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ROBERT SILVERBERG

The Face of
the Waters

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**To Charlie Brown, the focus of the LOCUS
– and probably about time, too.**

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

– *Genesis* 1:2

The ocean has no compassion, no faith, no law, no memory. Its fickleness is to be held true to man's purpose only by an undaunted resolution and by sleepless, armed, jealous vigilance in which, perhaps, there has always been more hate than love.

– Joseph Conrad
The Mirror of the Sea

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There was blue above and a different blue below, two immense inaccessible voids, and the ship appeared almost to be hovering suspended between one blue void and the other, touching neither, motionless, perfectly becalmed. But in fact it was in the water, right where it belonged, not above it, and it was moving all the time. Night and day for four days now it had headed steadily outward, travelling away from Sorve, sailing ever farther into the trackless sea.

When Valben Lawler came up on the deck of the flagship early on the morning of the fifth day there were hundreds of long silvery snouts jutting out of the water on all sides. That was new. The weather had changed, too: the wind had dropped, the sea was listless, not merely calm now but quiet in a peculiarly electric, potentially explosive way. The sails were slack. Limp ropes dangled. A thin sharp line of grey haze cut across the sky like an invader from some other part of the world. Lawler, a tall, slender man of middle years with an athlete's build and grace, grinned down at the creatures in the water. They were so ugly that they were almost charming. Sinister brutes, he thought.

Wrong. Sinister, yes; brutes, no. There was a chilly glint of intelligence in their disagreeable scarlet eyes. One more intelligent species, on this world that had so many. They were sinister precisely because they *weren't* brutes. And very nasty-looking: those narrow heads, those extended tubular necks. They seemed like huge metallic worms sticking up out of the water. Those obviously capable jaws; those small sawblade-keen teeth, scores of them, gleaming in the sunlight. They looked so totally and

unequivocally malevolent that you really had to admire them.

Lawler played for a moment with the idea of jumping over the side and splashing around among them.

He wondered how long he'd last if he did. Five seconds, most likely. And then peace, peace forever. A nicely perverse idea, a quick little suicidal fantasy. But of course he wasn't serious. Lawler wasn't the suicidal type, or he'd have done it long ago, and in any case he was chemically insulated at the moment against depression and anxiety and other such disagreeable things. That little nip of numbweed tincture that he'd given himself upon arising: how grateful he was for that. The drug provided him, at least for a few hours, with a little impervious jacket of calmness that allowed him to look a bunch of toothy monsters like these in the eye and grin. Being a doctor – being *the* doctor, the only one in the community – did have certain advantages.

Lawler caught sight of Sundira Thane up by the foremast, leaning out over the rail. Unlike Lawler, the lanky dark-haired woman was an experienced ocean traveller who had made many inter-island journeys, sometimes crossing great distances. She knew the sea. He was out of his element here.

'You ever see things like those before?' he asked her.

She glanced up. 'They're drakkens. Ugly buggers, aren't they? And smart and quick. Swallow you whole, they would, if you gave them half a chance. Or a quarter of a chance. Lucky thing for us that we're up here and they're down there.'

'Drakkens,' Lawler repeated. 'I never heard of them.'

'They're northern. Not often seen in tropical waters, or in this particular sea. I guess they wanted a summer holiday.'

The narrow toothy snouts, half as long as a man's arm, rose like a forest of swords from the surface of the water. Lawler glimpsed hints of slender ribbon bodies below,

shining like polished metal, dangling into the depths. Occasionally a drakken's fluked tail came into view, or a powerful webbed claw. Bright flame-red eyes looked back at him with disturbing intensity. The creatures were talking to each other in high, vociferous tones, a hard-edged clangorous yipping, a sound like hatchets striking against anvils.

Gabe Kinversion appeared from somewhere and moved to the rail, taking up a position between Lawler and Thane. Kinversion, brawny and immense, with a blunt wind-burned face, had the tools of his trade with him, a bundle of hooks and line and a long wood-kelp fishing rod. 'Drakkens,' he muttered. 'What bastards they are. I was coming back once with a ten-metre sea-leopard tied to my boat and five drakkens ate it right out from under me. Not a goddamned thing I could do.' Kinversion scooped up a broken belaying pin and hurled it into the water. The drakkens went to it as though it were bait, converging, rising shoulder-high from the water, snapping at it, yipping furiously. They let it sink past them and vanish.

'They can't come up on board, can they?' Lawler asked.

Kinversion laughed. 'No, doc. They can't come up on board. Lucky thing for us, too.'

The drakkens – there might have been three hundred of them – swam alongside the ships for a couple of hours, keeping pace easily, jabbing the air with their evil snouts, carrying on their ominous running line of comments. But by mid-morning they were gone, abruptly slipping down out of sight all at once and not surfacing again.

The wind picked up a short while later. The crew of the day watch moved about busily in the rigging. Far off to the north a little black rainstorm congealed into being just below a layer of dirty-looking overcast and dropped a dark webwork of precipitation that seemed not quite to be reaching the water. In the vicinity of the ships

the air remained clear and dry, and still had a crackling edge to it.

Lawler went belowdecks. There was work waiting for him there, nothing very taxing. Neyana Golghoz had a blister on her knee; Leo Martello was troubled by sunburned shoulders; Father Quillan had bruised his elbow falling out of his bunk. When he was done with all that Lawler made his regular radio calls to the other ships to see if any medical problems had cropped up on them. Around noon he headed up to the deck to get some air. Nid Delagard, the owner of the fleet and the leader of the expedition, was conferring with his flagship captain, Gospo Struvin, just outside the wheel-box. Their laughter carried readily the length of the ship. Two of a kind, they were, stocky thick-necked men, stubborn and profane, full of raucous energy.

'Hey, you see the drakkens this morning, doc?' Struvin called. 'Sweet, weren't they?'

'Very pretty, yes. What did they want with us?'

'Checking us out, I guess. You can't go very far in this ocean without something or other coming around to snoop. There'll be lots more wildlife visiting us as we go. Look there, doc. To starboard.'

Lawler followed the captain's pointing hand. The bloated and vaguely spherical shape of some immense creature was visible just below the surface. It was like a moon that had fallen from the sky, greenish and enormous and pockmarked all over. Lawler saw after a moment that the pockmarks were actually round mouth-like apertures, set close together over the entire surface area of the sphere, which were tirelessly opening and closing. A hundred gulping mouths, constantly at work. A thousand, maybe. A myriad long blueish tongues busily flicked in, out, in, out, like whips flailing the water. The thing was nothing but mouths, a gigantic floating eating machine.

Lawler stared at it with distaste. 'What is it?'

But Struvin was unable to put a name to it. Neither

could Delagard. It was just an anonymous denizen of the sea, hideous, monstrous, your basic floating king-sized horror wandering by to see if the little convoy offered anything worth ingesting. It drifted slowly past, its mouths chomping steadily away. After it, some twenty minutes later, the ships entered a zone thick with big orange-and-green-striped jellyfish, soft graceful shining umbrellas as big as a man's head from which cascades of coiling red fleshy strands, finger-thick and apparently several metres long, were hanging. The jellyfish looked vaguely benign, even clownish, but the surface of the sea in their vicinity bubbled and steamed as though they were giving off a powerful acid. They were so tightly packed in the water that they came right up against the ship's hull, jamming into it, bumping against the sea-finger plants that were growing on it, bouncing off with little sighing protests.

Delagard yawned and disappeared down the stern hatch. Lawler, standing by the rail, looked down in wonder at the massed jellyfish just below. They were quivering like a horde of plump breasts. He could almost reach over and scoop one out, they were so close. Gospo Struin, heading past him down the deck along the port rail, said suddenly, 'Hey, who left this net here? Neyana, was it you?'

'Not me,' Neyana Golghoz said, without bothering to look up. She was busy swabbing down the deck, farther toward the bow. 'Talk to Kinverson. He's the one with the nets.'

The net was an intricate tangle of moist yellow fibres lying in a sloppy crumpled mass by the rail. Struin kicked at it as though it were so much trash. Then he muttered a curse and kicked again. Lawler glanced across the way and saw that the net had become tangled somehow around one of Struin's booted legs. The captain stood with his leg in the air and was kicking repeatedly as if trying to free himself of something sticky and very persistent. 'Hey,' Struin said. 'Hey!'

One part of the net was halfway up his thigh, suddenly, and wrapped tightly around it. The rest of it had slithered up the side of the rail and was beginning to crawl over the far side toward the water.

'Doc!' Struvin bellowed.

Lawler ran toward him, with Neyana just behind. But the net moved with unbelievable swiftness. No longer a messy jumble of fibrous cords, it had straightened itself out to reveal itself as some kind of openwork life-form about three metres long, and it was rapidly pulling Struvin over the side of the ship. The captain, kicking and yelling and struggling, hung suspended over the rail. One leg was in the grip of the net and he was trying to brace himself against the gunwale with the other to keep from going into the water; but the creature seemed quite willing to pull him apart at the crotch if he continued to resist its tug. Struvin's eyes were practically popping. They glazed with astonishment, horror, disbelief.

In the course of almost a quarter of a century of medical practice Lawler had seen people in extremity before, many times, too many times. But he had never seen an expression like that in anyone's eyes.

'Get this thing off me!' Struvin yelled. 'Jesus! Doc — please, doc—'

Lawler lunged and clutched at the part of the net that was nearest to him. His hand closed on it and instantly he felt a fierce burning sensation, as though some stinging acid had cut through his flesh to the bone. He tried to let go, but it was impossible. His skin was sticking to it. Struvin was already hanging well over the side, now. Just his head and shoulders were still in view, and his desperate clutching hands. He called out once again for help, a hoarse, horrifying cry. Lawler, forcing himself to ignore the pain, slung one end of the net over his shoulder and tugged it back toward the middle of the deck, hoping to bring Struvin up with it. The effort required was tremendous,

but he was fuelled by mysterious energies, rising under stress from he knew not where. The thing was searing the skin of his hands and he could feel its cauterizing touch on his back and neck and shoulder, right through his shirt. Son of a bitch, he thought. Son of a bitch. He bit down hard on his lip and took a step, another one, another, tugging against Struvin's weight and the resistance of the net-creature, which had slithered well down the outside of the hull by this time and was heading purposefully for the water.

Something was starting to go in the middle of Lawler's back, where overstrained muscles were jiggling and leaping around. But he seemed actually to be succeeding in dragging the net up on board again. Struvin was almost to the top of the rail.

And then the net broke – or, more likely, divided of its own accord. Lawler heard one final terrible wail and looked back to see Struvin drop back over the side and fall into the bubbling, steaming sea. The water immediately began to thrash around him. Lawler saw movement just below the surface, soft quivering things coming from all sides like darts. The jellyfish didn't look benign and clownish any more.

The other half of the net remained on the deck, snarling itself around Lawler's wrists and hands. He found himself contending with some fiery mesh-like creature that squirmed and wriggled and adhered to him wherever he touched it. He knelt and smashed the net-thing against the deck again and again and again. The stuff was tough and resilient, like cartilage. It seemed to weaken a little but he couldn't get rid of it. The burning was becoming intolerable.

Kinverson came running up and brought the heel of his boot down on one corner of the net-thing, pinning it; Neyana jammed her mop into its middle; and then Pilya Braun, emerging suddenly from somewhere, crouched over

Lawler and pulled a bone blade from a scabbard at her hip. Furiously she set about cutting through the quivering rubbery meshes. Shining metallic-looking blood, deep blue in colour, spurted from the net, and the strands of the creature coiled back crisply from the blade. In a moment Pilya had hacked away the section that was stuck to Lawler's hands, and he was able to rise. Evidently the piece was too small to sustain life; it shrivelled and shrank away from his fingers and he managed to toss it aside. Kinverson was still stomping on the other section of the net, the remainder of the piece that had stayed on board after Struvin had been carried over the side.

In a dazed way Lawler lurched toward the rail with some blurry intention of going into the sea to rescue Struvin. Kinverson seemed to understand what was in his mind. He reached one long arm toward him, catching him by the shoulder and pulling him back.

'Don't be crazy,' he said. 'There's God knows what swimming around down there waiting for you.'

Lawler nodded uncertainly. He stepped away from the rail and stared at his blazing fingers. A bright imprinted network of red lines stood out brilliantly on his skin. The pain was phenomenal. He thought his hands were going to explode.

The whole incident had taken perhaps a minute and a half.

Delagard emerged now from the hatch. He came running toward them, looking annoyed and perturbed.

'What the hell's going on? Why all the yelling and screaming?' He paused and gawked. 'Where's Gospo?'

Lawler, breathing hard, his throat parched, his heart pounding, could barely speak. He gestured toward the rail with a toss of his head.

'Overboard?' Delagard said incredulously. 'He fell in?'

He rushed to the side and looked over. Lawler came up beside him. All was quiet down there. The jostling