

Within three hours, Michael had arrived in Salem. On the way, he was fed details of what had happened.

Leah Steinbecker had last been seen three days earlier. She had left Salem, piloting a Shuttle and she had been unaccompanied. Her staff had not been informed of her plans. It had been the evening of the day following her departure before someone had the first indication that something was not as it should have been.

Michael reflected grimly, no matter what her destination might have been, there should have been an automatic record of her progress at Salem Control. He read further:

Well into the evening, her Pod was supposedly still in flight over the desolate Barrier Ranges which separated the Home Provinces from Mongolia. The Pod had continued its course throughout the night, maintaining a steady speed and direction which apparently led to nowhere. She did not respond to attempts at communication. By morning, there was sufficient apprehension for someone to make a special report to his supervisor. In turn, enquiries were made to the Administration Secretariat and finally, steps were taken to find out what was happening.

The muscles on Michael's jaw had knotted when he had finished reading the report. Fully twenty hours had passed before somebody had decided that the mysterious flight of their Deputy Administrator should be investigated. He promised himself that this somebody's head would roll when he reached Salem. It wasn't his first priority. He was sick with apprehension about what had happened to her. His latest reports from Tracking Control confirmed that the Pod was still in the air.

Theoretically, there was no reason why it should not be, it had a limitless supply of power to energise the drive-pack. It was quite obvious that it was on automatic control - the onboard computer was doing the driving. It should have been possible to override the computer from the ground, but override commands were being ignored.

He was updated with the latest report when he stepped from the suborbiter which had taken him to Salem. The Shuttle was on the ground. As far as could be determined, it had not crashed but made a soft landing. All attempts at communication had not produced a response. Michael glared at the silent group of advisors.

"This tells me sweet nothing! The Shuttle has landed, that's fine - but what about Leah Steinbecker?"

The blank looks were an eloquent answer. One of the braver souls ventured.

"Land parties are on the way to the landing position. They expect to be there within twelve hours."

Michael looked astounded.

"Do you mean to tell me that there are no settlements in that region?"

"It's an extremely remote, mountainous area, brother ben Levi. The terrain is very rough and the local weather conditions extreme."

"Don't feed me meteorological jargon! What are the extreme conditions?"

"Blizzards, deep snow - "

"And you mean to say that the Shuttle landed in that?"

"Computer control would have brought it down safely in the most adverse conditions, brother ben Levi."

They had commandeered one of the reception rooms at the Terminal. A map of the area was displayed on one wall. Michael stared at the point which had been marked as being the landing site. There were few rivers, just a tangle of mountain ranges. Even in a two dimensional plane, it looked a bleak, inhospitable place. He shivered and murmured to himself.

"Leah! Why on earth would you want to take a trip into that region?"

"It's thousands of kilometres from Ambrose Suosin's base, brother ben Levi."

Michael took a good look at his informant for the first time. He judged him to be a man in his fifth century. He looked competent and a cut above the bureaucrats who were nervously hovering in the background.

"What do you do around here, brother?"

"I am Luke Belin, brother ben Levi. I'm on the staff of Flight Control."

"Doing what exactly, brother Belin - losing Deputy Administrators in the wilds of Mongolia?"

The man refused to be ruffled, his mouth eased into a grin.

"Reporting suspicious circumstances when they were brought to my attention, brother ben Levi!"

Michael stared at him and then nodded.

"I apologise - I guess I'm losing my objectivity. Stay close by - I might need an expert opinion."

The man nodded and receded a little into the crowd. Michael stared at the map again.

"If one Shuttle can make a landing in those conditions, so can others. I intend to go there - now!"

As he might have anticipated, there was a howl of protest. It went something along the lines that they had already - mislaid - a Deputy Administrator and they couldn't afford to lose her superior as well. He was needed in Salem, the news of Leah's disappearance had already circulated. On top of the assassination of Marcus, it was causing a great deal of unrest. The populace needed a stabilising hand. Michael was forced to reluctantly agree, political pressures were building - and as yet, the reason for Leah's flight and her disappearance had not been answered.

He was in two minds about leaving the Space Terminal. It was the last point of contact, the last place where Leah had been before she set off on her ill-fated flight. He brought himself up short. He was making the assumption that the flight was ill-fated. There was always a possibility that Leah had planned the whole thing - although for what purpose completely escaped him.

It was a flight to nowhere. He looked around for Luke Belin and gestured him to join him.

"Tell me, brother Luke, when did the Shuttle change direction? Did she file a flight plan before she left?"

"A flight plan was filed, but it wasn't followed. The Shuttle adopted this

original course and it was maintained despite the difficult terrain on the flight path. She had to negotiate some high peaks in the ranges. She didn't go round them, the ship lifted over them."

"Is that usual - to set a direct course, I mean?"

Luke fingered his chin.

"I wouldn't call it usual - A pilot usually takes his ship up and then enters on to the predefined flight path when he's cleared the Terminal Air Space. This ship set a course and maintained it from the moment it left the ground - as if - "

"As if it was computer controlled, even during take-off!"

"It isn't unusual to allow the onboard computer control from the very beginning."

"So, she must have fed the destination co-ordinates into the computer before the ship began to move."

"It would seem so, brother Michael."

"Which means that she had a definite idea of where she was heading and what she wanted to do."

Michael turned to the silent group of Secretariat personnel.

"None of you had any idea of what Leah intended to do? She must have discussed the trip with someone."

There was a general shaking of heads. Michael sighed in exasperation.

"I find it hard to believe that a Deputy Administrator can organise a flight without at least one of her secretaries being aware of it. A Shuttle has to be requisitioned - am I to assume she did this herself? The destination host is usually informed of an intended visit by someone of Administrator rank, even if it's a confidential visit. She was going somewhere, someone must have known that she was about to pay them a visit!"

He looked at them hopefully but there was no sign of agreement. He exhaled again and turned back to the map. He glared at the indicated landing site and tried to picture the conditions in his mind's eye. There was a timid cough. He turned hopefully and looked into the eyes of a small man.

"We thought perhaps - er - we thought that Leah might have been making a private visit - for - er - personal reasons."

Michael stared relentlessly.

"What personal reasons? Don't tell me that she had some man tucked away and she was off on what used to be called a dirty weekend!"

The man looked scandalised and shifted his eyes in every direction excepting that of Michael.

"We - er - that is - correspondence with your headquarters indicated that you were - er - away. So we thought that you and she - er - "

Michael's glare didn't waver.

"In the wilds of Mongolia! I can assure you, brother. If I wanted an assignation with Leah Steinbecker, I would choose a more idyllic and romantic destination than a freezing yurt in the middle of an icefield!"

Michael headed towards the door. He hesitated and turned.

"Brother Belin, you'd better come with me - and one of you had better ensure that his superior is informed!"

Requests for holo-links with Ambrose Suosin and Kurt Weber awaited

him when he arrived at the Administration offices. He delayed responded until he obtained the latest reports from the Control Centre. There was nothing fresh in them, other than the failure of air search parties to become airborne in the worsening conditions. The cramp of muscles in his stomach intensified. If the conditions in the area were worsening, it followed that Leah's chances of survival were decreasing. The thought would not leave him that she might already be dead and all they would find would be her frozen corpse in the shell of the Shuttle.

He took each of the holo-links in private - a one on one meeting with each of the Area Stewards. Ambrose was the first. His Mongolian face was set in solemn lines and the familiar grin was gone.

"I want to assure you Michael, that I've put every available man into the parties trying to reach the crash site. The weather has closed in, air traffic is impossible in the region - even flying on computer."

Michael nodded.

"I'm sure you're doing all you can, Ambrose. Tell me, didn't she give any clue where she was going?"

"Not to me, Michael - In any case, we had a visit from her only two days earlier - there was nothing out of the ordinary which would have caused her to come again so soon. I'd like to know what the hell is going on!"

"You and me both, Ambrose - Nothing about this business makes any sense. I'll keep you informed."

He broke the link and established another with Kurt Weber. The big man glowered at him when his image had stabilised.

"I want to know what is happening, brother ben Levi."

Michael stared at him and tried to control his temper.

"When I know what is happening, brother Weber, you will be one of the first to know!"

"First we have Marcus being blasted out of the sky - and now, Leah is grounded in some godforsaken spot and apparently, no one can reach her!"

"I am assured that everything possible is being done to get to her, brother Weber."

"It might have escaped your notice, brother ben Levi, but the Steinbeckers - and Leah in particular - are well respected in this part of the world. A lot of questions are being asked about this sequence of events and our citizens are getting very restless."

"It hadn't escaped my notice, brother Weber - on the other hand, I am quite sure you are more than qualified to ease the minds of the citizens under your control. You can tell them from me that I have no intention of leaving Salem until Leah is found - alive or dead - and until I am satisfied about the circumstances of her trip.

It is also my intention to identify and punish the person or persons responsible for the death of Marcus Steinbecker. You can take that as a firm commitment, brother Weber. I trust that you will make it known to the citizens of the Gazera Province!"

Kurt Weber held his gaze without blinking. It was a test of wills, eventually, it was Weber who lowered his eyes. Michael was quite sure that it wasn't often that the big man yielded ground.

It was already late in the day. The latest estimate from the nearest

party to the site of the grounded Shuttle was that it would take another six hours to trek into the wilderness at the present rate. Conditions were worsening, there was no guarantee that the pace could be maintained. Michael's pessimism increased, he felt so utterly powerless to help the woman he loved. He remembered the words Feodor had murmured only twenty-four hours earlier. It was something on the lines of:

'I thought Administrators were all powerful. If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't allow twenty thousand kilometres to get in the way of the woman I loved. I'd transfer her to Jerusalem and tell her that she was indispensable - I wouldn't stand any arguments!'

Administrators were all powerful! He wouldn't allow twenty thousand kilometres to get in the way of the woman he loved! Well! - These circumstances went to prove that Administrators were not all powerful and distance could indeed be a barrier which could not be bridged so easily. Michael wished he had followed his original impulse to fly out to the Shuttle's location. He would have been nearer and perhaps, he could have done something. All he could do now, was wait and hope - and pray.

The office where Leah usually worked, was silent. It felt like a tomb. He forced himself to dismiss the morbid thought. No one knew her condition - not until they reached the grounded shuttle. He went over the two conversations he had had earlier. The contrast between the two Stewards was extreme. They were both very able men. The way they were handling the adverse conditions in their areas of responsibility had increased his estimation of them to that of admiration.

Leah had nothing but glowing reports of their capabilities. It was the difference in their acceptance of him in his role of Administrator, which gave the greatest concern. There was no doubt, that from the very beginning, both had resented the fact that an outsider had taken over the reins after the death of Marcus. It had been obvious when the Firstling had announced it and it had remained so ever since. The appointment of Leah had gone a long way towards pacifying their ruffled feathers - but now Leah was gone - or at the very least, isolated in the wilds of Mongolia, her condition unknown.

It came back to the whole question of what was happening. Ambrose had asked: 'What the hell is going on?' Kurt Weber had been equally direct: 'A lot of questions are being asked about this sequence of events.'

A sequence of events? Was that what was happening? A hellish sequence of events which involved the murder of one man and now, the disappearance of his wife? Who would seek to gain from the removal of Marcus and Leah? Michael came to the reluctant conclusion that the ones most likely to benefit from the removal of an Administrator and a Deputy Administrator, were those who would be in line to replace them - the answer to his question was the two men with whom he had spoken through the holo-link!

It was an unpalatable conclusion, but it was viable. Both men had enough influence and followers to set in motion the ways and means to cause the suborbiter to be lost. Either of them would have the power to make things happen for the right price. The common factor between Marcus and Leah was that of intervention during a flight. Marcus's suborbiter had exploded. Leah's Shuttle had been tampered with in some way so that computer control could

not be overridden and it had been brought down in an inaccessible spot.

Michael got to his feet, not so much to stretch his legs but to shed some excess energy. The inactivity was driving him insane. His tension threatened to swamp him. He fought it and forced himself to sit down once again. It was one thing to have his suspicions about Ambrose Suosin and Kurt Weber, but quite another to prove them.

The hours dragged by. He gave up trying to force progress reports from his weary staff - there were none. He could only assume that the search parties were still making progress. It would be agonisingly slow and they would have to fight for every step in the gale force winds screaming through the mountain passes.

He remained slumped in the big swivel chair for the next seven hours. He must have dozed for part of the time. It was already getting light when he was wakened by the sound of the door control indicating that he had a visitor. He activated the lock and Luke Belin marched briskly in.

"I thought you ought to know - A search party has established contact with the Shuttle!"

Michael rose slowly.

"And?"

"First reports indicate that it was empty!"

"Empty?"

"That's correct, brother Michael - No passengers - and no crew."

Michael stared at him.

"Dear God! Don't tell me that she was foolish enough to leave the ship and try to walk out!"

Luke shook his head.

"What we have from the site so far is sketchy - they're having a devil of a job with the communication links - but there's no evidence that she left the ship."

He paused and looked out into the grey sky.

"Go on!"

"There are a few peculiarities."

Once again he hesitated. Michael exploded.

"Come to the point, Belin, before I come to the boil!"

Belin nodded.

"OK - Firstly, when the search party reached the ship, the outer doors were closed - Now, you'll appreciate, if Leah had walked away from the Shuttle, she would almost certainly have left them open - "

"Not necessarily! She might have closed them after her."

"True - but there is another peculiarity. For some reason, there was some heavy items of equipment within the ship's cabin - mining equipment - pumps, that sort of thing. It was stored against the exit doors. When the search party reached the ship and opened them from the outside, some of it fell out on their legs - fortunately, no one was injured. It was heavy stuff, not the sort of gear a woman would haul around by choice - and it would have been virtually impossible to close the doors from the outside, with it being positioned in the way it was."

Michael asked slowly.

"So - What conclusions can we draw from this?"

Luke hesitated.

"There is a strong possibility that Leah Steinbecker was never on the ship! We could come to the conclusion that it was empty when it left Salem. I've made a few enquiries during the night. No one actually saw Leah board the shuttle. The ship's onboard computer relayed the flight plan to Control and organised all the departure checks. No one actually spoke to Leah on the ship, either before it left or after."

Michael returned to his seat.

"A few hours ago, someone asked me what the hell is going on - now, I'm asking the same question. You're suggesting that Leah was never on the Shuttle - the implications are that she is still in Salem. The next questions for which we have to have answers is: Was it her decision to disappear? Did she organise this elaborate charade? Or did someone decide and organise it for her?"

"There is another possibility - she may not be in Salem, she might have been shipped out on another Shuttle and the one we've been chasing was a red herring to keep us off her track until the trail grew cold."

Michael stared at him.

"Why would she do that?"

"I didn't suggest she was a willing party, Michael!"

Michael nodded.

"But if she was?"

"She might have got wind of something she couldn't handle in any other way."

Michael shook his head.

"There would have been some hint of it - her staff know nothing."

"They say they know nothing!"

He returned Michael's steady stare without blinking.

"You are suggesting a conspiracy - in which her personal staff are involved - damn it, Luke! Most of these people are her close relatives within the Clan-family. Steinbeckers to the core! While we're on that subject - she left her two children here. I would hardly expect her to organise her own disappearance and abandon them!"

"All the more reason to look for a conspiracy, brother Michael. Not every family member loves another - most of mine hate me!"

He laughed but it didn't sound like humour.

"Perhaps, you ought to start looking closer to home!"