

Pik Sedova pushed his face down into the collar of his fur jacket and tugged its hood down over his eyes. He stared out over the ice bound Gulf of Riga towards the hidden menace from the north. Already in the previous days, his men had had to fight off the onslaught of wave after desperate wave of starving men. The slaughter had been considerable on both sides. He turned his head and spat into a snow drift and narrowed his eyes against the blizzard. He hoped the sentries he had posted had keen senses. The Scandians could now be considered experts in dealing with the atrocious conditions. His men were not so expert. A keen pair of eyes and acute ears might spell the difference between survival and annihilation.

On the whole, he was satisfied with the progress his band of raw recruits was making. Georgi Malenski had given him the task of welding together a fighting force - although he might not yet be aware of it. Sedova grinned mirthlessly, showing yellow teeth. Georgi was a peculiar mixture of administrative and military genius and an almost childlike naiveté. Pik Sedova was quite content for the moment, to accept him as his leader. Georgi commanded a type of loyalty which was rare. Those whom he had led down from the delta of the Lena and those who had joined them along the way, held him in a kind of awe - almost reverence. It was a sentiment Pik Sedova couldn't fight against, but he could turn it to his own advantage.

The man who was whispered to be Gog, had entrusted the regulation of weapons into his keeping. He had also instructed him to train likely recruits so that they could be handled efficiently. It was an opportunity too good to be true for the man from Novaja Zemla and one which he had accepted with both hands. He had gone much further than his original brief, he had welded together a respectable army - one which Georgi Malenski appeared not to know existed.

On the surface, the decision to strike out across the open plains of northern Russia had been that of Georgi Malenski. In reality, Sedova had planted the suggestion in his casual way and left it with his venerated leader to gestate upon. Now, the broad thrust of their progress into Europe was established. A corridor one hundred kilometres across, had been established from the Urals to the Gulf of Riga and from each flank of that corridor, the refugees from Siberia were spreading out to the north and to the south.

In the direction he was facing, were the now frozen polders of the Gulf of Bothnia and if he shifted his eyes westward, the bleak expanse of the snow driven bed of the ancient Baltic Sea stretched along the north European plain to the flatlands bordering the Atlantic. Pik Sedova was well satisfied with his progress, but he was not a man to dwell on it. He knew how quickly his success could be reversed. He debated whether now was the time to carry the onslaught to the Scandians, to turn what had previously been a defensive stance into one where he could drive back the northern invaders into the frozen wastes from which they had come. Reluctantly, he decided against it. His supply lines were too precarious, at any time, along that hundred kilometre wide corridor, there could be an onslaught from a hitherto

unsuspected band of northern invaders. Now, was not the time to carry the war into their territory.

He turned about and stared down towards the south, it was a softer target but he knew he would have to tread carefully. Georgi Malenski had entered into some sort of truce with the Barenkovs and Chernienko - and behind them stood Michael ben Levi. Sedova spat again, it was as much a reflection of his contempt, as indicative of the condition of his sinuses.

He returned to his shelter, it could hardly be described as a tent. It was no more than a stretch of hides sown roughly together and propped on fallen branches, which was braced against the direction of the prevailing wind. It offered little comfort and little privacy. It didn't worry him. Over the previous three years, he had grown used to living in extreme conditions. Until he had been driven out of his remote home country, he had sustained himself by hunting the small animals which had proliferated during the time of the Kingdom of Peace. He was not a man of sentiment, he was hungry and they were a source of food, it was the only consideration.

The few people who shared the wilderness of the New Land - Novaja Zemla, had given him the name he now used. Pik Sedova was the highest point on the island and especially since the climatic change, it was where he had ranged in search of food, until it had become a bleak place. It was therefore fitting that he had been named after it - he had also become a bleak and hostile individual, who had discarded the softer ways of the thousand years of comfort.

He took the bowl of thin gruel from the woman who shared his shelter and gave her no thanks. He wondered why he bothered to keep her near him. Their relationship was totally different to that which was shared between Georgi Malenski and Elena. Sedova knew Georgi's mate despised him, he also knew that she could see behind the facade of loyalty he professed to have for her husband. He glared into the gruel and promised himself that the time would come when she would wear a different expression on her pretty face!

There was a rush of feet close to the opening of the shelter. Sedova rose with his hand on his knife - it was one of his own men, but the approach showed that they were still novices. The man blurted out his message.

"The Scandians are attacking."

Sedova drew his knife free of its sheath and rose without a word and followed the messenger.

Two thousand kilometres to the east, Georgi Malenski prepared to follow the corridor to the west. The evidence of the progress being made to settle the great mob of refugees, was all around him. For the first time, the numbers within the main camp were depleting. There was a constant traffic of Cargo Transporters and Pods moving thousands of men, women and children to points along the corridor Pik Sedova had established. Georgi watched them as they boarded the ships, the look of hope had returned.

There still remained the matter of logistics - the feeding and housing of so many with the resources available. The north Russian plain was vast, but he asked himself if it was big enough to take the numbers pouring in and would the climatic conditions be clement enough to feed them in the future? His thoughts turned to the south. Feodor Chernienko stood across his path,

flanked by the Barenkov cousins and behind them was Michael ben Levi. They collectively guarded more than enough resources for his displaced people.

His meeting with Michael and Feodor had only been a few days earlier, but already its clarity was fading in his mind. He found himself disputing that he had made some sort of commitment not to cross into their territory. He was sure nothing had been verbally agreed, although there might have been an implication that he would not swamp them with a flood of hungry men, women and children.

Elena watched him by the flickering light of the single flame which floated on a pool of dirty oil in a dish. The flame guttered and flickered with the impurity and sent a wisp of acrid smoke into the top of the thin structure. The shadows danced on his face and made it eerily mobile, so that at times, he looked as if he was grinning at some silent joke, or at others, that he was glaring ferociously into the dirt floor. These were the times when she felt suddenly afraid. It was as if the real person within Georgi Malenski was showing his face and the man she had loved and married and to whom she had born a son, was now someone totally different.

As she prepared the thin soup which was their monotonous, repetitive meal each evening, she had to acknowledge that the man she had once known had gone. This was someone different. She almost dropped the wooden spoon as he suddenly spoke.

"Tomorrow, we move forward, be sure to have everything ready early."

She ventured a question, half expecting not to be answered.

"Do we travel far, Georgi?"

He looked up at her and she was surprised to see that his expression were almost gentle.

"No more walking for us, Elena - tomorrow we go by Pod. We go to Gorki, it's on the Volga - it's also about half way to where Pik Sedova has advanced."

She stiffened when the man's name was mentioned. She bit her tongue, it wasn't her place to question the trust Georgi was placing in that man, but she didn't trust him. She had seen behind his eyes, she knew he was waiting for something - for a moment when he would make his move - and she also knew that somehow, in those hidden thoughts, she was involved. The thought made her flesh crawl. Georgi continued without noticing the reaction.

"I have to catch up with him and find out what the situation really is on the Baltic coast. I don't get a lot of sense out of those who bring back the transporters."

"Perhaps, it is a good thing to go and see for yourself, Georgi."

He stared at her.

"I know you don't like him, Elena. I don't know why you've taken such a dislike. We've met rough and crude characters before this and you've accepted them for what they are. I find your sudden dislike of Pik Sedova hard to understand."

"I've accepted him for what he is, Georgi - He is an opportunist and I don't trust him - neither should you!"

It was the first time she had spoken her mind in months. He stared at

her for a long moment.

"Perhaps I don't trust him, Elena - but I need him to make the push into Europe - I need his skills to combat the Scandians."

"Tell me, Georgi - Who are these Scandians? Are they a race from another planet, or are they as hungry and dispossessed as ourselves? Do we have the sole right to the storehouses? What gives us the right to fight them and to butcher them in the way that Sedova is doing?"

"We have no evidence of that, Elena. Sedova is clearing the way for us - that's all."

"You make him sound like a saint! Ask the women of the men who come back from the Baltic! You may not be getting any answers to your questions, but they tell their wives about your friend's methods!"

His face was grim.

"I said I was going to see for myself, Elena - now let's have an end to this tirade!"

She dared to say one more thing and knew she was pushing his tolerance to the limit.

"I want to say one more thing, Georgi - there is such a thing as guilt by association. If you accept and condone what he's doing, it makes you his accomplice!"

"I said enough! Give me my food."

They lay like strangers throughout that night, with their child between them. She knew he was awake and thinking, sometimes she wondered how he had the energy to get through the days, he slept so little. Eventually, she dozed off, but she was bone weary when she woke. Georgi's movement had been careful, but she was immediately alert. She watched him strip off the tattered tunic and wash in icy water. The flesh had melted from his body, he was little more than skin and bone - added to that was a driving force which was sometimes terrifying. She wanted to reach out and touch him but she held back her hand, she no longer dared to offer that simple act of comfort.

Georgi was soon surrounded by his inner circle of advisers, effectively, she was thrust into the background. She could claim very little of the life of this man, for most of the time she was an appendage. She helped Piotr to dress and then prepared for the dismantling of their shelter and was a little puzzled that there were no men loitering around waiting for her to get out of the way so that it could be done. Georgi looked in her direction.

"Leave everything here, someone else can use it. In Gorki, you will have somewhere else to live."

A little later, she led her son to the Pod, she looked back on the tattered tent and was surprised to feel a pang of regret. It was hardly holding together, but it had endured the terrible journey through the frozen Siberian wilderness and had been their only shelter and symbol of their home during those days of starvation. It had been the focal point of the mystical authority Georgi had held over his followers.

Leaving it seemed an omen that things would never again be the same. An indefinable feeling of terror made her stop short so that Piotr looked up at her in wonderment. She knew that from this time forward, there was going to be a transformation, not only in her standard of life, but in the nature and substance of her husband. Saying goodbye to the shelter, was

like saying goodbye to Georgi Malenski.

The journey to Gorki was made in isolation. Georgi was immersed in conversations with his advisors. She could hear very little, but there seemed a great deal of disagreement. She hoped the subject was Pik Sedova and that someone would be able to talk some sense into her husband's stubborn head. Her feeling of distrust had grown since the conversation of the previous evening. The old expression seemed to apply in their relationship: 'He who sups with the devil should use a long spoon'. Georgi had said that he didn't trust him but that he needed him. Elena couldn't help wondering what the cost would be when Pik Sedova decided to submit his account for services rendered.

Elena and Piotr were entrusted into the care of people she didn't know, as soon as they reached Gorki. It was a substantial city. She found herself gaping at the buildings around her, as they rode into the city from the Terminal. The parting from Georgi had been almost perfunctory. It was nothing new, it was as if Georgi didn't dare to show any real emotion in case it would be construed as a sign of weakness before his devoted band of followers.

If the sights and sounds of the big city had impressed her during the transit from the Terminal, the structure into which they were led, made her stop in her tracks.

"There must be some mistake."

"Not so, sister Malenski."

One of the unknowns responded.

"These are the quarters considered appropriate for our leader and his family!"

She made one more attempt at protest.

"Did my husband agree to this?"

"His advisors considered it appropriate, your husband was not troubled with the details - in view of the other demands on his time."

The small party of officials bowed and scraped out of her presence and she was left to contemplate the suite of rooms into which she had been deposited. Piotr was already running from one to the other, excitedly exploring the new dimensions. Elena shook her head in vehement disbelief. Georgi would never agree to it! She accepted the fact that nothing could be done until he returned and that there could be no changes in the short term.

Georgi had always insisted that his family should be treated no differently than those who camped around them. He had never set himself up as a leader with special privileges. The new arrangements contravened every sentiment he had ever expressed on the subject. She wandered around and touched fittings and appointments in a kind of wonderment. How quickly one forgot the luxuries of life. The journey from their home on the Lena, had taken no more than a few weeks, but in that time, the everyday privations had driven out thoughts of turning a tap for running water, or waving the hand across a control panel to illuminate a room or open a storage space.

These simple things were now a source of wonderment to her. The furnishings, chairs, recliners, beds - were soft to the touch. They moulded to the body and provided comfort. She found herself sitting on the end of a large bed and touching the softness, hardly aware of the tears streaming down her

face and the look of wonderment on the face of her son, who stood watching her from the doorway.

Georgi Malenski had watched his wife and son being escorted from the Pod. He too, had been conscious of the restraint between them when they had parted. There was no doubt that Elena had drawn back from him. During the hours of the previous night and after the sharp discussion they had had on the subject of Pik Sedova, he had realised how silent she had become during the previous weeks. Her function as wife and mother had almost been mechanical, as if she considered herself part of the equipment provided for his use.

The spark of love which had been so bright between them, and which had fanned into passion briefly after his conference with Grigor Suskov, had once again receded. He knew that he was a great deal to blame, together with the desperate privations they had endured, but the final withdrawal had seemed to coincide with the advent of Pik Sedova into their lives. Elena had put up a great barrier and Georgi had neither the time or the energy to tear it down.

The Pod took him westward over the flat lands of the northern Russian plain. It had been on this territory, that the conquerors of old had faltered on their drives to the east. Armies from the west had ventured there and had been annihilated by the fierce winter conditions and extended supply lines which were constantly harried by their enemies. Now, his army was sweeping in the opposite direction and it was his task to ensure that their supply lines were kept open and that they did not fail.

He was almost in shock when he realised that for the first time he was beginning to see Pik Sedova and his men as an army of conquest. There had been a subtle change in his thoughts over the previous days - his refugees, his hungry and starving millions, had now become an armed force foraging for supplies as they pressed into new lands. He remembered Elena's words: 'Tell me, Georgi - Who are these Scandians? Are they a race from another planet, or are they as hungry and dispossessed as ourselves? Do we have the sole right to the storehouses? What gives us the right to fight them and to butcher them in the way that Sedova is doing?'

He remembered his answer: 'We have no evidence of that, Elena. Sedova is clearing the way for us - that's all.' It had been an evasion, perhaps he was trying to make an unlikely saint out of Pik Sedova. Another question came unbidden, a question which was always with him. In view of the changes he was allowing in the status of his refugees, was he also changing in some ungovernable way into the biblical monster, Gog? Was the establishment of an army under Pik Sedova another step on the path which would transform Georgi Malenski and bring him to the Plain of Esdraelon to face Michael?

Did he have a choice in the matter? Had the hooks already been placed in his jaws long ago, which were designed to turn him about and lead him from out of his northern lands against the people living in unfenced cities? By the time he reached the windswept and snow clad terrain close to the Baltic, his mood was sombre to the point of desolation. How could he fight against something which was preordained? All he could do was bow to the inevitable.

Pik Sedova waited for his leader at the side of the Pad which had been constructed to handle the inflow of new material for his expanding force. For the most part, they were new recruits who saw conflict as somehow exciting and glamorous. It didn't take long before they were disillusioned and by that time, it was too late to turn back or change their mind. No one was allowed to make a return trip to the more secure areas in the east. The new arrival was different, he would be one of the few to make the return journey. Pik Sedova knew that his coming would be a morale booster for his discouraged force. The appearance of their mystical leader in their midst could be manipulated to stir them into feats of courage they could not imagine.

Georgi Malenski descended slowly down the ramp. Pik Sedova waited patiently, he approved of the caution, the impact of the leader's arrival would be considerably diminished if he slipped and upended on his butt. He stepped forward and clasped his hand in greeting.

"Welcome, brother Georgi."

Malenski nodded, the bitter thoughts that had accompanied him for the last thousand kilometres would not go away. He looked around at the almost zero visibility.

"It seems we can't get free of these blizzards, brother Sedova."

The response was a harsh noise which could have been construed as a laugh. The words flowed easily.

"If we want to be free of blizzards, we have to go south, brother Georgi."

It was an old theme put in a different disguise. Pik Sedova had made no secret of his contempt with the arrangements struck with the Barenkovs and Feodor Chernienko.

"I hear that you're having trouble with the Scandians."

Again, there was the derisive noise.

"Trouble! Trouble from the Scandians? They couldn't even trouble their own grandmothers!"

Georgi eyed him sharply.

"I've met some of the wounded! It seems our men are more easily handled than their grandmothers!"

Pik Sedova grinned and nodded slowly.

"We've got the measure of them - it won't be long before we put an end to the problem!"