyn's man, and they would honor Gowyn's choice—or else!

The enemy ship called itself the *Brehtwol*. It, too, ran up its war-flag. Swords bristled aboard the *Garyun*; the grappling-iron crew readied itself.

Steadily, the two ships approached each other. Dovirr could see the men on the opposite deck now. There was short, grim-faced Harald, surrounded by his minions, waiting, waiting.

There was the thud of wood against wood, and grappling irons fell to. Moving automatically, Dovirr followed Gowyn over the side. The *Brehtwol* had been breached first!

"Swords! Swords!" roared Gowyn. "Follow on, men!"

The *Garyun* had seized the initial advantage. Its men swooped down on the dark-clad defenders, swords flashing brightly. Dovirr gripped the weapon he had won from Levrod long before and drove it through the heart of the first Black Oceanier he encountered.

The men of Harald's ship had deployed themselves for defense; Gowyn's sudden charge had left them no alternative. Dovirr and the Thalassarch moved forward.

"Ah, the pigs!" Gowyn exclaimed suddenly. He gestured



to the windward, where four of Harald's men were hacking at the grapples. They were trying to cut loose, to end the contest and gain freedom while Gowyn was still aboard the enemy ship, where he could be brought down at ease.

"Cover for me," Dovirr said.

Gowyn raised a fearful barrage of swordplay; his heavy weapon flashed in the air, driving the Black Oceaners back, as Dovirr made his way along the pitching deck to the grapples.

"Away from there, cowards!" he shouted.

The four who hacked at the grapples looked up, and Dovirr swept into their midst. His sword felled two of them before they could defend themselves; a third ranged himself along the bow, but as he began to strike, a bolt from a *Garyun* archer felled him, and he toppled headlong between the linked ships.

The fourth rose to the defense. His sword rang against Dovirr's. A quick thrust penetrated almost to Dovirr's flesh, but he sidestepped and brought the blade down crushingly. The man staggered away, nearly cut in two, and fell.

"To me," Gowyn roared, and Dovirr, his work done, raced back to the Thalassarch's side.

Gowyn was hard pressed. Dovirr's sword moved rapidly through enemy ranks, and together they cut back the opposition—until, suddenly, the victorious duo found themselves facing a squat, burly, black-bearded man with close-trimmed hair and a dark patch over one eye.

Harald himself!

Impetuously Dovirr leaped forward, anxious to be the one to strike down a Thalassarch, but Gowyn growled, "Not you," and pulled him back.

Dovirr started to protest. Then he realized Gowyn was right; the honor of smiting a Thalassarch belonged rightfully to Gowyn, not to him.

Swords rang. Harald was a formidable opponent, but he was tired and sick at heart at the utter failure of his assault on the *Garyun*. He put up a fearsome defense, but Gowyn finally beat down his sword and spitted him.

"Harald lies dead!" Gowyn bellowed, and instantly all action ceased. Fighters of both ships put down their swords, standing as in a tableau, frozen. The battle was over.

Dovirr found himself trembling unaccountably. A Thalass-

sarch lay dead; Gowyn now was ruler of two seas. Hardly ever had this happened before.

Harald's men were kneeling to Gowyn now.

VICTORY WAS CELEBRATED aboard the *Garyun* that night. Opinion was unanimous that Harald's bold move, while it had brought him ignominious death, was nobly conceived. It was rare for one Thalassarch ever to attack another's ship.

Now, Gowyn found himself master of two seas. He allowed the crippled *Brehtwol* to depart, placing aboard it Kebolon, the *Garyun's* second officer, as its captain. Kebolon was charged with the task of spreading the word to Harald's other ships that they now vowed fealty to Gowyn.

In the hearts of the men of the *Garyun* there was rejoicing—but none leaped higher than that of Dovirr, landman turned Sea-Lord, whose blade had known blood for the first time at sea.

He stood alone on the deck, his body warmed by the fiery rum in his stomach. At night, the sea hammered the keel of the *Garyun*, splattering the sides, booming dully. Far in the distance, the flickering light of a laden merchantship bound from Dimnon to Hicanthro with a cargo of rubber broke the darkness. The coded light flashed red; should it become suddenly green, the lookout would call, and the *Garyun's* crewmen would heave to, as the Thalassarch came to the merchantman's rescue.

That was part of the contract. The cities paid tribute to the Sea-Lords—and the Sea-Lords guarded against the pirates.

Twice, now, the *Garyun* had been called upon to save a vessel in trouble. Once, it had been a tub out of Lanobul, heading north to Vostrok. Gowyn and his ship had saved it from flagless pirates operating out of a rooted island.

There were a few such—islands which had once been the highest mountain-tops, before the *Dhuchay'y* came. Scattered bands of pirates lurked there, preying on merchant vessels.

The pirates had fled at Gowyn's approach; he had decided not to give chase.

The second time, it had been a ship bound for Vythain, out of Hicanthro. They were badly plagued by a school of playful

whales, and the *Garyun*, vastly amused by the difficulties encountered by the nervous merchantmen, answered the distress call and drove the whales off.

Now, Dovirr watched the steady progress of the *Dimnon* vessel in the distance. The vast bulk of the sea separated them.

Thalassa. Sea. It was an ancient word, a word that came from a language long drowned with the rest of Terra, but it conveyed the majesty and the awesomeness of the sea. *Thalassarch*—sea-king. The word rolled well on the tongue. *Dovirr Stargan, Thalassarch of the Nine Seas*. . . .

Already Gowyn had mastered two empires. Someday Gowyn would lie with the Seaborn, and Dovirr would rule. It was this he had dreamed of—this, all the long landlocked years in Vythain while he watched the far-off dots of ships against the blue curtain of the sky, and waited to grow to manhood.

He turned to go below-decks. Dovirr enjoyed brooding over the vastness of the sea, but on a celebration-night such as this his place was below, with the gay throng of roisterers.

Making his way over the rolling deck, he found the hatch and ducked through. The lights glowed brightly; rum flowed with free abandon. It was hardly every night that a *Thalassarch* fell.

Dovirr entered the big cabin. Gowyn was there, downing cup after cup of rum. The crew were roaring, laughing with a violence that threatened to shake the ship to shivers. The women, too, joined in the gaiety, joking and laughing as ribaldly as the men. They were strong and bold, these women of the sea—completely unlike the timid, gentle girls of the floating cities.

Dovirr stiffened as he realized why they were so mirthful. A knot of seamen around Gowyn parted to show something wet and dark lying on the deck, wriggling, beating its great fins against the wood in agony and uttering hoarse barks.

Gowyn was laughing. "Ho, Dovirr! We've brought up another prize! Two catches in one day! First Harald, now this!"

Dovirr made his way to the *Thalassarch's* side. "What may that be?"

"I sometimes forget you were a landman but months ago," Gowyn rumbled. "Know not the Seaborn when you see one beached? Marghuin the cook was trawling to supplement our stores—and netted this!"

Of course, Dovirr thought. With naked curiosity he studied the writhing creature lying in a pool of moisture on the deck.

It was about the size of a man, but its unclothed body terminated in flukes rather than legs—though where legs had once been was still apparent. It was a golden brown in color, covered with a thick, matted, scaly hide:

The face—the face was that of a man, Dovirr saw bleakly. A man in death-agonies. The eyes were shielded by transparent lids, the nose a mere dotted pair of nostrils—but the mouth was a man's mouth, with human pain expressed in the tortured appearance of the lips. Slitted gills flickered rapidly where ears might have been.

The transparent lids peeled back momentarily, and Dovirr saw the eyes—the eyes of a man. Flukes thumped the deck.

"How long can it live out of water?" Dovirr asked.

"They're pretty sturdy. Five minutes, maybe ten."

"And you're just going to let it die like that?"

Gowyn shrugged. "It amuses me. I have little love for the Seaborn—or they for me."

"But—they were once *men*," Dovirr said.

The Thalassarch looked curiously at him. "The creatures you were killing this afternoon still were men. Yet I noticed little hesitance in your sword-strokes."

"That was different. I was giving them a man's death. This is something I wouldn't do to a beast."

Gowyn scowled; Dovirr wondered if his harsh criticism had offended the Thalassarch. But to his surprise, Gowyn rose from his seat and planted his thick legs astride the deck.

"A sword!" he commanded, and a sword was brought to him.

Approaching the writhing Seaborn, Gowyn said: "Dovirr claims you are a man—and a man's death you shall get."

He plunged the sword downward. Almost instantly, the agonies of the sea-creature ceased.

"Overboard with him," Gowyn cried. "Let his brothers pick at his flesh."

He returned to his seat, and Dovirr saw that the Thalassarch's face was pale.

"You've had your wish," Gowyn said. He bent over a platter sitting before him on the wooden bench—a fish, hot from the kettle. Angrily, he bit into it.

Dovirr watched the Thalassarch fiercely attack his meal.

Suddenly Gowyn paused, lowered the fish to the platter, grabbed desperately for the cup that stood nearby.

Choking and gasping, he drained it—and continued to gag. In the general merriment, no one seemed to be noticing. Dovirr pounded on Gowyn's back, but to no avail. The Thalassarch was unable to speak; he clawed at his throat, reddened, emitted little strangled gasps.

It was over in less than a minute. Stunned, cold with horror, Dovirr was yet able to appreciate the irony of it: mighty Gowyn, Thalassarch for two decades, now ruler of two kingdoms, choking to death on a fishbone. *A fishbone!*

His numbed mind took in the information his eyes conveyed: the powerful form of Gowyn sprawled forward over the table, face blue, open eyes bulging. Then—just as the others around were realizing what had happened—Dovirr leaped to the tabletop.

“Silence!” he roared.

When there was quiet, he pointed to the fallen form of Gowyn. “Not one but *two* Thalassarchs have died today,” he said loudly. “Gowyn, whose sword smote all, has succumbed to the bone of a fish.”

His eyes scanned the shocked faces of the crew and the women. He saw three of the other mates staring at him.

“This morning,” Dovirr said, “as if foretelling his death, Gowyn named his successor. I call upon you now to offer allegiance to your new Thalassarch—Dovirr of Vythain!”

CHAPTER III

IN THE DAYS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING Gowyn's death, Dovirr established firm control over the crew of the *Garyun*. He had learned a valuable lesson during the battle with Harald's ship: act quickly, seize the initiative, and let the slower thinkers take second-best.

The excitement caused by the sudden snuffing-out of the Thalassarch's life was a fit frame for the young ex-landman's ascension. By the time anyone thought of questioning Dovirr's right to claim rule, he held the *Garyun* in tight thrall.

It was Lysigon, one of Gowyn's mates, who laid down the challenge that settled the problem of leadership aboard the *Garyun*. Dovirr had seen the quarrel coming long before, even

while Gowyn yet lived; Lysigon, a handsome, broad-shouldered Sea-Lord and son of a Sea-Lord, was openly resentful of the newcomer. Obviously he had once been high in Gowyn's esteem, and hated Dovirr for having usurped his place.

The *Garyun* was lying becalmed not far off Korduna, where the Sea-Lords had paid their annual tribute call. Korduna was one of the largest of the floating cities, and the *Dhuchay'y* had taken care to stock it with many of sunken Terra's fauna; the Kordunans were meat-purveyors to the world. It had been Gowyn's practice to exact tribute in meat, rather than gold, and Dovirr had seen the wisdom of that; a year's supply of barrelled pork and other meats was brought aboard and stored in the capacious hold of the *Garyun*.

Dovirr spent much of his time studying maps, familiarizing himself with the location of the floating cities, marking off the domains of his rival Thalassarchs, planning, thinking. It was while he thus occupied himself, with his charts spread out on a broad table on the bridge deck, that Lysigon came to him. The Sea-Lord stood before him, in full battle dress.

"What means the dress, Lysigon?" Dovirr asked casually, glancing up at the Sea-Lord and quickly back down at his charts. "Surely no trouble beckons—or do you know of battle before my lookout?"

"Look out for yourself, landworm!" Lysigon crashed an armored fist down on the table, disturbing the charts. Dovirr rose instantly.

"What want you, Lysigon?"

"*Lord* Lysigon. *Thalassarch* Lysigon. I've stood your usurpation long enough, man of Vythain."

Dovirr fingered the edge of the table. Flicking a quick glance back of the angry Sea-Lord, he saw a handful of others—all, like Lysigon, full-blooded Sea-Lords—skulking in the background near the rigging. His flesh grew cold; was this a carefully-nurtured assassination plot?

Evenly, he said: "I order you to get out of armor, Lysigon. The *Garyun* is not threatened at the moment. And I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue, or I'll have you flayed with a micro-knife and rubbed in salt!"

"Strong words, boy. Worthy of Gowyn—but for the strength that does not back them! Tonight the Seaborn feast on you; tomorrow, I captain the *Garyun*."

Lysigon unsheathed his sword. It hung shimmering in the air for an instant; then he lunged. At the same moment Dovirr smoothly up-ended the work-table.

The keen sword splintered wood. Cursing, Lysigon struggled to extricate it from the table—and, as he fought to free his weapon, Dovirr laughingly dashed his ink-pot into the Sea-Lord's face. Sepia squid-extract stained the proud seaman's fiery beard. He bellowed with rage, abandoned his blade, and charged blindly forward.

Dovirr deftly sidestepped around the table as the maddened Lysigon clanged against it. The Sea-Lord rebounded; Dovirr was waiting for him. Unarmed, unarmored, Dovirr paused in readiness by the bowsprit.

"Here I am, Lysigon," he sang softly.

Lysigon charged. Dovirr absorbed the impact, stepped back, bent, seized one of Lysigon's legs. The Sea-Lord toppled heavily to the deck, landing with a crash that brought some twenty men and a few women topside to see what was going on.

The humiliated Sea-Lord crawled toward Dovirr. With a mocking laugh the Thalassarch trampled Lysigon's outstretched hand. Dovirr was biding his time, waiting for word to travel that a fight was taking place on top deck. The crew was gathering. Lysigon's four cohorts held back.

"What do you ask of me, Lysigon? That I appoint you Thalassarch in my place?" His foot thumped ringingly against the Sea-Lord's armor. Lysigon responded with a strangled roar and leaped to his feet.

Dovirr met the charge evenly, took Lysigon's weight with a smooth roll of his body, and smashed his fist into the Sea-Lord's face. Lysigon stumbled backward; Dovirr hit him again, knocking him up against the bow. "To your kingdom, Lysigon!" he yelled, seizing the Sea-Lord's feet. A quick upward flip and the hapless mate vanished over the side.

There was a howl, a splash—and silence. In full armor, Lysigon sank like an anchor. Dovirr, unscratched, nodded to his audience.

"Lysigon desired to rule the sea. He now has the opportunity—at close range."

The onlookers responded with silence. It was the complete hush of utter awe—and from that moment, Dovirr Stargan was unquestioned Thalassarch of the Western Sea.

THE CYCLE OF DAYS ROLLED ON, filling out the year. Dovirr had taken over Gowyn's logbooks, and spent odd hours reading of the late Thalassarch's many triumphs. Gowyn had filled a long row of books; the last of them was only barely begun, and already a new hand had entered much: the death of Gowyn, the conquest of Lysigon, visits to many ports.

It was difficult for Dovirr to convince himself that not yet a year had passed since the day he had waited hesitantly at the Vythain pier. A year—and three of the mocking Sea-Lords who had called on Vythain that day lay at the seabottom, two sent there by Dovirr's own hand.

He who had never left Vythain once in his eighteen years now roamed two seas, with nine ships of his own and eight of Harald's claiming allegiance. Dovirr felt his body growing hard, his muscles quickening to split-second tone and his skin toughening. Occasionally, he took a hand in the galleys, tugging at his oar next to some sweating knave for whom a life at sea was constant hardship. Dovirr drank in the days; *this* was the life.

He wondered occasionally about the days before the *Dhuchay'y* had come. What was Terra like, with its proud cities now slimy with sea-things? He envisioned a race of giants, each man with the strength of a Sea-Lord.

And then he saw that he was wrong. The *Dhuchay'y* could never have conquered such a race. No; the Terrans must have been meek landworms of the sort that spawned in Vythain, else the aliens from the stars would have been thrown back.

Anger rose fiercely in him, and he strode to the bridge at nightfall to stare upward and shake his fist at the unblinking stars.

Somewhere among those dots of white and red and blue dwelt the *Dhuchay'y*. Dovirr, wearing the mantle of the dead Gowyn, would scowl at the stars with bitter hatred. *Come back, star-things! Come back—and give me a chance to destroy you!*

But the stars made no reply. Dovirr would turn away wearily, and return to his charts. He was learning the way of the sea. Later, perhaps, the *Dhuchay'y* would come. Dovirr was used to waiting long for what he most desired.

AT YEAR'S END, a pleasant task arrived. According to Gowyn's logbook, time had come to return to Vythain to demand tribute. This would be sweet, Dovirr thought.

He studied Gowyn's log-entry for this date a year earlier:

"Fifth of Eighthmonth, 3261. Today we return to Vythain for the gold. The wind is good; course holds true. Below-decks, I fear, Levrod has been murmuring against me. . . ."

"Sixth of Eighthmonth, 3261. Collection of tribute without difficulty at Vythain, as usual. Upon departure, we were accosted by a good-looking Vythainan boy. He humiliated Levrod in hand-to-hand combat, and killed him at my orders. I took the Vythainan aboard ship. I like him. . . ."

Smiling, Dovirr looked up from the dead Thalassarch's log. Ahead, on the horizon, he could see the growing dot that was Vythain. Even now, perhaps, old Lackthan was calling out the news that the Sea-Lords approached; even now, terror would be sweeping through the city as the poor landworms awaited the *Garyun's* approach. How they dreaded it! How they feared that the Sea-Lords would, for sport, sack the city while they were in harbor!

THEY DREW INTO VYTHAIN HARBOR early next day. Dovirr ordered the dinghy put over the side, and, picking six men to accompany him, set out for shore.

He stood, one-foot on the seat, in the prow of the little craft, peering intently at the city of his birth. He could see tiny figures moving on the pier—police officers clearing away the passersby, no doubt.

The sea was calm; tiny wavelets licked at the dinghy's sides as it slid through the water to the pier. They drew up slowly. Dovirr grinned at the sight of the familiar carven steps, the pile of buildings set back from the shore and rising to the bright stone of Lackthan's spy-tower.

He was the first one over the side and onto the pier when the dinghy docked. His six men arrayed themselves at his sides, and they waited regally for the tribute.

A few tense moments passed. Then, with faltering step, the eight old men began their procession down the rough-hewn

steps of Vythain, groaning under the weight of coffers as they came.

Dovirr folded his arms and waited.

In the lead was Councilman Morgrun, looking even more old and shrunken than before. His eyes, deep-set in a baggy network of wrinkles, were filmed over with rheum; he was staggering under the heavy coffer, barely able to manage it.

"Ho there, Morgrun," Dovirr cried suddenly. "Scuttle forward and greet your new Thalassarch!"

He laughed. Morgrun lifted his head.

The Councilman emitted a tiny gasp and nearly dropped the coffer. "*Dovirr!*"

"Your memory has not failed you yet, I see, old one. Yes, Dovirr!"

The eight Councilmen drew near, lowered their coffers to the concrete, and huddled together in a puzzled clump. Finally Morgrun said, "This is some joke of Gowyn's. He seeks to humble us by sending this runaway boy."

Dovirr spat. "I should have you hurled to the sea for that, Morgrun. Gowyn lies dead off the edge of Harald's sea; Harald lies beside him. *I* rule both Thalassarchies!"

The Councilman stared at him, sneering at first, then, seeing the unquestionable authority in his eyes, sinking to their knees, jaws working without producing speech. Dovirr smiled broadly, relishing the moment. "Into the dinghy with the money," he ordered. "No—wait. Open the nearest coffer."

A coffer was opened. Dovirr snatched an ingot, looked at it, sardonically sniffed it. "Morgrun, is the gold pure?"

"Of course, Dov—sire."

"Good." Dovirr stepped forward and lifted Morgrun's bowed head gently with the tip of his boot. "Tell me, Councilman—how goes it in Vythain? I have been somewhat out of touch, this past year. What of old Lackthan, the spyman?"

"Dead, sire."

"Dead, at last? Too bad; I would have enjoyed watching him discover who had succeeded Gowyn. Has the dredging gone well this year?"

"Poorly. You have taken nearly all our gold in the tribute, sire."

"A pity. You'll have to squeeze some unfortunate neighbor-
city of yours to make up the loss, won't you?"

A chill wind swept over the pier suddenly. Dovirr gathered his cloak about him. It was time to return to the ship, he thought; the fun here had been about wrung dry.

Morgrun glanced up. "Sire?"

"What is it, Morgrun?"

"Sire, have you heard aught out of Vostrok?"

Dovirr frowned. Vostrok was a northern city, one of the largest on the sea's surface. Vythain depended on it for its wood; Vostrok had Terra's finest forest, and from its trees had come most of the planet's ships.

"We were expecting wood from Vostrok," Morgrun continued. "It has not come. We pay our tribute, sire, and—"

"We do our job," Dovirr said coldly. "But there have been no distress signals coming from Vostroki vessels. Have you called them?"

"We have." Alien sub-radio channels still were in operation between the floating cities. "Sire, there is no answer. *There is no answer!*"

Dovirr glanced at Kubril, his first officer. "This is strange. Perhaps Vostrok is planning rebellion, Kubril. It might bear investigation."

To Morgrun, he said: "We will go to Vostrok, old one. Don't fear for your wood."

VOSTROK WAS THE NORTHERNMOST city of those Dovirr had inherited from Gowyn; it floated in high, choppy seas almost a week's journey from Vythain.

The course called for the *Garyun* to make another tribute call, but Dovirr decided to make for Vostrok at once, and ordered the *Ithamil*, one of his second-line ships which he encountered en route, to make the tribute pickup instead. The *Garyun* proceeded steadily northward, through increasingly rough waters. Crowds of the Seaborn attended the ship; moodily, Dovirr watched the flukes of the once-men churning in the dark waters.

On the fourth day an off-duty deckhand harpooned a Seaborn. Dovirr angrily ordered the man microflayed, then relented and merely put him on half-rations for a week. There was, it seemed, an instinctive hatred alive between the men of the *Garyun* and the Seaborn.

Dovirr felt none of it himself; he had been unable to share in the merriment over the predicament of the tortured creature on the deck, feeling only sympathy. He realized that, for all his dominion, he was actually still a landman at heart. By sheer strength, he had bulled his way to the eminence of a Sea-Lord's standing, but yet the men of the *Garyun* sometimes seemed as alien to him in way and thought as the flashing creatures of the deep.

The sea grew steadily rougher, and cold squalls began to blow; heavy clouds lay like sagging balloons over the water, dark and gray-shot. Dovirr bided his time, as the *Garyun* sailed northward. Vostrok had broken off contact with Vythain, eh?

Strange, he thought. That could mean many things.

AT THE END OF THE WEEK, the *Garyun* entered Vostrok harbor. The city was much like all the others, only larger. According to Gowyn's notes, Vostrok had been the central base of the *Dhuchay'y* during the occupation of Terra centuries ago.

Dovirr ordered the anchor dropped half a league off-shore. Calling his officers about him, he stared uneasily toward the waiting city.

"Well?" Kubril asked. "Do we go ashore?"

Dovirr frowned. He wore his finest cuirass and a bold red-plumed helmet; his men likewise were armored. "I like not the looks of this city. I see no men on the pier. Hand me the glass, Liggyal."

The seaman handed the glass to Dovirr, who focussed it on the distant shore. Tensely, he studied the area about the pier.

"No one is there."

"Perhaps they don't recognize us," Kubril suggested. "The tribute isn't due for another month."

"Still, when the *Garyun* casts anchor in their harbor they should flock to! Come—let us land three boatloads of warriors on their pier, and seek the source of these people's reticence."

Dovirr strode away from the gathering and gave orders for three boats to be unshipped. Thirty of his best men, sparkling in their burnished armor, manned them; the sturdy boats groaned under the weight, and the sea-water licked high near the gunwales, but the boats held fast.

Oars bit water. Standing in the prow of the leading boat,

Dovirr peered landward, feeling premonitions of danger.

The pier was still empty of men when the three boats pulled up. Dovirr sprinted to shore, followed by a brace of his men. Cautiously, they advanced as the other boats unloaded. The Vostrok pier was a long, broad expanse of concrete, an apron extending out from the city proper into the sea.

"Should we enter the city?" Kubril asked. "This may be a trap."

"Wait." Dovirr pointed. "Someone comes."

A figure was approaching them, a graybeard. "Know you him?" Dovirr asked.

"One of the city fathers, no doubt. They all look alike at tribute time."

The old man drew near. Strain was evident on his face; his thin lips trembled uncontrollably, and harsh lines creased his forehead.

"The tribute is not yet due," he said in a small voice. "We did not expect you for another month. We—"

"On your knees," Dovirr said. "We are not here for tribute. The city of Vythain reports you have been remiss in your shipments of wood, and that you refuse contact. Can you explain this?"

The oldster tugged at Dovirr's cloak. "There are reasons. . . . Please, go away. Leave!"

Surprised, Dovirr drew back from the man's grasp. But then, a curious stale odor drifted to his nostrils, the odor of dried, rotting fish spread out on a wharf in the sun. He glanced up toward the city. The oldster turned too, and uttered a groan of despair.

"They come, they come!"

Dovirr stiffened. The old man broke away and dashed out of sight. Advancing across the bare pier toward the little group of Sea-Lords were eight *things*. For an instant, horror grasped Dovirr as his eyes took in the image. Eight feet tall, with bony scaled skulls and gleaming talons, they advanced, each sweeping a thick, lengthy tail behind. Dovirr remained transfixed.

He recalled what Gowyn had told him once—about green-fleshed, evil-smelling hell-creatures, their bright eyes yellow beacons of hatred, their jaws burgeoning with knife-like teeth, their naked hides rugose, scaly. Eight of them, moving in solemn phalanx.

A sudden surge of mingled fear and joy shivered through him. Cupping his hands, Dovirr faced his men, who stood numbed with astonishment.

"Forward!" he shouted. "The *Dhuchay'y* have come back!"

I NDEED, IT WAS SO.

The gruesome creatures slinking from the depths of Vostrook could only be *Dhuchay'y*, come to reclaim the world they had transformed into a globe of water and then abandoned.

They walked erect; including tail, they measured twice a man's length. Their hind feet were thick and fleshy, terminating in webbed claws; the hands, curiously man-like, were poised for combat, holding wedge-shaped knives. They advanced at an accelerating pace. Dovirr led his men forward to meet them with desperate haste.

As he drew near, he saw the delicate fringe of gills near the blunt snout; the creatures were equipped for action on land or sea. A chilling thought gripped Dovirr; what if a swarm of the *Dhuchay'y* were to force him and his men into the water, then follow after and slay them as they swam?

He closed with them, Kubril at his side. His voice rose to a piercing shriek. "Kill them! Kill!"

Leather-webbed feet flashed around him as he drove into the midst of the alien horde. His sword flickered overhead, chopped downward, and sliced through a *Dhuchay'y* arm. The member fell; the knife it had held clinked against the concrete. The alien uttered a whistling scream of pain; golden blood spurted.

In fear-maddened rage, Dovirr's men charged the aliens. Dovirr smiled at the sight of the javelin of giant Zhoncoru humming into a scaly bosom; his own sword bit deep into a meaty flank. Once again, the teachings of Gowyn had stood him in good stead; taken by surprise, the aliens were dropping back. Already one bloody form lay sprawled on the pier, pierced by thirty Sea-Lord thrusts while another mighty bulk was toppling. At Dovirr's side, Kubril thrust his spear into the falling creature and aided it in its descent.

Holding the spear like a lance. Kubril thrust it into another alien that menaced Dovirr. A torrent of blood issued from the torn belly.

"Thanks," Dovirr murmured, and sliced into an alien eye with a tiptoe thrust. The pier was covered now with mingled golden and red blood; it was slippery, treacherous, and Dovirr within his armor was bathed in sweat.

The aliens were yielding, though. Three now lay dead; a fourth was staggering from its wounds, while of the remaining four, not one had escaped damage. Dovirr himself weaved in and out of the struggling group, and had so far evaded harm; Kubril had been struck by raking talons but seemed little the worse for it, while the javelin-man Zhoncoru bore a ragged cut down his tanned cheek.

Glancing quickly to one side, Dovirr saw three of his men dead in a welter of blood. There was little time for sorrow. His sword slashed through an alien gill, eliciting a shriek of pain that brought momentary near-pity to Dovirr's eyes. Then the wounded alien sliced the plume from Dovirr's helmet; laughing, the Sea-Lord thrust through the creature's throat.

Dovirr drew back, gasping for breath; the stink of the dying monsters was overpowering. Rivers of sweat poured into his eyes. Writhing aliens lay everywhere.

"No," Dovirr said out loud with sudden hoarseness. He caught Kubril's arms; the first officer had been striking a vicious blow at a dying *Dhuchay'y*.

He pointed toward the distant city. Coming toward them, talons thundering over the stone, were reinforcements—
Hundreds of them!

"TO THE SHIP!" DOVIRR CALLED. It was the only possible step; twenty-five Terrans could never hold off against an uncountable multitude of the alien invaders. He led the retreat; the surviving swordsmen dragged dead and dying into the boats, and they struck out for the waiting *Garyun*.

Dovirr saw the ship heave anchor and begin moving rapidly toward them. Obviously Dwayorn, the seaman left in command, had seen the melee on shore and was coming in to pick the fleeing Sea-Lords up.

But there was some doubt that the move would succeed. Dovirr goaded his oarsmen on, and the mother ship made full speed toward them—but with cold horror he saw the swarm of *Dhuchay'y* reaching the end of the pier, marching over the hacked bodies of their fallen comrades, and plunging into the

water! They were swimming toward the retreating boats!

Around them in the water, the flukes of the Seaborn were becoming visible; they would eat well tonight, Dovirr thought grimly.

"Pull!" he urged. "They're gaining!"

But it was useless. The *Dhuchay'y*, amphibians, were converging on the fleeing boats in a milky rush of foam. Dovirr glanced back and saw the blunt heads ominously breaking the waves in their swift advance.

Suddenly a taloned claw appeared at the edge of the boat. Dovirr instantly hacked downward with his sword; the severed claw dropped into the boat, the arm withdrew. But at once four more appeared. The *Dhuchay'y* had caught up—and the mother ship was still a good distance away.

He knew what had to be done. Stripping off his breastplate, he hurled the costly polished cuirass at the naked skull of a leering alien grasping the gunwale. "Out of your armor! They're going to capsize us!"

There was no way to prevent it; the only hope now was—impossibly—to outswim the creatures. The boat rocked dizzily as Dovirr and his men stripped down to their kilts. They hurled the useless armor at the bobbing aliens, beat at them with oars, slashed with swords—to no avail.

Already, Dovirr saw, Kubril's boat was overturned and his men splashing in a wild tangle of aliens. A moment later, their turn came.

The boat went over; its eight occupants leaped free. As Dovirr sprang he caught sight of the *Garyun* looming above, its decks lined with arbalestiers ready to fire if only they could be sure of hitting none but aliens. Already they had loosed a few hesitant bolts, and the shrieks of dying *Dhuchay'y* resounded.

The water was icy. Dovirr opened his eyes, peered ahead as if looking through badly-blown green glass, and saw aliens swimming all about. Choking, he broke the surface, sucked in a lungful of air, and submerged again, swimming toward the ship. The *Garyun*, he hoped, was going to lower lines to pick up the survivors.

He swam on. Suddenly claws ripped his back; he wriggled away, gripping his dirk. A *Dhuchay'y* swam between him and the ship.

He twisted the dirk upward into the creature's bowels, but tenacious arms gripped him and drew him under. Gasping, he sliced downward and across with his knife; the squirming alien refused to let go, keeping him beneath the surface. He thought his lungs were going to burst.

He groped for the creature's throat. His hands closed on something smooth—an amulet of some sort, it seemed. Blindly, he ripped it away and thrust the dirk upward.

The alien abruptly relented. Dovirr's head bobbed above the surface; still somehow clutching the amulet, he stabbed down into the bloodying water furiously.

Suddenly he was alone in the water. He looked up; the ship was next to him, and a line dangled invitingly a few feet away. He saw a few of his men, bloody and torn, climbing other such lines—one with an alien still clinging to his body.

Choking, gasping, Dovirr pulled himself up past the banks of oars, felt hands clutch at him and ease him onto the deck. He swayed weakly. Blood poured from a dozen wounds, fiery with salt sea-water.

Disdaining support, he strode to the bow and looked down. A blood-slick covered the sea, and the preying creatures of the deep were beginning to gather. The battle was over. Wounded aliens drifted in the water; he saw none of his own men except those few already aboard.

Numbly, his voice a harsh croak, he shouted: "Full speed out to sea! Let's get out of here!"

Wind caught the sails. The *Garyun* fled the scene of slaughter, putting leagues between itself and alien-infested Vostrok.

CHAPTER V

THERE CAME A TIME FOR LICKING of wounds, of drawing back into the open sea and drifting broodingly. For the next few days Dovirr kept to himself, alone in his cabin, going over and over the rout in his mind.

The *Dhuchay'y* had returned. They had silently slipped down from the sky and retaken Vostrok; countless aliens now again abounded in the one-time alien capital.

Thirty Terrans had gone ashore at Vostrok. Six had returned alive, and those six badly wounded, every man. Three boats sunk; twenty-four lives lost, thirty suits of armor. Do-

virr scowled. Armor could be forged, new boats built—but men were irreplaceable. And, now that the *Dhuchay'y* again gripped Terra in their clammy grasp, he would need every man he had.

Hatred surged through him—hatred for the vicious alien overlords. For the thousandth time he relived that struggle beneath the sea, where, tangled in wreathing kelp and choking for breath, he had drawn the life of a *Dhuchay'y* and saved his own.

He still had souvenirs of that encounter, eight of them: seven scabbing claw-marks down his back—and one amulet. He looked down at the amulet now.

It was small, made of polished onyx; a lambent flame glowed in its heart, a tiny worm of fire that danced dizzily without tiring.

“Come in, Kubril,” he said suddenly, hearing a knock.

The first officer entered, limping from his wounds. He took a seat heavily opposite Dovirr. “Aye,” he said, seeing the amulet. “Fondling your pretty toy again, Dovirr.”

The Thalassarch rolled the amulet idly over the table. “Do we dare attack Vostrok, do you think?” he asked.

Kubril stared at him. A raw, livid wound ran down one side of his face; a thick lock of his beard had been ripped away. “Attack Vostrok?” Kubril chuckled. “I’d sooner attack the sea itself.”

“How do you mean?”

“Sire, we have seventeen ships to our fleet. We might gather them all for the attack—but who knows how many of the aliens there be? We can count on no more than five hundred swords.”

“And if the other Thalassarchs cooperate?”

“Four thousand, then. Four thousand men—but even so, we couldn’t get near the city.”

“Why?”

“The *Dhuchay'y* are on the alert now. They’ll guard Vostrok. They live in the sea, as well as on the land; the seas will be thick with them as our boats approach. Recall what happened the other week?”

Dovirr scowled. “Aye.” He tugged at his beard angrily. “They would tip our boats as soon as we drew near. And the harbor is too shallow to bring the *Garyun* near enough.”

"If we could ever land our men—" Kubril said.

"The *Dhuchay'y* will have a cordon of swimmers surrounding Vostrok the instant our ships appear on the horizon. We could neither get boats through to shore nor land men."

Walking to the port, he stared out in the general direction of Vostrok. "The aliens live smugly there—and, when they see we are powerless, they will take the rest of their cities back, and put us to death."

"I see now why the men of old created the Seaborn," said Kubril. "The only possible way to attack the *Dhuchay'y* is in the sea. Strike at their main line of defenses; then march to the city!"

"The Seaborn failed," Dovirr pointed out. "Else mankind would not have fallen."

"The Seaborn failed because they came too little and too late! The world was already in alien grasp when the Seaborn were loosed upon the *Dhuchay'y*. If—"

"Enough," Dovirr said wearily. This had been his first taste of defeat. Heretofore, his progress had been rapid; now it seemed blocked utterly. He was not used to defeat; it rankled within him, leaving him harsh and sour. "You talk of miracles, Kubril. Leave me."

"Very well," Kubril said quietly. The hulking first mate rose, looked pityingly at his captain, and left.

Dovirr watched the door close. He gripped the alien amulet in his hand tightly, in a paroxysm of frustration.

He raised the amulet on high as if to dash it to powder against the cabin wall—as if destroying the trinket would crush the race that had forged it.

Suddenly, the amulet burned coolly in his palm. Dovirr gasped.

He saw the bottom of the sea.

HE SAW TOTAL BLACKNESS begin to give way to faint light. Strange creatures moved with stately grace through the deep; it was as if he himself were below the waters.

In the distance were towers springing from the ocean floor—towers grotesquely festooned with clinging sea-vegetation, enwrapped with streamers of brown kelp and crusted over

with anemone and budding coral, bright with glaring reds and greens and astonishing iodine-purples that no human eye would behold.

None but Dovirr's. He stared at the towers, then approached them.

It was a city. Disinterested fish flitted through the smashed windows of the dead buildings, gaping open-mouthed, goggle-eyed, in pseudo-surprise. Coiling moray eels wound around what had been television antennas and yawned, baring their myriad tiny, razor-sharp teeth. Dovirr peered in a window. An enormous turtle sprawled on a sagging floor, its soft green flippers scuttling idly, disturbing the layer of silt that had formed through the ages.

This was a dead world. Looking up, Dovirr saw the black curtain of the water's top cutting off the sea from the sky, and fancied he could see the glimmering sun penetrating the depths. He moved on, stalking silently.

Sea-spiders twice the height of a man crawled over the faces of the buildings. Here, there was merely a mound where a building had been; the sea was reclaiming, concealing, reshaping. Strange new forms were emerging; in a thousand years more, no one would ever know there had been a city here at the bottom of the sea.

And the endless sea would roll on.

Dovirr shot forward through the water, moving with the easy grace of disembodiment. Startled fish turned as he went past—and, seeing nothing, continued on their way.

He came to an anchor—a mighty titanium chain, each link feet-thick, stretching upward to a cloudy bulk far above. It was a city-anchor—one of the guy-wires that held a floating city in place. He rose along it, headed toward the surface.

Then he was thirty feet beneath the surface of the sea, and saw the *Dhuchay'y*. There were ten of them, in the shallow artificial sand shelf just off Vostrok—burying things. White things.

His blood chilled. They were eggs.

The *Dhuchay'y* were breeding. Soon, their numbers would increase.

Hastily he shot away, struck out for mid-sea. His mind, guided by the amulet, slid smoothly through the waters. He spied another sunken city, dipped to observe it.

Fingers brushed his mind.
Thoughts came:
Who are you, intruder?

DOVIRR FROZE, LET HIS MIND RANGE in all directions until he found what he wanted to see.

*A friend, he replied. I am a friend.
What seek you down here?*

I'll explain. Come to me, Dovirr's mind said. And the Seaborn came. Dovirr watched the lithe creature heading toward the point from which Dovirr's thoughts emanated.

Suddenly the Seaborn stopped; its mind radiated perplexity.
Where are you, stranger?

Tensely, Dovirr thought: *Above the sea. Only my mind roves below the sea.*

How?

I use an amulet stolen from the alien invaders, Dovirr said. *I know not how it functions, but it sends my mind down to the deeps.*

There was the equivalent of a chuckle. *The aliens, then, must manufacture what we have of nature,* the Seaborn said.

What mean you?

There is no way to speak beneath the sea. My people . . . communicate with the mind. The aliens need toys to focus their mind-powers beneath the seas, it seems.

Dovirr understood now the nature of the amulet he had snatched from the dying *Dhuchay'y*. The alien young lived in the sea, and spoke the language of the sea; when the amphibious creatures grew older, they left the sea to dwell on land. When returning to the sea they needed the amulets to communicate with one another, having lost the ability through maturing.

He studied the Seaborn before him. In his natural element, the mutant man was the epitome of grace; the feathery gills flickered in and out with dizzying speed, while the Seaborn's heavy flukes kept him serenely stabilized in the water.

Your people have killed many of mine, the Seaborn said. *If you yourself were here, perhaps I would kill you.*

We have fought long and for the wrong reasons, said Dovirr. *We are both men.*

Yes. But your people hate my people.

Not I. Vividly, Dovirr transmitted the image of the long-ago scene when Gowyn had uproariously watched the agonizing death of a captive Seaborn. Dovirr's own land-nurtured emotions came through: his feeling of sharp horror, his insistence that Gowyn put a stop to the atrocity.

You are not like the others, the Seaborn said. *I am called Halgar. I see you are different.*

Dovirr replied: *I have common cause with you.*

Yes, land-brother?

Dovirr smiled. *Long ago, men from the skies came to our world. My people—the land-people—created yours then, to help in the struggle against the invaders.*

We failed, Halgar said. *There were but a hundred of us. It was not enough.*

How many are you now?

Many millions, Halgar replied. *We cover the seas thickly, land-brother.*

Dovirr felt his mind growing weary under the strain of communicating. Gathering all his strength, he projected a final thought: *Know, then, that the aliens have come again! Will you give your help—and end the misunderstanding between our peoples?*

He hovered, mind suspended in the sea, awaiting Halgar's response. There was silence for a moment, the deafening silence of the depths. Then:

We will help you, Dovirr of the land-world!

CHAPTER VI

THE SHIPS GATHERED.

Slowly, the Sea-Lords of forgotten Terra gathered their might, massed their armada in the heart of the roiling ocean. United for the first time in ten centuries, the Thalassarchs mustered their power.

They met in the Western Sea, at Dovirr's call, in Dovirr's territory. Suspiciously at first, then open-heartedly as they learned of the *Dhuchay's* return, they came, thirsting for battle, longing to bury their rusting swords in alien hide, hungry for the spurt of alien golden blood.

And at their head, acclaimed by all, the youngest of the eight leaders:

Dovirr Stargan, Thalassarch of the Western Sea, Lord of the Black Ocean—

Dovirr Stargan, Thalassarch of the Nine Seas!

They massed in mid-ocean, seventy ships, nearly four thousand swords, and readied themselves for the assault on Vostrok. The ships swung into battle position, raised their war-flags.

In Vythain, in Dimnon, in the fifty floating cities of the sea-world, the landmen cowered, wondering what strange compulsion had brought the Eight Thalassarchs together in one sea, why the Sea-Lords had gathered, what awesome battle was to be fought. Snug in their landbound homes, they little dreamed that the aliens from the stars had come again, had taken back the proudest of the cities they had built.

Terra had been forgotten by the stars, and during the time of its forgetting the Sea-Lords had grown strong. Now, the aliens had remembered. They had come to reclaim their captive world—

But now, things would be different.

THE SEA BOILED. Flukes broke the waves, sank down again, rose, flashed brightly in the sunlight, slipped beneath the white crests. The war-fleet watched; the Seaborn were on the march!

From the corners of the world they came, thousands upon thousands of them. Dovirr stood at the prow of the *Garyun*, the Sea-Lords' flagship, and looked down on a sea thick with the mutant once-men.

They had bred—and they had had an entire world of water in which to breed. Just as once the landmen had numbered in the billions, now the Seaborn, beginning with the mere hundred created by long-dead Terran geneticists, had proliferated, had been fruitful and multiplied.

Now they disported themselves in the sea before the Terran armada. Dovirr waited, while they assembled. Clutching the precious amulet in his hand, he let his mind rove out among theirs to share in the joy of the sea. He spoke with Halgar the Seaborn, who led the legions of the sea as Dovirr did his fleet.

We come, Halgar said. *The aliens shall not live!*

Earth will be free, said Dovirr. *They will never come a third time. How many are you, now?*

Millions. Ready yourself, land-brother. At your word, we make for Vostrok!

Tenseness swept the gathered armada. Dovirr beckoned to Kubril; the first officer was staring down at the tight-packed phalanxes of Seaborn with mingled disgust and awe. Like the other Sea-Lords, he had not fully overcome his hatred of the mutant water-breathers, even now when he was locked in alliance with them.

"Send the word," Dovirr ordered. "To Duvenal, to the left, and Murduien at my right. We sail in an hour; be ready to lift anchor."

"Aye." Kubril swiftly set to the task.

Dovirr grasped the amulet. *Halgar?*

I hear you, land-brother.

We sail in an hour. The time has come for you to begin the journey to Vostrok.

I hear, Halgar said.

Flukes glistened in the sunlight. The Seaborn swept their mighty arms forward; the army of swimmers began to draw away from the anchored ships.

The attack on Vostrok had begun.

THE GARYUN STRUCK ANCHOR about a league off Vostrok, and the other Sea-Lords filled in the formation circling the island-city. Dovirr shouted to his men as they dropped the mighty anchor over the side.

Then he turned toward the city—and he saw the clustering Seaborn.

"Look at them," he whispered. Pride choked his voice—pride in the sleek men of the sea, even pride in the ancients who had somehow altered Man so he could breathe the ocean.

The sea bubbled with their numbers.

Through his glass, Dovirr watched the encounter. Massed Seaborn swarmed the island on all sides, forming a ring almost a mile thick, a brown carpet threshing in the water. Dovirr's heart rose as he saw the young *Dhuchay'y* being hauled from their subaquatic nests, being ripped to pieces on the surface of the water. Eggs, golden blood, upturned bodies.

A dull boom—the *Dhuchay'y* shore installations gunning the Seaborn. A shower of blue spume went up as the cannons

barked—but as the alien shells landed, as the ranks were thinned, other of the Seaborn fought their way up from the depths to take the place of the casualties.

“Down boats!” Dovirr shouted.

The cry resounded from ship to ship. “Down boats!”

The sound of boats thumping the water was heard. Dovirr headed one; at his left was Kubril, and farther along he could see the boats of the other Thalassarchs. Oars dug the waves. Fifty, a hundred, two hundred Terran boats sped forward to the scene of battle.

They reached the edge of the Seaborn ring. Dovirr, despite himself, was astonished by the way the sea-creatures had arrayed themselves, shoulder to shoulder, completely clogging the water a few inches below the surface.

And now the strategy Dovirr and Halgar the Seaborn had devised went into effect.

Four thousand Terrans, in full armor, left their boats at the edge of the Seaborn ring. They were barefoot. Led by Dovirr they advanced over the massed Seaborn, walking on their shoulders, running and leaping over the shifting floor of once-human bodies.

The Seaborn maintained steady support. Here, there, Dovirr saw one of his men lose his footing and slip, and saw webbed hands reach up to steady the fallen one.

The *Dhuchay*'s shore-battery barked, and ten square feet of Seaborn vanished, cutting a gaping hole in the bridge. But instantly from below surged a hundred more, filling the gap. Countless reinforcements lurked beneath the sea.

Now, Dovirr could see the aliens standing on the shore of their captured city. Some of them were venturing out into the water—and being dragged under instantly, to be ripped apart by the waiting hordes. Others, more cautious, hung indecisively back on land.

Dovirr reached the shore first. He sprang up, drawing his sword, and ripped upward into an alien belly. A steaming torrent of golden blood poured forth.

“Onward!” he yelled. “Onward!”

He cut a swath through the aliens and looked back, saw the Terran swordsmen advancing grimly over the packed sea. The *Dhuchay*'s defense had been negated completely; their hopes of keeping the Terrans away by means of an under-

water network of defenders had vanished under the vast counter-attack by the Seaborn.

The Terrans were packed shoulder to shoulder now, just as the Seaborn had been, advancing in a solid mass, wielding their swords before them. The aliens, ill prepared for such an assault by a foe hitherto held in contempt, gave ground.

Dovirr and his men isolated a pocket of perhaps fifty *Dhuchay'y*, fencing them in with a wall of flashing steel.

"To the sea with them!" Kubril shouted suddenly, and Dovirr joined the shout. It was a fitting doom.

"Aye, to the sea!" he shouted.

THEY DROVE THE PANIC-STRICKEN aliens before them to the edge of the sea-wall—and the Seaborn, realizing what was being done, leaped from the water in delight to seize the huge amphibians and drag them down into the element of their birth—and the element that would bring them death. Onward, onward, the Earthmen forced the aliens, who one by one dropped into the arms of the waiting, jubilant Seaborn.

From the heart of Vostrok now poured reinforcements—the rest of the *Dhuchay'y* enclave, no doubt. Dovirr smiled grimly. The aliens had returned to their abandoned province expecting to find crushed serfs; instead, they were getting a most unexpected welcome.

The aliens who advanced now bristled with weapons; hand-cannons sent thermal vibrations skimming toward the Earthmen. Heat rose; the Terrans in their armor poured sweat. Around him, Dovirr saw men falling. He dropped back, crouched behind a dead *Dhuchay'y*, sliced upward at the sickening bulk of an alien.

Suddenly, a shout went up.

The city-people! The people of Vostrok were joining the battle!

They came thundering down out of the city by the hundreds, carrying kitchen-knives, benches, any improvised weapon at all. They fell upon the doomed aliens with murderous anger.

Dovirr was like a demon, fighting everywhere at once on the blood-soaked pier. Once, venom-laden *Dhuchay'y* talons

raked his shoulder; he retaliated with a swift, vicious thrust.

"On! On! They fall before us!"

The *Dhuchay's* reinforcements were being driven into the sea as remorselessly as had the first wave. The thunder of cannon came less frequently; suicide battalions of Seaborn swarmed everywhere, climbing up on land to engage in combat until, gasping, they were forced to slip back into their own medium.

Golden blood stained the water. Scaly bodies lay strewn like pebbles.

Red-maned Duvenal, the Thalassarch of the Northland Sea, appeared suddenly at Dovirr's side, his mail hanging rent and his chest visible, bloody, within. Still, Duvenal grinned at the sight of Dovirr.

"Ho, young Sea-Lord! *This* is battle!"

"Indeed, Duvenal. And guard your left!"

The Northerner whirled and sank his mace deep within a *Dhuchay's* skull; at the same moment, another alien appeared from nowhere and sent the Thalassarch reeling with a back-hand swipe of a taloned arm. Dovirr sprang to Duvenal's aid, felling the alien with a thrust through its beady eye.

"Duvenal?"

The red giant staggered to his feet. "Fear not for me; attend to yourself."

Dovirr ducked as an alien scimitar whistled over his head. A javelin hummed past and buried itself in the thick scales of the creature's throat; it tottered, and Dovirr applied the coup-de-grace with a two-handed swipe.

He looked around. The *Dhuchay's* ranks were thinning. His muscles throbbed with excitement, and he urged his men on with a roar that could have been heard clear to Vythain.

Warm blood trickled over the ground, tickling his bare feet. The sea heaved in tumult. Overhead, sea-birds wheeled and screamed, spun in the air, shouted raucous commentary on the frenzy beneath them.

Everywhere, aliens died.

THE FRIGHTFUL CARNAGE CONTINUED more than an hour. At last, hanging on his sword, gasping for breath, covered from head to foot with sticky, slimy alien gore, Dovirr paused, for there was no enemy left to smite.

Dovirr groped inside his tunic for the *Dhuchay's* amulet.
Halgar?

As if from a great distance came the weary voice of the Seaborn leader. *I hear you, Dovirr.*

The battle has ended. How is it with you?

We are still searching the sea-floor for eggs of the alien, Halgar reported.

Excellent. Have your men bring our boats to shore.

The Seaborn towed to the pier the flotilla of boats the Sea-Lords had left at the edge of the battle-zone. Those who had survived carried bodies of dead and wounded into the boats, seized the oars, rowed out to the waiting mother-ships a league away.

Dovirr was the last to leave the pier. He stood ankle-deep in alien blood, looking around, feeling sorrow that Gowyn had not been with him to share in Terra's greatest triumph.

Night was settling over the now-peaceful scene; the moon hung glistening in the sky, and faint sprinklings of stars appeared against the black bowl of the heavens. Leaning on his sword, Dovirr looked upward.

Somewhere out there was the home world of the *Dhuchay's*. Somewhere, deep in the blackness.

Dovirr smiled. Perhaps it was not for him, nor for his children, nor for his children's children—but the ultimate battle was yet to be fought. Up there—out on the homeland of the star-marauders.

In the meanwhile, he knew the alliance between Seaborn and land-man would have to be strengthened. Neither could have thrown back the alien horde without the other; together, they had been triumphant.

Kubril stood at his side. The First Officer smiled. "The boat is waiting," he said.

"Very well." Limping, for an alien spear had dug into the flesh of his calf, Dovirr walked toward the boat, dreaming of a bright world of tomorrow.

He cupped his hands. "Row to the *Garyun* for all you're worth! The battle's over; there's tribute to be collected!"

