

The thoughts were still with him during his flight to Jerusalem along the length of the old Great Sea. His parting with Joshua and Miriam had been like that of parting from family. They had appeared genuinely sorry to see him go and this was coupled with his own reluctance to leave. He would have liked to have stayed longer. There was still a great deal for him to explore and there was a great deal he felt he could have uncovered given more time. The conversation with Joshua on the previous evening, had given him a sleepless night, it had opened up all sorts of possibilities.

Coupled with his desire to stay, was also the thought that by leaving, he was confronted with the necessity to report to Asher and Joel. The meeting with Asher promised to be difficult. Leah would have arrived in Jerusalem on the previous day and already, Asher would be well acquainted with what had happened between her and Joshua. Marcus mentally steeled himself to be ready to accept some recriminations. Realistically, he acknowledged that it was what he deserved for his duplicity in arranging Leah's journey. Joel could also be counted on to have plenty to say on the subject. Marcus sighed aloud and his seat companion turned with an enquiring glance - Marcus feigned sleep.

He tried to remember what he knew about the Administrator of the Asia Heartland. It was strange that such a close neighbour to Joel's responsibility in East Asia, should be so anonymous. He thought back to the last meeting in Jerusalem. He had been present, of course, but Marcus had paid him little attention. He vaguely remembered a rather nondescript, well beyond his

middle years, who had had little to say, but had been identifiable as one of the four who supported Joshua in his arguments. Marcus tried to focus him more clearly, but that was about the limit of the impact the man had made on him.

According to Joshua, Alexei Kharkov controlled the geographical area which Leah had nominated as being the power base of Gog. He could be described as a Prince of Resh, Meshech and Tubal. If so, he was a most unlikely looking candidate to be a warrior who would sweep out of the north with a mighty army at his heels! Marcus asked himself: How did he think Gog would look? He would not be so easily identifiable in their time.

They crossed the boot of Italy, still identifiable despite the draining of the Great Sea. The rather slender shape of the old coastline of Calabria, now looked a little like the profile of a club foot - and of course, the old island of Sicily was now joined to the mainland. Over his left shoulder, the smouldering ember of Stromboli still ejected smoke into the clear sky and far beyond, a smudge on the skyline announced that Vesuvius was still active. On the other side of the shuttle, Etna in Sicily still muttered below the surface. Some scientists predicted that they would soon erupt again - they had been quiescent for a thousand years. It was like a portent for the future.

Ahead, beyond the shores of the Eastern Basin, was the ancient landmass of Greece. He glanced out into the haze of the mountains to the left of the ship, to the north, in the direction from which Gog and his Horde was to come. He shuddered perceptibly and his neighbour gave him another cautious glance. The shuttle veered south and on to the long flight path which would bring them to disembarkation at the Salt Sea. Below the ship were the peaks of what had once been the islands of the Aegean, surrounded by drained polders and deep lakes. Ahead, were the lands of Gomer and Tubal

and Beth-togarmah, who would enter into a confederacy with Gog.

Marcus had a sense of the inevitable. In a few short years, the quiet lands would become a battle ground and the serenity of the Kingdom of Peace would become the cherished memory of a beleaguered people. They crossed the old coast of the Great Sea and veered southward to negotiate the mountains of Judaea. The blind eye of the dry Salt Sea stared up at them and then the mountains of Moab and Edom formed a frame into which the shuttle slipped before touching down.

Michael ben Levi was waiting for him when he entered the reception area. The young man was unsmiling, courteous, but distant. Marcus accepted it as an augury of the reception he would receive from Asher. He decided to take the initiative.

"I hope Leah arrived safely?"

Michael ushered his passenger into a two seater Pod and took his seat before replying.

"Leah has arrived safely."

Marcus eyed the lean, tense jawbone of the man in the adjacent seat.

He pushed tolerance to the limit.

"I hope she has been received with a little compassion, she had a trying time in Iberia."

"Asher ben Jacobi can always be relied upon to be compassionate - even when confronted with arrant foolishness!"

Marcus nodded calmly.

"I was sure that he could be relied upon not to act impetuously."

Michael shot him a glance and then stared ahead. Marcus continued relentlessly.

"Negotiations with Joshua Aristides are at a delicate stage. It would be

a pity to jeopardise them on a purely private matter between a man and a woman!"

"Perhaps, you had better tell Asher that, Marcus Steinbecker."

"Of that you can be fully assured, Michael ben Levi!"

The rest of the journey to Asher's villa was undertaken in silence. It was a relief to both men when they could disembark.

"Thank you for meeting me, Michael."

The young man bowed stiffly and walked away. Marcus watched him exit the yard and shrugged. There was nothing he could do in the short term to win back his approval. He turned and followed a house servant who led him to Asher's library. It was empty. Marcus remembered the evening when Leah had shown him a map of the lands over which he had recently flown. He would have liked to have activated the computer to display the images again, but he had no idea of the commands required. He turned, Asher had entered behind him and was looking at him critically.

"I must apologise for presenting myself to you at such short notice. I thought it necessary to make a report to you, before returning to Salem."

Asher nodded curtly.

"I will be interested in your report of your discussions with the Administrator Aristides."

"I was able to spend a great deal of time with him."

"So I have been led to understand."

Marcus persevered.

"As a result of our discussions, he has come to an agreement which might interest you."

"I thought we had agreed that I was interested in your report!"

Marcus drew breath slowly.

"My report contains a message from a Kingly-Priest to you and to Father Joel - perhaps, you would prefer that I put it in writing?"

Asher stared at him.

"That, of course, is your option, Marcus Steinbecker!"

Marcus walked slowly to the door and turned.

"I would strongly advise you against precipitous action in the matter of Leah and Joshua Aristides. All that you and Father Joel have been trying to accomplish, would be jeopardised by a display of wrath - righteous or otherwise! I will now continue my journey to Salem. Please extend my greetings to Leah."

He walked slowly out of the room and Asher did nothing to stop him.

His baggage was still in the hall, he instructed a house servant to load it on to a Pod and took the controls himself, for the journey back to the Salt Sea terminal. He asked himself if his reception was just a slight foretaste of what was soon to come.

The suborbiter rose from the pad at the Salt Sea and the land of Judah shrank into anonymity behind it. The sky darkened into a deep purple and then black, as they left the atmosphere behind, starting the long arc which would bring them eventually, to the extremity of the landmass of Asia. Marcus looked at the crystal clear sharpness of the stars, through the thick lens of the window. A few centimetres of material separated him from nothingness.

There was no sensation of movement, now that the earth was left behind them and the ship was almost at the end of its upward arc. There would come a moment when motion would stop, there would be the sensation of weightlessness, before they began the gradual glide back to the earth and their destination.

Marcus smiled to himself, remembering how Father Joel professed

dislike for the sensation of weightlessness. His smile faded, when he wondered if he would receive the same sort of reception from the old man. The story of Leah Steinbecker and Joshua Aristides, would certainly have come to the old man's ears. He looked around the cabin of the suborbiter. There were few passengers and he recognised no one. It promised to be a boring trip. He was reluctant to return to thoughts of the stewardship of the Asian Heartland and his suspicions. He was aware that the subject would be thrashed mercilessly, when Joel got to hear his report.

The subject of a report turned his thoughts back to Asher. The man's reaction was a little puzzling. To the best of his knowledge, Asher was not a blood relative of Leah. He might be very fond of her and value her as his assistant, but the reaction to the treatment she had received from Joshua Aristides, had been extreme. If anyone wanted to become annoyed about the situation, it would be Joel, who was, after all, a kind of patriarch of the Clan Steinbecker.

The shuttle had glided back to the fringe of the atmosphere. They were still very high, he looked down at the land. Below them, the formidable outline of the Hindu Kush and the Tien Shan ranges stretched, like a corrugation against the smoother surrounding terrain. He reminded himself that though it looked smooth, it was also rugged and mountainous and part of the vast hinterland of the Heartland - the responsibility of Alexei Kharkov. He tried to subdue the mental addendum - the potential Gog!

The scene became unreal, shimmering. It was the effect of re-entry and the heat being generated against the outer skin of the ship. It was a fact of physics which had not been altered in the thousand plus years since man had started to reenter the Earth's atmosphere - friction still caused the outer skin temperature to rise to thousands of degrees.

By the time the shimmering had ceased, they were much lower and crossing the vast yellow corn sea of what had once been the Gobi Desert. To the south, were the mountainous ranges of China. They had already crossed from the responsibility of Alexei Kharkov, into that controlled by Father Joel - the East Asia area.

Marcus thought back on the history of the region. It was now over fifteen hundred years since a group being persecuted for their religious beliefs, fled from the turmoil of Europe to seek a home in what they had been told was a paradise. Siberia was very quick to provide the disillusionment - it was to be no paradise! A whole history had been written about the privations of the refugees and the decades of wandering which had preceded their crossing the mountain ranges to their ultimate destination.

Behind them, other peoples had followed, creating a pressure. They were also intent on gaining access to the open lands they had found. These were a people of a totally different cultural and ethnic background, who filled the great plains on the hinterland side of the protective mountains. The migrants from Europe kept a watchful and uneasy eye on their progress and at the same time, fashioned their little enclave into the land of tolerance they had been seeking.

The following peoples were hunter/gatherers used to the plains, they had no taste to cross the difficult mountain ranges. They left the small group of European migrants alone and gradually, a coexistence evolved which provided a framework into which could be implanted the activity of the Apostles. There had not been dramatic growth but a little flock had developed.

Marcus returned from his reverie. They were crossing the jagged peaks of the barrier range. How different the situation had become during the

Kingdom. The descendants of the European refugees, had recrossed the ranges and had become the administrators of the lands their ancestors had left behind. The two peoples, who had been ethnically and culturally different, had become as one, common citizens of the Kingdom.

The coastline north of Salem was lined with tall buildings. Even though he had been away for only a few days, he had the feeling the city had grown bigger. It was his imagination, of course, but there could be no doubt that Salem was increasing in size together with all the other cities. The population of the Kingdom was becoming huge, despite the slowing down of the life cycle. It was a fact of life that when people lived in peace and had enough to satisfy their needs, they saw no need to restrict the size of their families.

There was a slight jolt as the suborbiter touched down. Marcus leaned back in his seat and relaxed. He had the feeling that this would be the last opportunity to take his ease that he could enjoy in the face of what he expected to happen. Reluctantly, he rose from his seat and made his exit from the cabin. Joel was waiting impatiently.

"As usual, Marcus - always tardy in leaving the ship! Sometimes, I wonder what is the attraction!"

Marcus smiled, it was almost a relief to find Father Joel in his usual acerbic mood.

"I fell in love with one of the crew members."

Joel grunted.

"I hope you had more success than with Leah!"

Marcus's smile faded, the subject was not going to be avoided. Joel eyed him sharply.

"I understand you paid Asher a flying visit."

"I thought I owed him the courtesy."

Joel grunted again.

"You have more courage than sense. I'd have avoided him like the plague! - At least, until he'd had the chance to cool down! I hear you gave him a piece of unsolicited advice."

"I suggested he treated the matter of Leah with discretion."

"Which would have had the same effect as suggesting he stoked up the fire and sat in it!"

"Negotiations with Joshua Aristides are at a delicate stage, Father Joel."

"So you keep telling everyone."

"I do - but no one seems interested in asking why!"

"So - tell me! What are you waiting for - the end of the millennium!"

Marcus looked around, they were attracting attention.

"No! Somewhere private."

Joel took his arm and marched towards a Pod. He gestured to the passenger seat and marched around to the other side.

"Wouldn't you prefer me to drive?"

"You make me nervous when you drive, Marcus."

Marcus rolled his eyes and said nothing. Sometimes it was better to go where the wind blew.

Joel punched in a co-ordinate and Marcus felt a wave of relief - at least, the computer would do the driving - always provided that Joel had entered the correct data. The Pod crossed the area of the old city and took the road which connected it to the ancient Pringle's Head. Joel was silent and Marcus was content to let it stay that way. The Pod eased off the main thoroughfare and came to a halt before the wall which sealed off the entrance to the headland.

"It's a nice day, I fancy a walk."

Marcus nodded, it figured. He followed Joel through the entrance to the reserve and noticed the closure of the gate after them - they were to be given privacy. He watched Joel pace up the rise to the crest of the headland. The breeze tugged at his tunic and dragged it against his scrawny frame. Marcus felt a certain awe, it was incredible that Joel still had so much energy, the man was in his nine hundred and eighty-sixth year!

After a quarter hour, they came to the point of the headland. Joel scrambled on to a rock ledge at the very brink of the cliff edge and gestured Marcus to join him. The younger man shuddered, averted his eyes and tried to ignore the dizzy drop to the pounding surf. Joel stared at him with a slight smile.

"You still don't like heights, Marcus?"

"You know that well enough."

"I do - that's why I bring you here!"

"I wouldn't be sure, but that probably makes you a sadist!"

"My word! We are being complimentary this day! You must have something of tantalising importance to discuss."

Marcus nodded and stared out over the ocean, it relieved his attention from the surging breakers.

"Joshua Aristides agrees to store food for the time after the millennium, but refuses to store materials for weapons."

Joel was silent for a moment.

"Well! Go on, that isn't the end of the story. Really Marcus, getting sense out of you is like pulling teeth!"

"Joshua is ready to comply with a direction given by a Kingly-Priest."

"Ah! Now we get to it. Asher suggested as much."

Marcus stared at him.

"So - Asher has been talking to you?"

"What more do you expect? You wave the information under his nose, about a message from a Kingly-Priest and then flounce out of the room like a distraught ballet dancer!"

Marcus got to his feet, turned and faced the old man.

"Perhaps I should get you to ask Joshua Aristides about the message."

Joel eyed him calmly.

"Marcus, in your position, I would be very careful. It looks as if you have forgotten your fear of falling. Beware that you don't lose your balance!"

Marcus stared into the old man's eyes. The warning was implicit and it didn't relate to physical danger. He sat down carefully.

"You are right, Father Joel. I apologise. I had no right to threaten to withhold the message - especially when I was told to tell both you and Asher."

He carefully told the story of his encounter with the Firstling. Joel listened without interruption. Marcus hesitated and then went on to tell him about Joshua's commitment. Joel nodded.

"So, you called up the biblical reference of Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream and you both came to the conclusion that you were being told to store food against the time of famine?"

"It seemed the appropriate conclusion."

Joel sat silently for a moment.

"I am inclined to agree. Let us consider for a moment the conditions which might apply after the release of Satan. The population of the earth is greater now than at any time in human history. The release of Satan will be accompanied by physical changes. I share the opinion that the climate might well undergo a change. If so, the frequency of the harvests might diminish -

so might the quality. If you remember the passages which follow Pharaoh's dream, you will find that Joseph was put in charge of accumulating corn during the time of plenty and that when the time of famine came, there was food for all in Egypt - and, other peoples came to Egypt to beg for relief from hunger. It was in this way that Joseph was reunited with his brothers and then with his father, Jacob.

I anticipate a time when other nations will come to where the storage places will be, during the time of scarcity which will follow Satan's release. I agree with Joshua and with you, Marcus. We must reserve a portion of the current harvests and build storehouses. Perhaps, it is also significant that the period following Gog's defeat is also quoted in scripture as being seven years - they promise to be seven lean years. There is nothing more devastating to good farmland than having an army trample all over it!"

Marcus stared out over the ocean and said nothing. Joel went on.

"It's good to see that you've made an impression on Joshua Aristides, I think it will prove to be important in the coming years. You have done well, Marcus - better than I could have expected."

It was high praise indeed, Joel was not noted for being lavish in his applause. Marcus was loathe to prick the bubble.

"I have something else to tell you, Father Joel."

He took his time and related the entire episode of his visit to Iberia.

Joel listened intently and pursed his lips when it came to the subject of Leah.

He leaned forward when Marcus began to explain the tangle of relationships he had uncovered. The story came to an end and Marcus waited.

"I think you might be right about the name Kharkov, I seem to remember my father speaking of it - and the name Alexei - but these events took place in the earliest days, Marcus - they surely have no significance

now, except to remind us that there is no such thing as a coincidence. I am more interested in the present Alexei Kharkov, my fellow Administrator. There was once a saying: 'He who holds the heartland controls the world'. It is also significant that the area north of the old Black Sea appears to be a kind of nomans-land, an area where control is perhaps adequate, but loose. Alexei Kharkov is quite content to allow capable lieutenants to do the work - which is as it should be, up to a point, but that can lead to a problem situation - especially when Satan is let loose to work his mischief!"