



Ocean of Time

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CHAPTER I

“The Blow Will Fall on Durmurot”

Winter came early to Obann that year—early, but gently. Snow fell softly, melted soon. The winds that swept down from the mountains in the east, up from the ocean in the west, were not yet sweeping hard. Travelers prayed prayers of thanks.

In Obann City the new government repaired the gates, tore down irreparably damaged buildings whose owners could not be found, and indemnified farmers, villages, and towns for losses sustained in Obann’s recent wars. For the time being, Obann was at peace.

But there were those who knew the peace wouldn’t last.

“The blow will fall on Durmurot,” Prester Jod wrote to First Prester Orth. “Mardonius says the Winged Bull always comes with all the force that he can muster, whether he needs it or not. He will send hundreds of ships, each with hundreds of warriors. We cannot possibly resist them.”

Jod paused with a sigh. Once teased as the handsom-

est man of all the clergy, the strain of the past few years had greyed his hair and etched lines on his face.

“I know I need hardly ask you, my lord,” he wrote, “to distribute as many of our books of Scripture as you can, as widely as you can. God willing, we will go on producing the books regardless of what any enemy can do, whether we’re occupied or left in peace. But Mardonius keeps warning us to expect the worst—by the middle of the summer, at the latest.”

Obann had no cities west of Durmurot, only the coastline and the sea. Mardonius, an amaral in the Winged Bull’s navy, had brought six ships all the way across the ocean, sent two of them back to report his successful crossing to an eastern continent—which no one had been sure existed—and lost three ships to mutiny and desertion, retaining only his flagship, the *Silver Cloud*. She would be Durmurot’s entire naval force.

The thousand young men being trained as soldiers would retreat to safety and not return unless Obann sent the entire army west. General Hennen would not permit them to stay and be devoured.

For the Winged Bull would come in all his might to seize the bell, God’s bell, that rang from the summit of Bell Mountain to announce God’s sovereign lordship over all the world that He’d created. That the bell had burst into pieces as two children rang it, Mardonius said, would not stop the Bull from coming to take it. “He’ll never believe that it exists no more,” the amaral said. “We heard it ring: the whole world heard it. And he wants it for his god, Artoosh. He will march all the way across Obann to get it.”

Durmurot was indefensible. The city had no wall, and

neither the time nor the manpower to build one. How the Bull would fare when confronted with the mighty walls of Obann City, no man knew. The Heathen host of the Thunder King, with help from traitors within the Temple, had breached the walls, only to be shattered by a miracle—a great beast emerging from the river with the boy king, Ryons, clinging to its shoulders like an insect. The Heathen had fled.

No one dared hope for another miracle like that.

Obann City's government concentrated on repairing and strengthening her defenses. Having already marched four thousand men to Durmurot, only to arrive too early, General Born ruled out any further marches to the west. "Let them break their teeth on our defenses," he said, "if they come at all." He'd brought the four thousand back to Obann City just ahead of the first snow.

Lord Orth, the First Prester, preached God's word to the assemblies, mostly in the market squares. He did not intend ever to rebuild the Temple. It was costing more than enough just to have the rubble carted off and reused, where possible, to strengthen the city's defensive works. It would be two or three years before the site was cleared, and then they could start removing the baked and blasted rubble that used to be the Palace. The Heathen had destroyed the Temple. God's wrath, and an ancient artifact that spat out a sea of fire, had destroyed the Palace.

"I was one of those traitors who let the Heathen in," Orth confessed. He'd once confessed it to the full conclave of the clergy of Obann, and as his punishment, they'd

elected him First Prester.

But today, with no sermons scheduled and no business to draw him out of his house, the confession was only a remark to Gallgoid—who already knew the full story, having been part of it himself. He and Orth and many others had been servants of the arch-traitor, Lord Reesh, the old First Prester. “But some of us,” thought Gallgoid, “had been duped. I wish I could say we were!” But Orth had been Reesh’s handpicked successor, and Gallgoid had been the man Lord Reesh turned to when he wanted someone poisoned.

“I pray a prayer of repentance every morning,” Orth said. “This morning, I felt an especially intense need for it. Does your guilt ever hit you like that, Gallgoid?”

Gallgoid sighed. After Reesh’s death, Gallgoid—he’d never planned it so—had become the chief spy in the city, in the service of King Ryons. He was still the king’s eyes and ears in Obann City, but now there was no one left for him to spy upon. Now he served the city’s new government, loyal to the king.

“I try not to think of those days,” he answered Orth. “We’ll both be kept busy for the rest of our lives trying to undo the harm we did for Reesh. He never got a chance to do that—not that he would have taken it. You and I can only do our best, my lord. I give God thanks for that.”

Jack and Ellayne, with Martis to protect them and Wytt to protect them all, returned to Ninneburky while the baron, Roshay Bault, was away from home. It was the first chance he’d had in three years to visit his two grown sons,

Dib and Josek, in the foothills where they supervised the family's lumber business. His wife, the baroness Vannett, had teased him for it.

"With all the wars and chaos we've had to cope with," she said, "our sons still managed to keep the lumber rafts coming. I doubt they need your supervision now."

"Well, I want to see them!" Roshay grumbled. "Who knows when I'll get another chance?" It did seem strange, nowadays, for the country to be at peace.

Vannett gave the children a warm welcome and a hearty supper, while Wytt darted under the back porch to see if his friend, the old rat, was still there. He was.

All the time Wytt had been on the road to and from Durmurot, the rat had felt some great evil stirring somewhere; but where, he didn't know.

"Evil will come," said Wytt, "but it will come from far away." They didn't speak as humans speak, but they understood each other. Wytt, the Omah, was but little larger than the rat, his only weapon a stick sharpened by his teeth. But he was the children's guardian, and he'd guarded them well. They would not have reached Bell Mountain without him.

Ellayne and Jack would soon be mated, Wytt confided in the rat. They both marveled at the immense amounts of time it took humans to do anything important. Like the rest of Ninneburky, the rat knew there was a marriage impending. Not that a rat would call it "marriage."

Those who'd heard the gossip included Jack's stepfather, Van, the municipal carter, who had conceived a desire to prevent the marriage if he could. But that was something he had not yet mentioned to a soul.

It would have astounded him to know there was one

more man in town who, if his plans turned out as he hoped, would also act to stop the marriage. But he was only a stranger passing through, and no one in Ninneburky took any special notice of him.

“We’ll have to ask Mother for her blessing sometime soon,” Ellayne confided to Jack, when they were alone after dinner. “But not till Father comes back from the hills.”

Jack lived in the baron’s house, playing chess with the baron and helping the baroness with the paperwork; it would be fair to say they loved him. As Baron of the Eastern Marches, Roshay had to make sure the towns along the Imperial River were defended and the militia trained to defend them. Vannett’s work was to make sure of the supplies, and Jack and Ellayne helped her with it. This, said the baron, was their preparation for service to King Ryons: he would need the three of them when Jack and Ellayne were all grown up. The king’s council of chieftains wouldn’t be able to help him forever.

“I’m not sure I want to tell anybody yet,” Jack said. “It might be bad luck.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! How can you be so superstitious?” Really, Ellayne thought: Jack was a prince, but sometimes you had to prod him sharply to get him started. “Of course, if you don’t want to get married—”

“We’ll still have to wait two more years. I just don’t want to tell anyone yet.”

Vannett would have laughed out loud if she could have overheard them. She and Roshay both knew where the children were headed. Even old Prester Ashrof—Jack’s mother’s uncle, his only living blood relative—knew it and looked forward to performing the ceremony.

“My lovely daughter and this lovely boy,” she sometimes said to herself, “what more could I ask?” She was honest enough with herself to remember a time not long past, when her plan was to send Ellayne to a finishing school in Obann City to learn to wear fine clothes, dance dignified dances, and someday marry a gilded little puppet whose family was rich. “What could I have been thinking!” she wondered. Well, the recent years had knocked all that foolishness out of her head, and she was thankful for that.

In Lintum Forest, where God had placed King Ryons’ throne in the settlement of Carbonek, winter came with novelties.

Dragon, a creature that had come back with Helki the Rod from his pursuit of the late arch-outlaw, Ysbott the Snake, was a novelty. “No, I don’t know what she is,” Helki admitted; and if Helki didn’t know, then no one did. “We killed another one like her, only twice her size. One thing I do know: she’s enough like a bird that she’ll stick with me for as long as she lives.”

Carbonek already had a bird—Baby, raised from a chick by Perkin the Wanderer, a bird taller than a man, whose beak could crush a horse’s skull. Dragon was almost his size and would grow bigger. But where Baby had thick dull feathers, Dragon had smooth scales that could change color as her mood changed. “Some lizards do that,” Helki said. “She’s as much a lizard as she is a bird.” Instead of a heavy beak, she had jaws full of exceedingly sharp teeth.

It seemed eminently wise to keep Dragon and Baby apart for now, and Helki took Dragon with him whenever

he went into the woods: he was training her. She fascinated the children at Carbonek and scared their parents, but to Helki's surprise, she took to human company sooner than Baby ever did. "She's very much smarter than I thought," said Helki, "and very quick to learn." Cavall, King Ryons' hound, and Angel, his little hawk, quickly fell into friendship with her. And Gurun the queen liked to feed her treats by hand.

Perkin thought Baby might be jealous. "But he'll get over it—I hope," he said.

Another novelty at Carbonek had also come back with Helki: Qeqa, the Abnak girl who'd lived alone in the forest for a year and had never seen a town before. Gurun took her under her wing.

"I still don't know quite what to make of her," Helki confided to the queen. "Ysbott was afraid of her, and maybe he had reasons for it. He said she poisoned her parents—which was a lie, she said, but Ysbott believed it. She says she told him a lot of lies, but that was to protect herself."

"I'll watch over her," Gurun said. "She needs a sister."

The third novelty he'd brought back to Carbonek was the strangest of them all.

It was a device, a thing surviving from the ancient world before the Day of Fire. Qeqa and Ysbott had brought it up from an underground chamber in an ancient ruin, and Qeqa was convinced it held the spirit of a mighty witch. Had it not shown the whole settlement, one night, a dazzling glimpse into that ancient time? Who could do that, but a witch? Had they not all seen and heard an image of the witch? It had done no harm, but Obst the teacher feared it and had it placed in the custody of the chieftains. The

only persons who dared to touch it were Qeqa and the king himself. “What else can it do?” said Obst. “It may be very dangerous to find out!” The works of those people, a thousand years ago—had they not brought on the Day of Fire? And who, by now, had not heard of that other device that had destroyed the Palace in Obann?

But for the time being the artifact was left alone; the first snow of the season delighted all the children; and Lintum Forest and its people rested.

“Always rest when you can, Your Majesty,” Helki counseled the king. “There’ll be times enough when you can’t.”

A Voice in the Waves

Uduqu and Zekelesh, chiefs, with Herric and Bolli and Fnaa, enjoyed their journey down the river on a boat. Herric and Bolli handled it easily—it was very like the boats they’d grown up with on Fogo Island, and such boats had brought both them and their sister, the queen, all the way to Obann’s shores. Fnaa learned quickly, and the two chiefs had little to do but lean on the gunwales and swap stories.

They were almost to Durmurot with no sign of the weather turning against them.

“Of course there are giants,” Zekelesh was saying, in the middle of a lazy fall day with the river bathed in sunshine. It had already snowed in Lintum Forest, but this far west, fall still held sway—for just a little longer.

Fnaa interrupted the Fazzan chieftain. “Giants?” he said. “Uduqu killed one! Haven’t you heard the song of Helki the Giant-killer?”

“You just said Uduqu killed it,” Herric said.

“Well, all right! But Uduqu was there, and he cut two men in half with one blow of the sword when they attacked Helki.”

“Oh, let’s not hear that again!” Uduqu said. That sword had grown too heavy for him since that exploit, and he’d handed it down to Jiharr the Zephite, now the queen’s own

champion. "It's been a long time since I've killed anybody, and I won't mind if I never do it again. I'm not so sure God was pleased with a lot of things I've done."

They were journeying to Durmurot because God's word was that they would witness a miracle there that later generations would not believe. There would have to be a written record of it, attested to by Prester Jod and the other clergy, and Uduqu wished to be the one who wrote it down. That this word had been delivered by Nanny Witkom, who had died some years before, established it as prophecy. All Carbonek had heard her voice. It was not the only service that Nanny, as a messenger from heaven, had performed for God, but all the rest was secret.

There was nothing anyone in Durmurot could do to make the city safe from the overwhelming might of the Winged Bull from across the sea—so life went on. The scriptorium, under Preceptor Constan, turned out books of Scripture for shipment to Obann and distribution to all the towns along the river. Prester Jod preached God's word at each assembly. The people bought; the merchants sold; the farmers finished gathering in their crops.

Mardonius, accompanied by the boy, Ebed, made frequent visits to the Silver Cloud to prepare her for the winter. Shesh, the sailor from Arachosia, spent most of his time aboard the ship, learning her ways. His niece, Barseen, stayed at Jod's house and studied in his library. He had many of the New Books and commentaries, which were not known in Arachosia.

"So much to learn!" she said to Jod. "I wish my mother

and father could be here to study with me.”

“I’ll give you some to take back to them,” the prester said. “If we survive the Winged Bull” was his afterthought, left unspoken.

When he was in Durmurot, Mardonius had the Scriptures read to him. “I have a hunger for this Word,” he said. “Maybe someday my people, the Gedrosh, will hear it. I think it might help us, somehow, to be free again.” The Bull had conquered the Gedrosh a generation ago and was a hard master.

“It’s God’s will that all the peoples of the earth be free,” Jod said to him.

“History is one tyrant, one evil, after another,” said Mardonius, “even in Obann, where you have always had the Word. Is it not so?”

“It has been,” Jod admitted, “but that’s why the bell rang—to call us back to the sovereign God who makes us free. Someday there will be no tyrants: only God’s Kingdom over all the earth. The bell proclaimed it, and the Lord has always spoken it.”

Ebed had, by now, what they called his sea legs. He could walk the deck without stumbling, his body automatically compensating for the rocking of the ship.

“We’ll make a seaman of you yet, Captain Ebed,” said the first mate, Barzanes. “Pretty soon you’ll be scurrying up the mast like a monkey.”

“What’s a monkey?”

Shesh had taught him how to climb the various ropes and ladders. “I was about your age when I first went to sea,”

he said. “Thought I’d have my own ship by now. If I still want it, I suppose I’ll have to build it myself. I could, you know.”

Mardonius had a safe winter anchorage within sight of his camp on the beach. Mutineers had destroyed the first camp, but by now the Kaskai warriors and the ship’s crew had rebuilt it. There would be provisions carted up from Durmurot.

They hadn’t bothered to build a stockade. It wouldn’t protect them from the Winged Bull when he came. The Kaskai would be attached to General Hennen’s little force, which would retreat until help came from Obann. “We’ll retreat all the way to Obann City if we have to,” Hennen said. For the rest of the company, the Silver Cloud would be their refuge: her design and Mardonius’ seamanship would be safety enough for them.

Ebed and Barseen, when the time came, would join Shesh aboard the ship.

“This is very sad,” she said to Prester Jod, “for so many men to run away and leave this city to its fate.”

“The Silver Cloud can’t fight a navy,” Jod said, “and our young men can’t stand against an army ten times their number.”

“So there will be no one to defend the city?”

The prester shrugged. “Our task is to produce as many copies of the Scriptures as we can, for as long as we can—come what may.”

That night, a clear and not quite chilly night, Ebed stood leaning on the rail along the foredeck of the Silver Cloud, captivated by the play of starlight on the ever-shift-

ing sea as the night watch, all around him, went about their duties.

He wondered what you would see if you went down under the waves, down to the bottom. He often wondered about that, and Barzanes once answered, "You'd see what it was like to die by drowning." But Narses, Mardonius' friend, said, "I've heard tell there are palaces down there and coral castles, where the Sea People live. But if you should ever chance to visit them, they'll never let you come back up. Not all the sailors that men say have drowned have really drowned. They're living down there still."

And it seemed to Ebed, that night, that there was a voice among the waves and it was trying to tell him something, but he couldn't understand, couldn't make it out: a voice that soothed and comforted whoever heard it.

"Oh, Barzanes!"

The mate, who was making his rounds, stopped when Ebed spoke his name.

"What is it, Ebed?"

"Do you hear that?"

Barzanes joined him at the rail and listened for a moment or two. "It's only what we hear every night," he said, "when we have fair weather."

"No, it's not that. Listen! There's someone speaking to us."

Barzanes laughed a little. "It's only your imagination, Captain. Seals and whales and gulls speak to us, after a fashion, but there are none of them out here tonight. I wonder if you have the makings of a poet."

"You don't hear a voice? You don't hear speaking?"

"Only you and me—and the waves, the breeze, and the

creaking of our timbers. Nothing more.”

“I wish I could tell you what they were saying, whoever they are,” said Ebed.

“Maybe it just means it’s time for you to go to bed,” said Barzanes.

Ebed didn’t think so, but he went to bed regardless because, after all, he really was tired. And once he’d tucked himself in, he didn’t hear the voice anymore.

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