

It took another seven days before Michael felt confident enough to leave the Far Eastern Administration Region and return to Jerusalem. During those seven days, there had been hastily convened holo-conferences with some of his senior men. For the most part, they were those advisors he had inherited from Asher. He knew he had a rock solid corp. of reliable men upon whom he could call to do the most difficult tasks. There was no doubt that whoever inherited the Secretariat in Salem, would have an extremely hostile ride and would require considerable talent.

The abdication of Leah and her reason for leaving the city to return to Jerusalem, had placed the Steinbecker Clan on the defensive. Privileges which their name had earned and which they had enjoyed for nearly a thousand years, were now under threat. Whoever took over from Leah, would be calculated to ask a lot of questions and veto a good number of jealously guarded arrangements. It wasn't that any of them were particularly improper - but there was no actual reason why certain people should be favoured over others. It was a product of habit, perhaps even of expediency and in the calm waters of the Kingdom, questions had never been raised. It had been a non-issue.

Michael chose an older man, one who was well versed in the ways of the bureaucrats of Asher's Administration. In a private holo-conference, he told him exactly what sort of reaction he could expect and that he could anticipate a great deal of hostility. Lazarus Cohen was a shrewd man. He was small and wiry with a head which seemed out of proportion to his body. His features were extremely Jewish. He stared Michael straight in the eye and smiled slowly.

"I served Asher for a long time, Michael - Do you remember when you first came to his house? You were a very young fellow - no more than five or six years old. On that occasion, as I remember, you tipped a plate of hot vegetables into my lap at the meal table. I can tell you, you made my eyes water! I think what you've just asked me to do, rates at about the same mark on the discomfort scale! It sounds a painful exercise - but if that's what you want, I'll do it!"

Michael smiled back, he liked the little man.

"Take plenty of handkerchiefs with you!"

Lazarus looked up sharply.

"For your watering eyes, Lazarus!"

Simon had already left for the Gazera capital. The parting had been deliberately low key - underplayed. Michael had grown used to having Simon around. They had been together for a long time and the relationship between them had long since slipped from that of employer and employee into that of an easy intimacy of true friendship. They had shaken hands awkwardly and taken refuge in formality - a formality which had long since been abandoned. When the Pod sped on its way northward, Michael was conscious of feeling a loss - he was also confronted with whom he could call upon to replace him - after a long deliberation, he decided upon Luke Belin.

The big man's eyes widened when the proposition was put to him. His

objections were blunt.

"I don't know the first thing about being a private secretary to anyone - let alone to an Administrator!"

"I know that - I don't need someone who shuffles communiqués around a desk. I need someone upon whom I can rely to watch my back, day and night. Wasn't that what you were doing for Marcus Steinbecker?"

Luke stared at him steadily.

"I didn't do Marcus much good - I don't come highly recommended from my previous employer!"

"I'm not asking for recommendations - I make my own judgements!"

"Then - brother ben Levi - I hope your judgement doesn't prove fatal!"

"Will you take the job, or not?"

Luke shrugged and nodded.

"You've got yourself a new gopher, brother Michael!"

On the evening before their departure for Jerusalem, Michael relaxed and thought over the arrangements he had put in place. Lazarus had moved quickly and was already installed in the Salem Secretariat. Simon had similarly taken over the reins in the Gazera capital. There was no sign of resistance or reaction from those who suddenly found themselves the subjects of new overlords. Michael had the impression of a waiting game.

During the afternoon, a communiqué had arrived concerning the movements of Gideon Steinbecker. It seemed that he was heading for Jerusalem. It was yet another pressing reason why Michael knew he had to return to his centre of operations.

He was still faced with the decision as to how he was going to deal with the three conspirators. Deborah, David and Kurt Weber remained in custody at the villa. In some undefinable way, he could feel their presence in the building. It was a constant reminder that they were in his hands and that he would have the ultimate decision over their fate. They were a problem which would not go away, but he prevaricated.

He made the excuse to himself that he still needed to investigate the part that Gideon had had to play. For this reason, he took no steps to arrange a trial. There was another factor, during the Thousand years, there had never been the occasion to hold a trial - there was no body of precedent to instruct him how he was going to deal with the logistics of trying three people - and there was no rule of law he could take as an example if they were to be found guilty of the crime of murder - unless it was the Law of Moses.

On this last evening at Deborah's villa, he made the decision to transfer the three prisoners to Jerusalem. It seemed the better of the three options. He saw no reason to move them to the Gazera capital, or to Salem. Simon and Lazarus had enough problems without adding the additional burden of a focal point for revolt and the attempted release of the conspirators. Jerusalem seemed the logical place. It was also a pointed reminder that the responsibility was his.

There was another problem - Leah! He had been almost submerged in work in the time between her release on the first evening, until that moment. The departure of Simon and Michael's attempts to initiate Luke into his new duties, had added considerably to his work load. The net result had been that he had hardly had time to take the woman he loved to one side and talk over

what was going to happen in the future.

It was obvious that her intentions were to go to Jerusalem, but it was by no means a foregone conclusion that they would be together. Leah had kept out of his way. On the surface, she might have been giving him room to make the arrangements which had taken up so much of his time, but the result was the creation of distance, as if she was trying to avoid being alone with him. It was something which required immediate and decisive action. He rose to his feet and wandered through the house. He tracked her down eventually and stood watching in the doorway of the children's room.

They were just asleep and she knelt by their beds and looked at them for a while. When she got up and turned, her hands jerked up defensively, when she saw him watching her. He stepped aside as she closed the door of the room.

"You frightened me, Michael!"

"I'm sorry - I didn't want to disturb you or the children."

"I find I'm very nervous since - since the business with Rebecca."

He took her shoulders. He felt the tension, but she didn't try to pull away - on the other hand, she didn't move any closer.

"We leave for Jerusalem tomorrow."

"I know - I'll be glad to leave this place."

"I'm sorry I kept you here so long, it can't hold any good memories."

"I didn't mean this house - I meant the Far East. My place is in Jerusalem - I've always felt it, I never gave up my home there - something stopped me from doing so."

"Are you quite sure you don't want to go back to Salem before we leave?"

"Especially not to Salem! I associate Salem with treachery and people conspiring to kill their cousin and to hold me against my will."

"It also has a lot of memories of happier days, Leah - with Marcus - and then, your children were born there."

Her response was sharp.

"They can go back one day! Not me! I will never set foot there again - "

"Just as you like, Leah - it's your decision. I thought you should know - Gideon appears to be travelling towards Jerusalem."

"Why?"

"I intend to find out - I have a few questions to ask Gideon Steinbecker!"

"I hope you don't want me to meet him, Michael! I want nothing to do with him - or with Deborah."

Michael nodded and placed his arm around her shoulders. He led her slowly along the corridor to the reception room.

"I still haven't decided what to do with them, Leah. They must be called to account for what they've done - and there must be some sort of punishment - but I don't know how to go about it."

"An eye for an eye!"

He looked at her sharply.

"Is that what you really think? An eye for an eye?"

"If they want to live outside of the rule of Grace, they must expect to be dealt with according to the rule of the Law!"

Michael sat her down in one of the chairs and pulled her closer so that he sat almost touching.

"Tell me - whom do you suggest to be the executioner? Firstly, who will be the Judge - who will make the decision of life and death?"

She gestured wearily.

"I don't know, Michael. Perhaps, it's this place - perhaps, it's Salem and the thought of Marcus taking off from the Terminal and then, the explosion which tore a hole in the thin skin of the ship. Do you think he choked and gasped for breath? Was it quick for him, Michael?"

She sobbed against his shoulder and he cradled her and rocked her like a child. He knew he couldn't put any pressure on her. She would return to Jerusalem with him and they would live in the same city, but he couldn't ask her to make a decision where he was concerned. She was so very close to a breakdown and only time and a change of locale could heal the trauma. Her sobs died away and she didn't try to pull away from him. She lay quietly in his arms in the darkness and stared into the fire. Eventually, he could hear that she had fallen asleep. He picked her up gently and she stirred and moaned but didn't waken. He carried her to her bedroom and placed her on the bed. He looked down at her and then covered her with some loose bedding.

They made ready to return to Jerusalem on one of the suborbitors which had brought the militia reinforcements. The landing of the huge ships had made an untidy mess of one of the cultivated fields which surrounded Deborah's home. Luke organised the loading of the three prisoners. Michael watched from one of the windows. Kurt Weber didn't give a backward glance to the house which had been the scene of many a liaison with the woman who strode arrogantly behind him. She did stare for a long moment at the building and Michael was sure that she saw him watching. David stumbled along, with his head bowed. He looked a broken man. Michael felt almost sorry for him - but he steeled himself against sentimentality. David was as guilty as the other two.

Once they were safely embarked and in the care of a respectable contingent of militia, Luke returned to the house.

"Did they give you any trouble."

Luke grinned.

"Only Madam Imperious, but I soon cut her down to size! We're ready when you are."

Leah and the children were ready. The youngsters were chattering excitedly about the forthcoming flight. Leah stared through the window at the suborbiter.

"I hate these things!"

Michael took her hand. He responded gently.

"Any other way would take too long. We want to arrive in Jerusalem before Gideon."

She nodded.

"When this flight is over, I never want to go on another suborbiter."

She sat beside him for the two hours of the journey. Her tension was almost palpable. Luke kept the children amused. Michael whispered.

"He has quite a talent with youngsters."

Leah nodded.

"What do you know about him? Does he have a wife? Children? He's not as young as us. Does he have a history?"

"We all have a history! Call it what you like, Leah - intuition - or whatever else. I trust him. I know next to nothing about him, but I would put my life in his hands!"

"It doesn't pay to be too trusting, Michael - remember what happened to Marcus!"

They were met at the Salt Sea Terminal by a squad of militia and a dozen of Michael's advisers. There was a certain air of tension. One of the senior secretaries stepped forward to explain.

"We decided not to break security whilst you were in transit, brother Michael. Feodor Chernienko reports a sudden movement of the Malenski force towards the Baltic coast. He suggests that there is the probability of an imminent clash with the roving bands moving down from Scandia."

Michael absorbed the information. He took particular note of the term 'Malenski force'. He had gone out of his way to discourage the use of 'Gog' and 'Horde'. Despite a great deal of evidence to the contrary, he was still not totally convinced that there was an automatic equation between Georgi Malenski and his mob of refugees moving down from the Arctic and thence across the Urals, with the expected appearance of the biblical Gog.

"Thank you, Reuben. You were wise to be cautious. You say that Feodor reports a sudden movement. What does that imply, have they somehow speeded up their advance to the west? Did he give any information about the size of the Scandia groups?"

"It seems that Grigor Suskov's fleet of Pods and cargo transporters have been appropriated. The refugees are now strung out in a long line across northern Russia, between where they crossed the Urals and the Baltic coast. Malenski is thickening this band by airlifting his people and expanding out of pockets grouped around populated centres. He seems to have formed a kind of barrier to prevent the Scandia bands from moving further south, but some of his people have themselves turned south and are spreading towards the northern boundary of the Chernienko stewardship."

"I'd better talk to Feodor - Any news of Gideon Steinbecker?"

Reuben glanced at Leah, who had stood silently beside Michael.

"You may speak openly, Reuben. Leah can hear what you have to say about her stepson!"

Reuben's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"He was last reported leaving New Brasilia on a suborbiter bound for Potomac. It is due to arrive there in ten minutes."

Michael looked thoughtful.

"I wonder what he's trying to do - muster up support from Ruis Peres and Thaddeus Grant? I would be surprised if he gets much encouragement from Thaddeus - he and Marcus were allies on the Council - Ruis Peres is another matter. I can't forget the grilling to which he subjected Marcus over the matter of the Storage Directive. Keep a close eye on Gideon, Reuben, we don't want any surprises!"

By this time they were already on their way to the Judaeen Hills. Leah interjected.

"I hope you haven't forgotten that I have my own home, Michael."

He turned and smiled.

"I haven't forgotten - but I had hoped you had. Leah, your house needs putting into commission - it hasn't been lived in for years. You have two small children who are trying to pretend that they aren't tired, but not making a very good job of it! It would be sensible if you accept my offer of hospitality for a day or so - or are you in a particular and desperate hurry to get away from me?"

She flickered a little smile.

"I'm not desperate, nor am I in any particular hurry - thank you for the offer, Michael - just for a day or two."

She seemed so determined to keep up the barrier against him! Michael returned the smile. He would play it her way, he could only suppose that it was some sort of defence mechanism. She had lived through a great deal of betrayal.

They arrived at the old house where she had lived for so many decades. He watched her as she stepped out of the Pod. John and Rachael were on each hand, close to her. The exhaustion was very visible. Some of the older house staff took her under their wing. He was glad that he had insisted that she stayed with him.

There was no time to think about his personal relationships with Leah. The hastily convened holo-conference with Feodor was the first priority - even the activities of Gideon had to take second place. Feodor shimmered into life and joined him on the holo-pad. He looked agitated - but then, Feodor always displayed a great deal of vital energy.

"Thank God you're back, Michael!"

"How are you, Feodor - Do you have any particular reason for such emphatic thankfulness?"

"Gog is on the move - don't tell me you haven't been told!"

"I won't! I have been told that the Malenski force is moving across your northern boundary."

"That's only half of it! They're encroaching into Anatole Barenkov's stewardship!"

"I thought he was already having trouble with the Scandian bands."

"True! But now, Malenski is moving into the same territory - and there have already been pitched battles between them."

"Which must be relieving the pressure on Anatole, surely."

Feodor eyed him doubtfully.

"I hope you're not suggesting that Georgi Malenski is our ally - against the Scandian bands."

Michael shrugged.

"Why not! In the short term. I won't consider Georgi to be an aggressor until he actually crosses your northern perimeter, or until Anatole reports that his storehouses have been raided. In the meantime, I intend to tell him to open up his northern granaries and feed those who are hungry!"

Feodor shook his head vigorously.

"You're wrong, Michael! Appeasement will never buy peace. If you feed them once, they will demand more the second time. It will accelerate and more and more will be attracted to the hand-out and then they will take what they want by force. That's how it happened all over Siberia - ask Grigor

Suskov!"

"I was reminded earlier today of the Storage Directive which Marcus received from a Firstling. In it, there was no provision for picking and choosing who was worthy to be fed in the time of need. The stores we have in our barns were provided by the special bounty of our Heavenly Father, who gave rich harvests, so that we could store for these conditions. Nowhere do I find a reference to restricting the stored food to provide for some of the population, whilst others are forced to scratch in the ground. We have vast reserves - especially from the Saharan Granaries - they are not reserved for the exclusive use of the citizens of the Central and North African Administration regions, but for all those who are still classified as the citizens of the Kingdom of Peace!"

Feodor rose in his chair and his image became distorted, so that it appeared to loom over Michael, who waited quietly until the Kharkov technicians coaxed his excitable friend to return to his seat. Feodor was very flushed.

"I'm sorry you don't see it that way, Feodor - but that is how it is going to be!"

Feodor appeared to be trying to swallow his retort but he didn't succeed.

"Then, brother Michael. I am beginning to think that I made the wrong decision when I asked you to accept my province as part of your Administration!"

Michael stared into the angry, flushed face for a long moment.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Feodor. Try to convince me of another solution by answering these questions. Do you think you can stand alone against several million refugees and do you think you can close your storehouses against a hungry and desperate tide of human beings? What weapons will you use against starving women and children? Are you prepared to strike against the hungry hands stretched out towards you? Or do you think it would be better to try to regulate and control, so that all have equal and proper shares of what is available?"