

The old man's eyes bored into him. Marcus swallowed and forced a grin.

"On my mind, Father Joel?"

"Don't dodge the issue, Marcus, I know you too well. Something happened today - "

Marcus nodded slowly and turned to the window.

"You are right, of course. I should have realised that you would sense it. Father Joel, if you don't mind, I would like to tell you about it later. It involves the privacy of two other people and I feel I would be intrusive if I discussed it at this stage - "

The old man was of the old school, he responded as Marcus knew he would.

"Of course, Marcus. When you feel free to talk, I will be ready to listen."

Leah had returned by the time they assembled for the evening meal. On this occasion, there were only four grouped around the table. Asher and Joel sat next to each other, which had the effect of manoeuvring Leah and Marcus into the remaining seats. Asher greeted the guests.

"So, Marcus, the wanderers return. Both you and Leah went off on mysterious errands today."

Marcus smiled.

"Not much of a mystery on my part, Asher - I acted the typical tourist and explored Jerusalem. I saw quite a few of the sights - and some were quite different to what I expected."

He avoided looking at the girl. Asher took the comment as a challenge and Marcus found himself quizzed on the various places he had visited. Leah and Joel didn't enter the conversation. At length, Asher seemed satisfied, he relaxed in his chair.

"I concede your point, Marcus, Jerusalem is nothing like the city one might have expected for this day and age. I tend to agree with Joel - and he and I have had many similar discussions on this point - the ancient places bear no real witness to what they once were. They excite the imagination and one hears the horns of the ancient Israelites when they stormed the citadel of the Jebusites with David at their head. One hears the battle cries of Babylonians, Assyrians and the armies of Pharaoh, as they swept through the land. It is all in the mind and wonderful pictures form, excited by the places and the names. But when it comes to it, the reality is now, and the present and the relentless future presses upon us."

They were interrupted by the food being placed upon the table. Marcus stole a covert glance at Leah. She seemed engrossed in her thoughts. Asher asked suddenly.

"You're very quiet, my dear Leah - how was your day?"

"Very uneventful, Uncle. I too was in Jerusalem, but I had nowhere near such an exciting day."

Joel murmured softly.

"What a pity Marcus and you didn't go together. He is an old stick in the mud but I'm sure he would have enlivened your hours, daughter."

Leah laughed.

"I think you would have been bored to tears, Marcus."

"Not in your company, Leah."

"Did you hear that, Asher? He really hasn't lost the art of a gallant comment! There's hope for you yet, Marcus!"

The wariness seemed to have evaporated, at least, upon the surface, but Marcus was aware of an undercurrent. The reason for it was hard to define, but they all trod carefully. When the meal was over, each found different directions in which to go. Marcus followed Leah resolutely as she headed towards the garden.

"I always like to take a little exercise after a good meal," he explained.

She made no comment and they walked towards the perimeter of the garden, close to the wall where they had heard the singing on the previous evening. This time it was quiet, the sun was gone and it was completely dark. The moon would rise one hour later that night. The sky was cloudless and heavy with stars. Marcus sighed with sheer pleasure.

"To think that our Father created it all and that each of those points of light represent something almost beyond our comprehension, when we come to think about the physical laws He has created to ensure their continuity, their balance and the mechanism by which they counteract with each other."

She was quiet for a moment, then:

"Marcus, do you really believe that this creation is about to be destroyed?"

It was his time to be silent for a while.

"I believe that it is possible for it to be destroyed - just as I believe it was created. The One who created it can also destroy it!"

"That's a logical answer - but consider this, scientists tell us that the act of creation is still going on and that it has taken twelve to fifteen billion years until now. How then, can it be destroyed in an instant?"

He struggled for an answer.

"The Firstlings were created in the course of time and then transfigured in the twinkling of an eye at the First Resurrection. Surely, it wouldn't be difficult for God to destroy the universe in the twinkling of an eye!"

They walked on.

"You saw me today, didn't you, Marcus?"

"Yes."

"I know you did, I saw you getting out of the Pod."

He waited.

"Well! Aren't you going to ask me some questions?"

"You will tell me what you want to tell me - it isn't my place to invade your privacy."

"What if I have nothing to tell you?"

"Then, the subject is closed."

"You will say nothing to Asher - or to Joel?"

"Is there a reason why I shouldn't mention that I saw you emerging

from a Pod in the company of Joshua Aristides?"

"We have nothing to hide."

"In which case, I can see no reason why I shouldn't mention the matter in the course of normal conversation, however, I also see no reason why I should especially raise the subject - if you should wish to keep it confidential."

She laughed in the darkness.

"You sound like a negotiator - "

"I'm just looking for clarification - "

"Uncle Asher doesn't know of my meetings with Joshua."

"Would he be displeased if he did? Joshua seems to be a very pleasant and cultured man."

"I'm glad you approve."

"It really isn't my place to approve or disapprove."

"The relationship between Asher and Joshua is a little delicate at the moment."

"I'm sure there isn't any animosity between them, but I can see that they hold opposing views on a very important subject. From our conversation last evening, I would have thought that you held the same viewpoint as Asher and Joel, and that you would be at odds with Joshua."

"Joshua and I are in love."

"Ah!"

"And what does 'Ah' mean?"

"Just 'Ah'. You see, my dear cousin, I've had another three hundred years to learn that love isn't governed by logical arguments, even when important subjects are involved. If you love Joshua, his opinions are of secondary importance. If I can offer you some advice. Come out into the open and live for the present. I've been told twice today, there isn't much future left!"

They walked on in silence for a while.

"It's a very difficult situation, Marcus."

"There is nothing wrong with two people declaring their love for one another."

"Perhaps, but I am very close to Uncle Asher and I know that he holds private views about Joshua."

"Private views? Do you want to explain - or shouldn't I probe?"

"It's no secret - and you're not probing."

She fell silent again, then:

"Uncle Asher is like Grandfather Joel, they see Gog in everybody who doesn't agree with their point of view!"

Marcus stopped abruptly

"They think Joshua Aristides is Gog!"

"Not in so many words, but I'm sure they hold him in suspicion. He seems to be trying to sway the Administrators away from what Asher and Joel deem to be inevitable."

"And that is supposed to make him Gog?"

"They believe that Gog will emerge from the sort of thinking that Joshua expresses."

They had resumed walking.

"I don't see eye to eye with Joel on everything - its a question of degree - I hope that doesn't make me Gog?"

He saw her shoulders shrug in the starlight.

"Uncle Asher can be very uncompromising when it comes to this subject. He is always quoting the old saying: 'He who isn't for me is against me'."

"Joel is much the same - "

"It seems we share a common problem - "

"What could Asher say if you came out into the open?"

"Probably very little but I'm afraid that I might lose his trust."

They were approaching the library wing of the house. On this evening the great room was blazing with light and through the undraped windows, they could see Asher and Joel seated at the big desk. Marcus put his hand on her arm and stopped her from going forward into the pool of light from the window.

"Leah, I just want to say one more thing before we go inside. Think about what I'm going to say. I believe it will be far better for you to tell Asher yourself than to wait for someone to tell him that they saw you and Joshua together somewhere. I could have blurted out that I saw you today. Only you and Joshua know if you have anything to hide or anything for which to be ashamed. Also, you can't have it both ways. If you love Joshua - and he loves you for yourself and not for your connection to Asher, you have to be open about it. But be very sure of him! Otherwise, if someone whispers into Asher's ear, you might find yourself accused of some hidden agenda needing secret meetings!"

She stared at him in the darkness and then she nodded.

"That's plain advice, Marcus. I'm glad I have you as a friend."

"You can count on my friendship, Leah."

"I hope Joshua can too."

Marcus answered carefully.

"If you love Joshua and he is being honest with you, I could learn to be his friend."

She sighed softly.

"A very cautious answer, Marcus. Is that how it has to be these days? We all have to be cautious with each other - we have to prove ourselves before we can expect a commitment?"

"Perhaps those two old men are right. The shadows are drawing in on the day of the Kingdom of Peace. We are in the evening of the Kingdom and soon the night will be upon us once again. With the night will come something far worse than caution - there will be suspicion and accusation and a man's heart will be hardened against his neighbour."

"Perhaps we had better go in through the other entrance, they might not wish to be disturbed."

"They know we're here, Joel can see like a cat in the dark!"

"Then why are we whispering in the bushes?"

"I'll let you into a secret, Leah! He's been playing the matchmaker ever since we've arrived. He must be feeling very self-satisfied at this moment, knowing that we're hiding out here in the shadows!"

She laughed softly.

"And I'll let you into a secret, my dear cousin Marcus! Asher has been conspiring with Joel - or hadn't you noticed?"

"I suppose I ought to be flattered - I'm old enough to be your father - "

"I would have thought - grandfather!"

"Thank you! - Out of curiosity, how old is Joshua Aristides?"

There was a pause.

"Six hundred and twenty-eight."

Marcus nodded and permitted himself a little feeling of triumph.

"It's amazing how fifteen years can change a lover to a grandfather - I'm six hundred and forty-three, you know!"

"Let's go in!"

She moved forward abruptly before he could stop her. They squinted their eyes against the light. Joel and Asher surveyed them calmly as they entered the room through one of the open windows.

"I hope you enjoyed your stroll, children."

"We're sorry to disturb you."

"You're not disturbing us! We're completing our final strategy for tomorrow's meeting."

"Strategy, Father Joel?"

"Why, yes, Marcus. You wouldn't expect anything less of me, now would you? Joshua Aristides is a wily fellow - a substantial opponent, one could say. I'm sure that he will employ any stratagem to outmanoeuvre us. What we will be talking about tomorrow will result in a decision which will be one of the most momentous ever to have been reached in the history of mankind. The building up of our resources to combat Gog and his Horde when he is revealed in the fullness of time. It will give us a fighting chance to withstand him when he wages war against the Camp of the Saints!"

Leah and Marcus left the old men to their plans. She shivered visibly and whispered.

"It shouldn't be like this, Marcus. Talk of conspiracies and strategies and outmanoeuvring this one or the other. It shouldn't be like this, we're turning the remaining days of the Kingdom of Peace into something other than the Lord planned. I think they're wrong!"

He faced her in the broad passage leading away from the library.

"Are you saying that we should do nothing?"

"Perhaps - "

"Leah, you're either saying that or you are not. It sounds like Joshua Aristides speaking!"

Her voice rose a little.

"I'm saying that what is to happen will happen. The prophecies in the Book of Revelation and in Ezekiel will take place. Nowhere in scripture is it suggested that men should become involved in planning defences, or getting materials together to make weapons. Joshua was right yesterday, when he said that we would be turning the remaining years of the Kingdom of Peace into something far from peaceful. We will be creating unrest, for someone is going to ask: 'Why are we doing this?'. Thoughts of war and not of peace will prevail. God has promised that he will send fire down from heaven upon Gog and consume him. He will fight the battle for us. The prophecy even says that Gog will fall upon a peaceful people living in unfenced cities. Does that sound

like the situation Joel and Asher are planning?"

Marcus shook his head wearily.

"I don't know, Leah. I really do not know. Perhaps the prophecies were given to provide a warning for those who could understand them. They might have been given to encourage people like Joel and Asher to make preparations. I don't know the answers, but I do know that short of a direct order from the Lord and his Firstlings, nothing will stop Asher and Joel!"

"I'm beginning to believe that it might come to that! The Administrators have only been given the task of managing the harvests and other products and distributing them fairly - I think Joel and Asher are exceeding that duty."

They parted at the junction of the passage which led to the guest wing. Marcus went over their conversation in the solitude of his suite. For some reason which escaped him, he felt that he had been deprived of something. Leah was a very special person and despite the machinations of Joel and Asher, there had been too little time for a closer relationship to develop. Now that he knew about Joshua and Leah, a closer relationship was quite out of the question. He understood from history, that in the days before the Kingdom, men had competed with each other for the attentions of a lady. It was not the way things were done in the Kingdom. When two people declared an interest in each other, there could be no question of someone else trying to interfere, no matter what his feelings might be. It was a matter of self discipline and in keeping with preserving the tranquillity of the Kingdom.

He waited up for Joel for two reasons. Firstly, he had no desire to be

shaken awake by an inquisitive old man determined to complete their earlier conversation. Secondly, he decided that he was not going to allow Joel to fritter away the night scheming with Asher. He was going to need all his strength for the session on the next day.

Marcus was spared the necessity of invading their planning session. In fact, he was dozing in the chair when Joel returned.

"Wake up! Marcus. Why haven't you gone to bed? We have a busy day tomorrow and I want you alert and ready to do battle - especially if I feel unwell!"

Marcus was instantly awake.

"Unwell! Do you feel unwell, Father Joel?"

Joel waved an dismissive hand.

"Just my little ploy to get your undivided attention, my boy!"

"Are you expecting to feel unwell tomorrow?"

"How can I answer that - I'm an old man - I might die half way through the session!"

"In which case, the session would be ended - abruptly!"

"You should always be ready to step into my shoes, Marcus."

"I can't step into your shoes, Father Joel - Why are we talking in this way?"

"For no reason other than to get your juices flowing!"

Marcus drew a deep breath.

"So, what devious plans have you and Asher been concocting."

"Plans? Devious? Strange words to use Marcus."

"Don't hedge - just answer the question. You and Uncle Asher are up to something."

"Let us just say that we must be ready for every eventuality."

"Surely, there are no enemy forces amongst the Administrators?"

Joel stared at him sharply.

"Come, Marcus. You're not that naive. Joshua Aristides can bring many convincing arguments and we must be ready for anything."

"But, you don't see Joshua as an enemy, surely?"

"The enemies of a man shall be of his own house!"

Marcus shivered involuntarily.

"Are you cold, Marcus - Too long wandering around in the garden, perhaps - even if the company was most attractive!"

"Uncle Joel! You're trying to change the subject."

"You both looked very attractive - and a little guilty - when you emerged from the darkness."

"We looked guilty - as you put it - because we had been spying on you for a while."

Joel sniffed.

"When I was a young man, I found something better with which to occupy my time, when I was in the company of a pretty young woman."

"I'm surprised that you can remember such ancient history!"

"So! What did your spying reveal?"

"Perhaps, two old friends discussing the weather."

"A lot more than the weather, Marcus. Of that you can be assured."

"No doubt, all will be revealed tomorrow, Father Joel - Now, speaking of tomorrow, its time you went to bed. The subject matter deserves your full strength."

Joel grunted in agreement, suddenly he looked bone weary. He seemed to sag a little.

"They say that waiting for something can be more exhausting than when it happens. I'll be glad when we no longer have to plan and second guess for the future - when we're face to face with our enemy, Gog."

Marcus assisted him to bed. Just as he was about to leave, Joel took his arm.

"How is it really with you and Leah?"

Marcus hesitated.

"I think I can say that I'm getting very fond of her."

The old man's eyes gleamed.

"Ah! Fond, you say? And how does she feel about you?"

"I think I can say that she is very fond of me too."

Joel nodded and closed his eyes.

"Good night, Marcus."

Marcus went to his own room and wondered why he had given the old man false hope. There could never be a relationship between Leah and himself. Joshua Aristides had claimed her. The question remained whether he, Marcus would have tried to change a tolerant friendship to marriage. He didn't know the answer to that question either. It was another quandary to add to all the others.

