

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Echoes of the Great Song

David A. Gemmell

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About the Book

The Avatars were immortal and lived like kings – even though their empire was dying. Their immortality was guaranteed by magic crystals, crystals whose influence was now waning, overwhelmed by the power of a great flood and a freak ice age. But when two moons appeared in the sky, and the ruthless armies of the Crystal Queen swarmed across the land, bringing devastation and terror, the Avatars united with their subjects to protect their universe.

As the cities faced imminent destruction, three heroes emerged. Talaban, a warrior haunted by tragedy, Touchstone, the mystic tribesman seeking his lost love, and Anu, the Holy One, the Builder of Time. And when all seemed lost, two others entered the fray: Sofarita, the peasant girl who would inspire a legend, and the madman, Viruk, who would become a god.

Through his powerful storytelling and intelligent handling of human emotions, David Gemmell once again shows that he ranks as one of the finest contemporary writers of heroic fantasy.

Echoes of the Great Song

David A. Gemmell

Echoes of the Great Song is dedicated with grateful thanks to Richard Allen, who – back in the sixties – showed me the way to popularity by breaking my arm. And to Peter Phillips, whose heroic appearance in another time of great danger prevented even more fractures.

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Chapter One

And that was in the time before our time, when Tail-avar, the god of wisdom, travelled with Storro, Speaker of Legends, and Touch the Moon, god of tribes, to steal power from the magic fang of the Frost Giant. With a rope crafted from moonlight Tail-avar lassoed seven serpents of the sea. They drew his canoe across the Great Water in less than a day. When Touch the Moon saw the beast they had come to find, he fell to the floor of the canoe, and cried out to the Spirit of Heaven to grant them courage. For the Frost Giant was greater than mountains, its white back tearing the sky. The breath from its mouth flowed for many leagues as a cold mist across the water. Its claws were as long as the ribs of a whale, its teeth as sharp as betrayal.

From the *Morning Song of the Anajo*

ALONE ON AN icy hillside, the wind blowing cold across the glaciers, Talaban recalled the first time he had heard the prophecy.

The Great Bear will descend from the skies and with his paw lash at the ocean. He will devour all the works of Man. Then he will sleep for 10,000 years, and the breath of his sleep will be death.

The words had been spoken by a Vagar mystic; a ragged man in clothes of filthy fur, sitting on the lower steps of the Great Temple. Thinking the man a beggar the young blue-haired Avatar officer had given him a small silver coin. The mystic looked at it, turning it over and over in his grimy hand. His face was smeared with dirt and sweat, and upon his neck was an inflamed boil. Had he been anywhere else in the city the Watch would have arrested him, for no Outland beggars were allowed in the streets of Parapolis. But the Temple was the acknowledged centre for the world's religions, and all were free to gather here. Vagars,

tribesmen, nomads, all journeyed to Parapolis. It was as much a political decision by the Avatars as a spiritual one. For the barbarians returned to their homes and convinced their followers of the futility of revolt. Parapolis, with its gleaming towers of gold, and its powerful magic, was a symbol of invincible might.

Talaban watched the fur-clad beggar examining the coin. The boil on his neck seemed ready to burst, and the pain must have been great. Talaban offered to heal it for him. The man shook his head, the movement causing him to wince against the agony of the inflammation. 'I need no healing, Avatar. The boil is a part of me, and it will leave me when it is ready.' The mystic gazed down at the silver coin in his hand, then glanced up at the tall blue-haired soldier. 'Your gift to me shows a generous spirit, Avatar,' he said. 'Look around you, and tell me what you see.'

Talaban gazed at the colossal buildings at the centre of the capital. The Great Temple was a magnificent edifice, roofed with gold sheeting and adorned with hundreds of beautifully wrought statues of marble depicting scenes from a thousand years of Avatar history. The gilded Monument, a towering column of gold 200 feet high, stood beside it. Everywhere he looked Talaban saw the glory that was the Avatar capital: awe-inspiring buildings, great arches, paved walkways. And beyond them, breathtakingly serene, dwarfing all the incredible works of Avatar architecture, loomed the brooding presence of the White Pyramid. Three million blocks of stone, many of them weighing more than 200 tons, had been used to create this artificial mountain. And then the whole edifice had been faced with white marble. For a moment Talaban was lost in the wonder of it all. Then he remembered the question the ragged man had asked him. 'I see what you see,' he said. 'The greatest city ever built.'

The mystic chuckled. 'You do *not* see what I see. You see what is. I see what will be.' He pointed to the glittering

Monument, rising like a spear towards the skies. It was a work of wonder, and golden spikes radiated from the crown set upon it. The gold of the crown alone weighed almost a ton. 'The crown will fall when the whale's body crashes against it,' he said.

'I have never seen a flying whale,' said Talaban, amiably.

'Nor will you,' agreed the mystic. Then he spoke of the Great Bear and its sleep of death.

Talaban was growing bored now. He smiled at the man and turned away. The mystic's voice followed him.

'The bear will be white. Gloriously white. Just like the pyramid. And you will be one of the few Avatars who will gaze upon it and live. And when you do your hair will no longer be dyed blue. It will be dark. For you will have learned humility, Avatar.'

An icy wind whispered across the snow-covered hills. Talaban's mind returned to the present. Pushing his fingers through his night-dark hair, he lifted his fur-lined hood into place, and stared out over the glaciers.

There was a time when he had hated the ice. Hated it with every fibre of his being. Yet now he gazed upon the cold and brittle beauty of the glaciers without rage. It surprised him that he could even appreciate the sunlight creating pale colours upon the ghost white of the glacier flanks, the faint blue of the reflected sky, the gleam of gold as the sun set.

So much was hidden beneath it, lost for ever. His childhood friends, his family, thousands of works of literature and philosophy, all buried now. Along with his hopes and dreams. Yet despite what it had taken from him, the ice had proved too powerful for his hatred; too huge and too cold for his fury.

And now, as his dark eyes scanned the white mountains, his heart felt a curious sense of kinship with the ice, for his own feelings were now buried deep, as deep perhaps as Parapolis, which lay frozen beneath the belly of the Great Ice Bear.

The tall warrior transferred his gaze to the small group of men working at the foot of the ice mountains. From his vantage point on the hillside he could see them planting the golden probes, and setting up small pyramids created from silver poles. Golden wires were being attached to the pyramids, linking them together. Talaban could see the short, stocky figure of Questor Ro moving among the Vagars, issuing orders, barking out commands. At this distance he could not hear him, but he could tell by the impatient gestures that Questor Ro was putting the fear of death into his team. And the fear was very real. Questor Ro was one of the few Avatars who still, routinely, sentenced his slaves to be flogged for minor infractions. The little man was powerful within the Council, and it was by his influence that this expedition had been realized.

Would he be so powerful when they returned, Talaban wondered?

He had long since cast aside his optimism and considered the venture futile, but his orders were specific: bring Questor Ro and his Vagar team to the ice, protect them, oversee the operation, and return within three months.

It was the seventh team to attempt Communion in four years. Talaban had commanded three of the expeditions. All had ended in failure and he had no expectation of greater success on this trip. The prevailing opinion was that Communion was no longer possible. Questor Ro had argued against this, calling his colleagues 'pathetically defeatist'. His enemies, and there were many, had part-sponsored the current expedition. Their aim was obvious: to see Questor Ro humbled. This did not seem to perturb the little man.

Turning from the ice Talaban scanned the barren plain, seeking signs of movement. Nomads still lived in the mountains to the east. They were a savage and fierce people. With only twenty soldiers under his command Talaban did not relish the thought of battle in this cold, lonely place.

These icy lands, once so wondrously fertile, were full of peril now. The nomads were only one of many dangers. On the last expedition a pride of sabre-tooths had attacked a working party, killing three Vagars and dragging off a fourth. Talaban had killed the beast as it mauled the Vagar. The victim had bled to death within moments, the artery in his groin torn open. Then there were the krals. Not since the first expedition had they been seen, but fear of them remained strong, and the descriptions of their ferocity had grown in the telling. Talaban had never seen a kral, but witnesses told him of their speed and savagery. They were covered in white fur, like a snow bear, but their faces were almost human, though incredibly bestial. Three accounts described them as more than seven feet tall, with long upper arms. When they charged they dropped to all fours, and killed with talons and sharp teeth.

The last of the perils, but by no means the least, lay in the herds of tuskers, who roamed the forests to the east. Their shaggy hides protected them from the severity of the cold, and their tusks, some measuring more than ten feet, made them dangerous adversaries. Even sabre-tooths generally avoided the mammoths – unless they could isolate a stray.

The vast plain appeared empty. Talaban gestured to his sergeant, Methras, positioned on a hillside some 600 paces to the east. The man spread out his arms in a flat line, signalling nothing to report.

A movement out to sea caught Talaban's eye. At first he thought it was a ship, but then he saw the great back of a blue whale lift and dip, before the sea swallowed it once more. The mystic's words came back to him again. And now he knew that, as the tidal wave engulfed Parapolis, a whale had crashed against the Monument's crown, ripping it away. He wondered if the little mystic had survived.

Down in the bay, sails furled, *Serpent Seven* was at anchor. Even here in this gentle bay the huge black ship looked

unseaworthy, her decks too high, her draught too low. Talaban sighed. Drawing his black woollen cloak around him he strode down the hillside. Three Vagars, waiting for the ship's boat, were crouched in the shelter of several boulders. They were wearing coats of white fur, and boots of sheepskin. Even so their lips were blue with cold. Talaban knelt among them. 'Once there were vineyards here,' he said, 'and away to the north was a lake where the Avatar Prime had a palace. I swam in that lake as a child, and my shoulders were burned red by the sun.'

'The lake is ice now, lord,' said one of the Vagars, blowing into his hands. 'Everything is ice now.' His voice was toneless and he did not look up at Talaban.

'Two more days, and then we will sail back to the city,' Talaban told them.

His words did nothing to lift their spirits and he moved away from them down to the water's edge. Chunks of ice were floating along the shoreline. Raising his arm he signalled the ship. Instantly the silver longboat was lowered to the surface.

Swiftly, without oar or sail, it glided through the water and Talaban could see the hunched, hooded figure of Touchstone seated at the tiller. Talaban shivered once more. The cold was seeping into his bones now. The three Vagars hurried down to the water's edge as the boat neared, then waited until Talaban had stepped aboard before scrambling over the side.

'Them's cold rabbits,' said Touchstone, grinning, gesturing towards the shivering Vagars. Talaban smiled. Touchstone pushed back his fur-lined hood, shaking free his black braids. 'Nomads are close,' he said, tapping his nose. 'I smell them.'

The three Vagars tensed, and Talaban saw the fear in their eyes. At least they've forgotten how cold they are, he thought.

'How close?' he asked Touchstone.

‘Half a day. Twenty riders maybe. Hunting tuskers they are. They be close to here tomorrow. By dusk maybe.’

‘And you can smell all this?’ put in one of the Vagars.

‘A good nose I have,’ said Touchstone with a wink, stroking his long curved nose. He grinned at the man. ‘You see. Tomorrow. Come dusk.’

Talaban raised his arm to signal the ship, and immediately the silver longboat began to glide backwards out into the bay. Touchstone pulled the tiller arm and the craft swung towards the waiting ship. Talaban’s gaze focused on the black vessel, with its high prow, and long, raking lines. The newly added masts were an abomination, but sadly necessary in these days of fading power. Fifty years ago there were seventy or more warships, sailing the oceans, mapping new lands, keeping the peace of the Avatar Prime. Now there was one, *Serpent Seven*, its power chest almost empty, its beauty scarred by the clumsy wooden masts hammered into its deck. Where once it had cleaved through the sea like a giant dolphin, now it laboured like a sick whale, needing to keep close to the shoreline, wary of every wave that threatened to capsize it.

The silver boat drew alongside the huge vessel. Ropes were lowered. Touchstone tied two of them to the prow and stern. Talaban climbed the ladder to the central deck, responded to the salutes of three black-clad Vagar sailors, then strode on towards his cabin.

Once inside he doffed his cloak, unbuckled his sword belt and stood before the brazier of burning coal beneath the stern windows. Holding his hands to the heat he shivered with pleasure. Though he could tolerate it better than most men Talaban hated the cold. The quarter window was open, allowing fresh air into the cabin, and helping alleviate the stink of coal. Talaban gazed longingly at the crystal globes set into the wall. Once these had supplied either heat or light – indeed both if required – for the captain’s cabin, but there was so little power left in the chest that Talaban did

not dare activate them. Moving to his desk of polished oak he sat down, enjoying the luxury of the deep, padded chair.

Closing his eyes he thought again of the palace of the Avatar Prime, the burning sun, and the scent of nearby vineyards. Talaban had been happy there for a while, content to work on the maps he had so carefully charted the year before. It was the year that Questor Anu had been stripped of his rank. Talaban had been sent to question him, to decide if he posed a threat to the State.

The inquisition had taken place in Anu's home on the outskirts of the city. Anu, like all Avatars, eternally youthful, had welcomed him warmly, and they had sat in his garden in the company of a slack-jawed half-wit, who drooled and stared vacantly into space. The half-wit was an Avatar but, because of his condition, was not allowed blue hair or any other badge of rank. Talaban found his presence off-putting. It was made more disturbing by the contrast with Anu. He was a slender man of medium height, his features regular, his expression friendly. Yet there was about him an almost tangible radiance, a sense of unworldliness that was both compelling and unsettling. It was the kind of feeling Talaban experienced when climbing a mountain and looking out over the landscape of the world, a sense of awe and deep humility.

Anu smiled at Talaban's discomfiture. 'Why does he disturb you so?' he asked.

Talaban returned the smile, and decided upon a course of honesty. 'To be frank, sir, it is because I am here to decide your sanity. It seems curious to be doing so while in the presence of an idiot.'

'An interesting point for debate, Talaban. What is it that makes a man an idiot? Togen cannot dress himself, and if left to his own devices would probably starve to death. He does not understand politics, and if I sent him to market he would become lost before he reached the first shop. And

yet, tell me, Talaban, upon which science is our civilization built?’

‘Mathematics,’ answered the officer.

‘Indeed so. Now here is a riddle for you: Tell me the square root of 4,879,625?’

Before Talaban could even think of a method to supply the answer the half-wit spoke. He did not look up or change his expression. ‘Two thousand two hundred and eight point nine eight seven three two four five four five.’

Anu clapped his hands. ‘And the square root of that, Togen?’

Again the half-wit spoke instantly. ‘Forty-point six nine nine eight.’

‘How does he do that?’ asked Talaban.

‘I have no idea. But he has proved immensely useful to me these last six years. So, is he an idiot or a genius, Talaban?’

‘Apparently he is both. So let us put the question of his sanity aside and examine yours.’

‘As you will.’

‘You are preaching heresy, Questor. How do you justify your actions?’

‘My actions require no justification. But let us return to mathematics. I have studied the science for almost eight hundred years. Through it I have helped the Avatar to achieve greatness through architecture, travel and commerce.’

‘No one is disputing that, Questor. I have used your star maps myself on my journeys. But that is not the point at issue.’

‘It is the very point. We have a thousand years of history behind us, Talaban. But what is before us? Catastrophe awaits. Based upon my studies I have concluded that the earth itself passes through a series of regular cataclysms. During such times the earth rolls, falls if you like. I have studied ancient records. Such an event almost certainly took

place about eleven thousand years ago. It is my belief it will happen again some time in the next two years. With the help of Togen I shall narrow down that estimate. But we must prepare for the end of all we know – indeed of much that we love. Within a few years this little garden will be buried beneath a mountain of ice. If we do not make preparations then the civilization we have brought to this planet will pass from memory.'

'I have heard of your predictions, sir. Such is your reputation that even Vagar mystics are now predicting the end of all things.'

Anu shook his head. 'Now it is you who are missing the point. Those same mystics were prophesying the cataclysm long before I began my calculations. Indeed, it was my fascination with them that led me to apply my knowledge and expertise to the question.'

'But they go against prevailing wisdom, sir – and worse – against the views of the Avatar Prime himself. Can you not accept that you might be wrong?'

'I am not wrong, Talaban,' he answered, sadly. 'I would give all that I possess – my life itself – if it could be so. And I know what must happen. The sun will rise in the west, the seas will tip from their bowls, and not one stone will be left upon another.' The Questor sighed, then gave a sad smile. 'The Avatar Prime will either have me killed or declare me outcast. If it is the latter I will be stripped of my grants, my annuities, and my position. Even so I will continue to preach what you call heresy. I will take as many of our people as will travel with me and head north – far north. We have outlying settlements, and with the help of the Source, we shall survive the catastrophe. Whether there will be enough of us to rebuild our civilization I do not know.'

Talaban had reported the conversation to the Council. Some called for Anu's death, but Talaban spoke against such a course. The argument was fierce and raged on for several hours. Questor Ro had been vehement in his calls for death,

and such was the recommendation to the Avatar Prime. Happily he overruled the judgment and instead declared Anu stateless. His property was confiscated and he could no longer walk the streets of Parapolis. The former Questor had removed himself to the temple grounds, where he survived on gifts of food and clothing from the few friends who stuck by him. Here he continued to preach the coming catastrophe.

Within weeks Anu's dark prophecies began to be spouted among the populace. But they were derided by the Council.

True to his word Anu did refine his calculations, predicting the fall on the eighth or ninth day of summer in the eighteen hundred and third year of the Avatar Empire.

Two years and four months later, on the ninth day of summer, while taking *Serpent Seven* on a mapping expedition to the far north-west, Talaban had viewed the fall of the world. The ship was sheltering in a wide bay and his scouts were returning from a trip ashore. It was close to sunset. Talaban was standing on the high upper deck as the silver longboat cut through the waves towards the *Serpent*. It had been a good day, bright and fresh and cold. Melting ice floes still clung to the shores of the bay and a cool breeze whispered across the decks. The longboat secured, his men on board, Talaban turned towards his cabin door. The sunlight was almost gone, the clouds shining red and gold above the western mountains. Talaban paused to watch the last of the sunset. Suddenly the winds rose, a storm arriving from nowhere. Distant trees were bent by its force, and the clouds began scudding across the sky. The ship lurched. Talaban was thrown against the cabin door. A bright light washed over the *Serpent*. Talaban turned – and saw the sun rising again. He stood, lost in the wonder of the moment. From all over the ship came the sound of shouting, as men called for their friends to come and see the phenomenon. Then Talaban remembered the words of Anu.

The sun will rise in the west, the seas will tip from their bowls, and not one stone will be left upon another.

Shading his eyes he stared into the west. The area they were mapping was a narrow strip of land, some 20 miles wide. On the other side of the mountains lay the ocean. A huge dark mass, like bunching storm clouds, reared up over the mountains.

. . . the seas will tip from their bowls.

The mountains were almost two miles high. The tidal wave beyond them was half as high again. And it was roaring towards the bay.

For the first time in his life Talaban felt the onset of fear-induced panic. It rooted him to the spot, and he stared horrified at the immense wave darkening the sky. For a dozen heartbeats he stood still. Death was coming, and he felt powerless to oppose its immensity. On the deck below him a man screamed in fear, and fell to his knees, covering his head with his hands. The man's terror touched Talaban like a cool wind. Forcing down his own panic he sprinted for the control deck and entered the inner sanctum. Swiftly he placed the power crystals into the black panels and spun the wheel. The black ship swung and sped out to sea. Her power chest fully charged, *Serpent Seven* was almost a mile from shore when Talaban swung her again, pointing her toward the towering wall of water bearing down upon her. At the last moment he turned her again, making an oblique angle. The colossal wave struck the ship, lifting the *Serpent* higher and higher, like a spear towards the sky, until it seemed the ship would be hurled through the clouds. Ferocious winds tore at the vessel, and several men who had remained on deck were sent hurtling to their deaths.

Still the ship climbed, Talaban urging every last vestige of power from the chest which lay at the heart of the *Serpent*. The ship slowed and began to topple. Talaban clung to the control panel and glanced through the port window. It was a dizzying sight. Miles below him he could see islands about to

be swamped. If the ship capsized it would fall back down the wave and be buried beneath the roaring ocean mountain. Twisting the wheel once more he struggled to straighten the *Serpent*.

A crystal on the panel cracked. Another shattered.

And then the ship righted itself, and was sailing serenely behind the great wave.

The world he knew was gone – and he had survived.

As Touchstone entered the cabin Talaban opened his eyes. The tribesman gave a half-hearted salute then slumped down into a second padded chair alongside the desk. He was a short stocky man, round-shouldered and thick-necked. His greasy black hair hung in two braids, and, despite his two years as Talaban's scout, he refused to apply for Vagar citizenship and still wore his black tribal vest decorated with fingers of bone. He glanced up at Talaban, his green eyes shining with mischievous humour. 'Them's running around like snow rabbits,' he said, 'digging into the ice. You think they find what they look for this time?'

Talaban shrugged. 'They will or they won't.'

'Buy a big house, farm maybe, with all that gold,' said Touchstone. 'Big waste.'

Talaban found it hard to disagree. Driving gold rods into the ice was an expensive exercise, and so far it had achieved little. 'These nomads,' he said. 'Will they fight us?'

Now it was Touchstone's turn to shrug. 'Who knows? Them's tough boys. They'll fight if they see the gold. They don't believe in Avatars no more. They know your magic is dying. They know the ice killed the empire.'

'Wounded it,' corrected Talaban. 'Nothing can kill the empire. We are too strong.' The words were spoken by rote and even Talaban had long since ceased to believe them. 'And you shouldn't verbalize such thoughts. I don't want to see you lying upon the crystals.'

‘Straight talk?’ asked Touchstone. Talaban nodded. The tribesman leaned forward. ‘You Avatars are like elk surrounded by wolves. You still strong, but the wolves will tear you down. They know it. You know it.’

‘Enough straight talk, my friend. And now I have work to do. Come back in an hour, and bring the Questor with you.’

Touchstone rose. ‘I bring food first,’ he said. ‘And more coal.’

‘My mother took less care of me than you do,’ said Talaban.

‘Keep you strong,’ said Touchstone. ‘You die and promise not be kept.’

‘I always honour my promises,’ said Talaban. ‘And I have not forgotten.’ Touchstone looked at him for a moment, the green eyes locked to Talaban’s dark gaze. Then he left the cabin.

Talaban took up his pen and opened the log, carefully detailing the day’s work. As dusk deepened he lit a lantern. The beautifully painted walls of the cabin had been soiled with carbon deposits from lantern flame and coal over the years. Idly he wondered whether the ship felt a sense of shame at the loss of her power and prestige. You are a romantic, he told himself.

With the log entry completed Talaban stripped off his clothes and moved through into the small sanctum beside his bedroom. He removed the three crystals from the velvet bag hanging by the window and placed them on the rug. Then he knelt facing the window and opened his arms wide. Taking a deep breath he drew on the power within. With his eyes closed he reached for the first crystal. It was pale and clear, like glittering ice. Lifting it to his forehead he slowly chanted the Prayer of One. His trance deepened and he felt his body relaxing. He became aware of knots of tension in his shoulders and neck. Gently he eased them. Completely relaxed now he laid the crystal down and reached for the second. This was a blue gem the size of his thumbnail. He

held it to his chest, over his heart. The power of the blue seeped through his skin, entering the heart, invigorating the blood and flowing through his arteries and veins, filling them with strength. Lastly he took the green crystal, the largest of the three. This one he held against his belly as he chanted the Prayer of the Avatar Prime. This time the power flowed with more urgency, revitalizing his organs, healing and renewing them. The shock to his system was great, and pain flared from his kidneys and liver. But it passed and Talaban rose and placed the crystals once more into the black velvet bag.

The green was coming to the end of its energy, he knew. How long had it been since he renewed it? And what was stopping him? Pushing the thoughts aside he lit a second lantern and carried it to the full-length mirror in his bedroom. Leaning in close he examined himself. The skin of his face was tight and glowed with health. His body was lean, the lines of muscle sharp and clear in the lantern light. Only the eyes were old, he thought, dark and sombre, brooding. Gazing into his own eyes discomfited him and he turned away from the mirror.

From the closet he took fresh leggings of black wool and a shirt of silver satin. Then he pulled on a dry pair of boots and returned to his desk. Touchstone had left a plate of salted meat and some fresh bread. He had also replenished the brazier, which was glowing red. Talaban opened the rear door of the cabin and stepped out onto the balcony beyond. Cold air whispered against him, but this time it was pleasant, following the heat from the cabin. The Vagar team had left the glacier, but he could still see the silver pyramids glistening in the moonlight. And below the ice the energy of the golden rods silently sought the Great Line.

An elk surrounded by wolves. Touchstone's words drifted back to him.

The analogy was not quite correct. More like a dragon surrounded by lions. They feared his terrible fire and held

back. He feared their fangs and their claws . . .
. . . and hoped they would not learn his fire was dying.

Chapter Two

QUESTOR RO WAS a traditionalist. His head was shaved, his forked beard dyed blue, and every day he practised the Six Rituals of the Avatars for precisely two hours. His clothes were of dark blue, a shirt of expensive satin edged with silver thread, leggings of finest wool, and boots of blue-stained lizard skin. Around his waist he wore the silver-edged belt of First Questor, and he still carried the ceremonial sceptre, despite the fact that its energy had been spent some twenty years before. Though oceans had washed away the Avatar Empire and ice had entombed its power sources, Questor Ro believed in maintaining standards. It was one of the many reasons he disliked Talaban.

He considered the others as he waited outside the captain's cabin with the savage Touchstone.

'Him's busy,' said Touchstone. 'Call us soon.'

Questor Ro did not reply. In the glory days no savage would have dared address an Avatar directly. They would have approached on their knees, then touched their heads to the ground. Every address would begin with the words *Lord hear your servant*. In this way discipline was maintained, and lower orders understood their place in the world. Indeed, in the opinion of Questor Ro, they were far happier for it. Clearly defined borders of behaviour were the cornerstone of any civilization. Talaban seemed to understand none of this, and allowed savages to address him as an equal. He had even journeyed among the barbarians, living in their squalid tents. Questor Ro shuddered inwardly. There was almost no doubt in his mind

that Talaban had Vagar blood. Added to which he was young, barely two centuries old. He had not lived long enough to understand fully the need for maintaining fear among the sub-races.

But then his mother had also been well known for her fey behaviour, refusing to have a child until her eightieth year, when she – despite her crystal-inspired youth – was close to becoming barren. It had been the cause of many rumours, and had brought considerable humiliation upon her 300-year-old husband. Most Avatar females lost the ability to carry children past the age of seventy, and few males past the age of two hundred could sire them. No, the consensus was that she had fallen pregnant during her travels. Few Avatar women made long journeys of any kind, and then only from necessity. She, on the other hand, had apparently travelled for pleasure, visiting the outer cities of the empire. Questor Ro could readily imagine what pleasures she had found among the vulgar races who peopled the cities. Soon after she returned she announced her pregnancy.

Her son's current behaviour only served to fuel Ro's suspicions. Talaban was too close to the Vagars who served him. He was even popular, which was a situation no Avatar should achieve. Vagars respected discipline, they reacted best to fear. Popularity, as far as Questor Ro was concerned, merely showed weakness in areas of leadership. It surprised Ro that the General could not understand these obvious flaws in Talaban's nature. Added to this there was the fact that Talaban had never married. And since he was fast approaching the age when his seed would no longer be strong it was an added insult to the Avatar race. Every citizen should sire Avatar children. What future for the Avatars without them?

'Him's ready now,' said Touchstone. Questor Ro had heard nothing, but the savage opened the door. He stood back as Questor Ro entered – which was at least something!

Ro stepped inside. Talaban was sitting at his desk, but he rose as the Questor entered. He moved round the desk to greet his guest. Like most of the warrior caste Talaban's movements were graceful, always in balance. The soldier towered over the short stocky mage. The two men opened hands in the Avatar greeting. Questor Ro bowed, halting the movement a few inches short of the required angle. Not enough to be insulting, but sufficient to show Talaban he was displeased. If the warrior noticed the discourtesy he did not show it, but returned the bow smoothly, offering the perfect angle.

'How is your work progressing?' asked Talaban. Questor Ro cast a glance at Touchstone, who had sat down on the floor by the door.

'It is not seemly to discuss such matters before inferiors,' said Questor Ro. His slender hand tugged at the twin forks of his blue beard, signalling his rising irritation.

Talaban said nothing, but Touchstone rose and silently left the room. 'Be seated, Questor,' said Talaban, returning to his chair.

Ro glanced at a guttering lantern, then transferred his gaze to the cold crystal globes set into the wall. 'I once journeyed to the western lands in one of these vessels,' he said, sadly. 'They were impressive then. No storm could touch them.'

'Times change, Questor. Now how is your work progressing?'

'I expect better results by tomorrow,' said Ro. 'Our probes need adjustments - minor adjustments,' he added swiftly, seeing the concern on Talaban's face. 'We are not entirely aligned.'

'Nomads will be in this area tomorrow,' said Talaban. 'We do not have much time.'

'Surely that is why we brought soldiers,' said Ro.

'Indeed it is, Questor. We have no *Avatar* soldiers. If the nomads come in strength we will be outnumbered ten to

one. My Vagars are armed with conventional weapons only. They will not withstand a heavy assault.'

'Of course they won't,' snapped Ro. 'I said at the start that we needed Avatars. On an expedition as important as this it is hard to credit that it could have been refused. Surely the empire would not have been weakened by allowing us true men and zhi-bows?'

'This was not intended to be a war party, Questor. The General was specific about that. Any complaints you have should be taken up with him upon our return. However, since we are speaking frankly, you should be aware there are fewer than fifty zhi-bows still in operation.'

'Fifty? That is a disgrace,' stormed Ro. 'Why only last year the General assured the Assembly there were over three hundred such weapons.'

Talaban leaned back in his chair. 'Questor Ro, I am aware of your great skills, and I know you spend much of your time in research. But surely the eastern revolt did not entirely escape your attention. Six thousand tribesmen? The zhi-bows swung the battle, but most were exhausted. We did not have the power to feed them. Hence this expedition.'

Questor Ro absorbed the information. 'It did not escape my attention, as you put it, captain. Few events escape my attention. However it seems a criminal waste of resources to allow our main defensive weapon to be exhausted by one petty revolt.'

'With respect, you are not a soldier, sir. Without the bows we would have been overrun in the east. That would have encouraged the other tribes to join in the revolt. The cities would have fallen.' Questor Ro was about to argue, but Talaban raised his hand. 'Enough of this, sir, for it is now history. Our task is to replenish the energies of the chests. Can it be done?'

'I need two days, captain. I believe Communion is near.'

Talaban fell silent. 'Do not tell me what you believe,' he said, at last. 'Tell me what you *know*.'

The man is insufferable, thought Ro. He took a deep breath, calming himself. 'Some of the rods have picked up faint emanations. I believe . . . I know . . . that with adjustment I can hone them to the pyramid. Once I have done so we will draw on the power and feed the chests.'

Talaban's dark eyes fixed to Ro's gaze. 'Be sure, sir, for I will have to risk the lives of my men and the security of this vessel. Be very sure.'

'Only these facts in life are sure, captain: the sun rises and sets and lesser beings die. Give me two days and we will power the six chests.'

Talaban looked long and hard at the smaller man. He did not like him, and had no reason to trust him. And yet . . . The power of one full chest would recharge every zhi-bow in the city and keep them charged for up to five years. The dragon would breathe fire again.

'You will have your two days,' he said. 'But get your men back to the ice tonight. They can work under lanterns.'

Talaban stood on the balcony deck behind his cabin and watched the Vagar team scurrying about on the ice. The bald blue-bearded figure of Questor Ro moved among them. 'Make me smile, him,' said Touchstone. Talaban considered the comment.

'He's a man from a lost time,' he said, at last. 'I both admire and pity him.'

'He faces the wrong way,' said Touchstone. Talaban smiled.

'For him the past is golden, the future barren. What else can he do but strive to recreate what is gone?'

'He could live. Now. Read the stars. Sire small sons.'

'How old are you, Touchstone?'

'I took breath when the red wolf ate the moon. Twenty-four summers back.'

'Questor Ro was more than four hundred summers old by then. And he had lived all those centuries in Parapolis, the

greatest city ever built. He was part of an empire three thousand years old. Ships like these sailed the oceans without need of wind. No grotesque masts, no bulging sacks of filthy coal. And then, one day, the sun rose in the west, and the seas rushed up to greet it. Parapolis was engulfed, the people swept away. Those that survived, like Questor Ro and myself, journeyed back to Parapolis. But the stars had changed, the earth had tilted, and it was bitter cold. All the trees had died – frozen in a single night. In one day the invincible cities of the Avatar had perished. And every day since the land is buried further beneath the ice. One mathematician calculated that 90,000 tons of fresh ice a day gathers over the old empire.'

'You want big truth?' asked Touchstone. 'Avatar anger Great God. He struck you down.'

Talaban shrugged. 'I do not believe in gods. Unless I am one, of course,' he added with a smile. 'But I was talking of Questor Ro. He is older than I. For three hundred and fifty years he lived among great wonders. No disease. No death. That is why he cannot let them go. Perhaps it is why none of us can let them go.'

'No death, no life,' said Touchstone. 'We need it.' Talaban knew what he meant. Man was part of the seasons, the youth of spring, the strength of summer, the ageing wisdom of autumn, and the cold departure of winter. Hearts beating to the rhythm of nature.

'Easy to say when you are mortal,' said Talaban.

'You have blue hair like him, once?' asked Touchstone.

'Yes. It separates us from ordinary mortals.'

'You are not gods,' said Touchstone. 'Gods need no golden rods. And why you sire no sons?'

Talaban said nothing. Stepping forward he leaned on the rail. Several more lanterns had been lit on the ice.

'What you do about the nomads?'

'I will talk to them,' said Talaban.

‘Pah, talk! Them’s fierce men. They fight. They kill. No time for talk, I think.’

‘I will speak in a language they understand.’

Touchstone bared his teeth in a wide grin. Talaban returned to the cabin. Touchstone followed him, pulling closed the door. ‘I’ll be with you when you talk,’ he said. ‘But now I sleep.’

Alone once more Talaban moved to a long wooden chest by the wall. Inside, wrapped in black velvet, was an ornate weapon, golden in colour, and shaped like a hunting bow. Gems of many colours adorned the grip. Talaban hefted the weapon and touched his thumb to a red gem just above the grip. Thin threads of light flickered, forming what appeared to be the strings of a harp. Talaban tuned his mind to the zhi-bow. The weapon was almost empty. No more than one bolt remained. He touched a white gem above the red and the strings of light disappeared. Setting the weapon down he considered the problem. He could take the bow to the *Serpent’s* chest and recharge it, but there was little power left there, and if he drained it none of them would survive the voyage back to the city. The Avatar *Serpents* were never seaworthy vessels in their own right. Only the power of the chests kept them afloat.

Dismissing the idea, Talaban removed his clothes and moved to the bedroom. Lying on his bed he could see the stars flickering through the curved window.

He had been far to the north-west when the Great Bear’s paw had lashed the ocean, sending a tidal wave three miles high across the continent of the Avatars. But even 2,000 miles away, on the outer edges of the empire, the earthquakes had toppled buildings, and a terrible hurricane had swept across the land, ripping away homes, killing hundreds of thousands.

Many had thought it to be the end of the world. For much of the earth’s population it was exactly that.