

Within ten days, the guests had started to gather in Jerusalem for the Sanctification of the Union between Michael ben Levi and Leah Steinbecker. A steady stream of arrivals flowed into the Salt Sea Terminal and Luke Belin had been kept busy receiving them on behalf of Michael and his bride. Michael himself was reluctant to leave his Secretariat, even for the few hours each of the greetings would have taken. He monitored every report of the movements of what he stubbornly still referred to as 'the Malenski group' and tried to second guess what they would do next.

One of the first guests to arrive had been Anatole Barenkov - the alacrity with which he had accepted the invitation had been rather a surprise, but his early arrival had all the signs of an escape from the scrutiny of Malenski's overseer. It was from Anatole that Michael learned for sure, that Georgi had been with the army which had been transported down the length of the Adriatic polders and along the southern Italian coastline to the western tip of Sicily. It followed therefore, that the abrupt turn around of the army and its transportation back to the entrance to the Adriatic trough, had been initiated by Malenski and not Sedova. Without any additional information, it could only be supposition, but it gave a hint of some conflict between the two leaders.

Alexander Barenkov and Feodor Chernienko had been the next to arrive, two days later. Feodor had brought unexpected guests - Elena Malenski and Piotr. He had explained to the startled Luke Belin that in his absence, he could hardly leave her unprotected at his Kharkov headquarters. He didn't spell out the pressing need for protection which had necessitated the heavily pregnant woman to make such a tiring journey.

The last to arrive was Joshua Aristides, his late arrival had been explained as being his natural anxiety to ensure that whoever made the decisions within the Malenski force, did not change their mind about discretion being better than foolhardy valour. He looked tired and worn when he arrived and was immediately ushered into Michael's office. They embraced silently and then Michael stepped back and eyed him critically.

"You look exhausted, Joshua."

"I have been keeping an eye on the wanderings of Gog's Horde - and that doesn't allow for much sleep. It isn't the only reason though - Maman is far from well. I was quite reluctant to leave her, even for so important an occasion as yours and Leah's wedding - but she insisted, and you are well aware that Maman always gets her way!"

"Leah and I appreciate you being here, Joshua - we were both hoping your mother could make the journey."

Joshua shook his head.

"Unfortunately, that would not have been wise."

Michael gestured to a chair and they both sat facing each other. Joshua smiled gently.

"Do I begin to see signs of the nervous bridegroom - or is there some other reason for your restlessness?"

"We will call it that, Joshua. Latest reports show signs of activity from the Malenski group."

"Why do you persist in calling them that, my friend? We are dealing with Gog and his Horde - it must be obvious to you by now. Georgi Malenski is leading his people in the pattern foretold in scriptures. I think we can no longer doubt that we are dealing with those events."

Michael didn't answer immediately, then:

"I suppose you are right - but tell me - which of the two is Gog - Georgi Malenski, or Pik Sedova?"

Joshua shrugged slightly.

"Does it matter? Gog's Horde is Gog's Horde and Gog leads it. I predict that his identity will become plain before very long."

Michael murmured.

"I would give a great deal to know how things stand between Georgi and his general."

"Once again, I ask you: Is that really important? The resolution is out of your hands and out of mine. No one can affect the outcome of that relationship."

Michael nodded.

"You have been informed that Feodor has brought Elena with him - and Piotr?"

Joshua nodded.

"Luke told me - I must say that I was immediately apprehensive. The implications of having Georgi's wife and son under your roof are much the same as if you had thrown down a gauntlet in challenge - but once again, I must say that it must be pre-ordained and the outcome is known."

Michael eyed him quickly.

"You have become very fatalistic, Joshua. As I remember, you were once a notorious sceptic on the subject of the inflexibility of God's promises."

"Perhaps we are all called upon to become fatalists, Michael. After all, current events have shown us that nothing can alter what has to take place. Gog will come with his Horde. You must stand up for your people. Armageddon will occur - the aftermath is pre-ordained. Nothing is negotiable - as you say, God's will is inflexible!"

"Are you trying to tell me that coming events should not concern us - we should just allow Gog to do as he must?"

"Gog must do what he is inspired to do - and we must do what we are inspired to do - we all realise that Gog will take certain initiatives and that we will be activated to try to do something to stop him. If you like, our reaction and defiance will become the spur which will lead him to the Plain of Esdraelon.

I point to our recent little skirmish as an example - the King of the West had to send his ships - there was no alternative - and Gog had to turn about and suffer a rebuff. His attention has been pointed elsewhere."

Michael nodded.

"The latest reports I have received indicate that he has indeed turned his attention elsewhere - namely, the Balkan peninsula. It would appear to be his next target."

"Did you expect otherwise? To all intents and purposes, Georgi has

practically occupied Anatole's stewardship. It is an indisputable fact that his refugees are flowing into Feodor's area. The Balkans are the next logical step. I know I do not have to remind you of what comes after the rebuff. Quote:

*'He will turn and vent his fury against the Holy Covenant; on his way back he will take due note of those who have forsaken it.'*

That isn't the end, Michael, although the meaning is a little obscure. It goes on:

*'Armed forces dispatched by him will desecrate the sanctuary and the citadel and do away with the regular offering. And there will be set up the "abominable thing that causes desolation"*

The scripture continues:

*'He will win over by plausible promises those who are ready to condemn the Covenant, but the people who are faithful to their God will hold firm and fight back. Wise leaders of the nation will give guidance to the common people; yet for a while they will fall victim to fire and sword, to captivity and pillage. But these victims will not want for help, though small, even if many who join them are insincere. Some of these leaders will themselves fall victim for a time so that they may be tested, refined, and made shining white. Yet there will still be an end to the appointed time.'*

"You know that passage by heart it seems, so do I - I've read it over and over again - You are right, it isn't easy to understand. Of one thing we can be sure, we face a time of trouble which is beyond our imagination."

"But we will prevail, Michael! Let us not forget that important fact - we will prevail! We would have cause for concern if we had to rely on our own strength, but we must never forget that we instruments in God's hand and it is to Him that the final victory will fall!"

Michael stared at him and then laughed a little shakily.

"I wish we weren't separated by so many kilometres, Joshua. It would be good to have you around when my knees start to shake."

Joshua arched his brows.

"Michael, the great Prince, who shall stand up for his people - his knees shake? Impossible! You need no one but your God, my friend! Trust in Him as you have always trusted - and even more so, for we are engaged in His undertaking and we cannot possibly do anything but succeed!"

"I know you are right, Joshua - but I think of the cost - the innocent lives which will be lost and the injuries and dispossession which must occur before it is finished. I feel heartsick when I visualise it."

Joshua leaned forward.

"Remember one thing, Michael. This is the Time of the End. We are so busy thinking about Gog and his Horde that we are in serious danger of being diverted from the main issue. Gog is the instrument which Satan uses to attract those who declare themselves for the Evil One. Gog is the instrument

which determines the sifting of the sheep from the goats, prior to the Judgement Day. We haven't yet seen the extent of Gog's endowment from Satan.

Do you remember the thirteenth Chapter of the Book of Revelation? There we can read that after the First Resurrection and coinciding with the beginning of the Time of Destruction, the Dragon endowed a Beast which rose from the sea, with his powers. In much the same way, Satan has already endowed Gog with the power to draw men away from God. He has given him the tools to perform this most despicable of all tasks. These power of these tools will be shown to us as we live through the terror of the coming days.

I know it is sad to think that many will die at the hand of Gog because of their use - but they will die as innocents and will stand in confidence before the Judgement Throne. Those of Gog's forces who die, will already have cast their lot with Satan. It is they who are mentioned as being the ones who shall resurrect to everlasting contempt. Remember always, that no matter what the outcome of the Battle of Armageddon, there will come the time soon after, when we will all be called to account.

We are engaged in a mighty work, in a titanic battle with Satan for the souls of men. We must be victorious - it cannot be otherwise!"

It was time to join the other. They locked arms and walked to where they were gathered. Leah felt a lump rise in her throat when she saw the demonstration of unity. She rose to greet Joshua.

"Greetings, Joshua. It is good to see you again."

He took her hands and raised them to his lips.

"Greetings, Leah - I am so glad that you have found happiness with this man. I must say, he took his time, but in the end he has managed to stop falling over his own feet!"

Leah laughed, it was good to be free of any restrictions with the man she once thought she could never live without. She saw him through different eyes - almost as a father figure instead of a potential husband. It was quite a shock to realise that he was only a few years different in age to Marcus. The thought came unbidden. Had she seen Marcus as a husband - or as a father figure? It was a question she didn't care to answer.

She glanced across to Michael and found his eyes on her. They radiated love and protection and she felt it a little hard to breath. She knew she was happy. For the first time in years, she was really free of all the tensions which had soured her life. She refused to think of what the future would bring. There would be time enough to concern herself with those things after she was united to the man who gazed on her with such devotion.

Elena watched them both. She had taken a seat towards the back of the room, a little outside of the circle to which she did not belong. Feodor was close by, his nearness raised her tension. The depth of the attention he was paying to her was too noticeable. She felt powerless to do anything to about it. It was becoming harder to raise sufficient energy to do anything. She was very heavy with this child, much more so than with Piotr. The women at Feodor's dasha, who were supposed to be knowledgeable about these things, had assured her that everything was progressing well - but she wasn't sure.

She longed for the presence of her husband - the man Georgi

Malenski had once been - not the transformation into a monster. She was privy to most of the communiqués which flowed into Feodor's office. She knew where Georgi was and that he was directly involved in bloodshed and death and the forcible take-over of that which belonged to others. It was no place to take her son - or to trust herself and her unborn child. Joshua noticed her sitting behind the others.

"Dear sister Elena, please move forward into our circle - we are one here."

She complied because she had no other option, not to have done so would have highlighted her separateness. Joshua noticed the immediate attention supplied by Feodor and she was aware of his shrewd assessment. The Administrator of the Western European Area was a calculating man and she knew he had been mainly responsible for the most recent setback suffered by her husband. There was a shift in attention, someone had asked:

"When is the actual Ceremony of Union to take place, Sister Leah?"

"Our Firstling will tell us."

Elena felt a surge of excitement and at the same time, a tightening around her heart. It had been so long since she had faced a Firstling. With the heightening of anticipation, came the concern - how she could ever face the penetrating eyes of a Kingly-Priest. He would search her heart and would know that she had abandoned the man to whom she had been United in a similar ceremony. It seemed so long ago, another time in another world. Leah continued.

"We think it will be within the next two days."

One of the house-servants provided refreshments. The conversation was generalised and Elena sensed it was her presence. None of them trusted her - with the possible exception of the infatuated Feodor. Perhaps they had good reason. After a decent interval she excused herself. The conversation did not progress beyond trivia whilst she was within earshot. She reached her room and her eyes were flooded with tears. Never had she felt more alone. In the room which she had left, the subject matter had turned to that which concerned them all. Alexander was proclaiming with some heat.

"I tell you, Michael - Malenski has turned his rabble loose on my stewardship. They're coming in from every direction except from the east."

Joshua interjected.

"But surely, Alex - you can stop him in the mountains? The Balkans are one mess of mountains!"

"Not in the north of my stewardship, Joshua. There is a steady flow of farmers and their families surging into the plains around the Danube and the Drava. These - refugees - had what we can politely call - an armed escort. To the south, the army you turned back from Africa, is pushing into the polders around the old landmass of Greece - they're ignoring the mountains - bypassing them. The push is towards the east!"

Joshua murmured.

"Which is what we might expect."

Alexander went on.

"Gog is with the southern force! He's behind the move through the Corinth Trough. But he's also co-ordinating the surge by his farmers further to the north."

Anatole wailed his complaint.

"I have nothing left to hold. There has been a pause, but now there's another move south into the remaining plains north of the Carpathians - and to the east as well, towards Feodor's territory."

Michael looked at Feodor, he was uncharacteristically silent.

"We already know that you are absorbing an ever increasing number of refugees in your northern areas. Is there any evidence of an armed escort?"

Feodor nodded.

"It would seem that our militant friend has changed his policy, now he is quite ready to get his way by force and not by subtle persuasion. I agree with Alex, Gog is on the move."

Joshua entered the fray once more.

"Are we expecting Micah?"

Michael shook his head.

"Our invitation was declined with polite felicitations - our co-Administrator pleads pressure of work."

Joshua's response was silky soft.

"What a pity."

An uneasy co-existence prevailed between Malenski and his general. Sedova had made the only decision open to him to agree to return with his army to the mouth of the Adriatic. He did so with good grace, acknowledging that Malenski had out-manoeuvred him, but he also agreed that it would have been foolhardy to attempt a crossing of the land bridge into Africa. The unknown element posed by the Aristides fleet on his exposed flank, had been the deciding factor. He was even ready to comply with the suggestion that he should lead the bulk of his army into the Corinth Trough and press eastward in the search for vital supplies. There was always the hope that Alexander Barenkov had not had the foresight to removed his stores further to the east - and so it proved. As they moved forward towards the highland of the isthmus which connected the Peloponnese to the northern mountains, they were able to reap a rich booty from poorly defended storage facilities.

Malenski was not in evidence on a continuous basis, he spent his time roaming up and down the mouth of the net he was placing over the responsibilities of the absentee stewards. He had learned the reason for their absence during a flying visit to the Vistula Secretariat - Anatole was in Jerusalem. Michael ben Levi and Leah Steinbecker were at last celebrating their Union. It suited Malenski's purposes very well to have both of the Barenkov brothers absent and it was even more gratifying when his spies told him that Feodor had also headed to the south. He was not so pleased to be told that Elena and Piotr had accompanied him.

Georgi returned to the alpine encampment. It was now nearly empty, most of the forces which had been trained by Pik Sedova, were spread out in a great arc around the triple prize of the three stewardships. It was time to absorb them, to remove them as pawns from the main game. It was time for him to assert his ancient ancestral ties to become in fact, the Prince of Rosh, of Tubal and of Meshech and to seek his alliances with the House of out of sight, but within reach of his Shuttles and that beyond that shore, lay another - the shore of what they called the Holiest of all Lands.

His private spies had told him that Michael ben Levi was to celebrate his Union with the widow of Marcus Steinbecker. He was aware too, that those who had stood in the way of his army on their African adventure, had assembled there. His teeth were bared in the mockery of a smile. Pik Sedova would deliver his own, very personal gift, which would be sure to enliven the good Administrator's Union.

Within the time Leah had predicted that the Union would be Sanctified, Michael and Leah knelt before the Kingly-Priest who bestowed the blessings of the Father on their vows. Those assembled as guests, knelt in reverence around them. The presence of the Firstling created a pulsation of peace and reassurance. It was a reassurance that nothing could ever overwhelm them, if they clung to the hand of the Father, which was extended in blessing.

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Togarmah and of Gomer. Only then would he be entitled to use the name which destiny had appointed to him - then he would become Gog and he would no longer frown upon those who elected to whisper his name.

The reports from Pik Sedova were good. He had made excellent headway to the east and on the third day after the return to the camp at the mouth of the Adriatic, he stood with the bulk of his army, on the heights overlooking the reclaimed plains of the Aegean Sea. The conquest had proceeded quickly. Malenski had left him the use of some of the Shuttles and Transporters which had brought the army back from Sicily. Sedova stared out over the flatlands and knew that the shore of the Eastern Basin lay beyond,

The Firstling remained with them for a while. He talked quietly to each one in turn before finally standing before Elena. He took her hand and she involuntarily began to weep. He said nothing and eventually, she lifted her eyes and stared into his. Not a word was spoken but the communication between them was tangible. He reached out his hands and placed them on her head and that of Piotr and then he spoke.

"The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee and give thee his peace - now and for ever more."

He touched her hands once more and then released them and stepped

away - and then he was gone. Elena took the hand of her son and walked from the room. No one spoke, they understood, it was a moment they could not share.