

"If you read further, it begins to sound like an avalanche - listen to this."

Luke had entered the co-ordinates of the prophesy. The dispassionate tones of the computer intoned:

*'He will overrun land after land, sweeping over them like a flood, amongst them the fairest of all lands, and tens of thousands shall fall victims. Yet all these lands (including Edom and Moab and the remnants of the Ammonites) will survive his attack.'*

*'He will reach out to land after land, and Egypt will not escape. He will gain control over her hidden stores of gold and silver and all her treasures; Libyans and Cushites will follow in his train.'*

"It has to come, Luke. There's nothing we can do to stop it - even the 'fairest of all lands' won't escape, 'and tens of thousands shall fall victims' but it appears to be limited - perhaps only a major, probing attack. Look at what the next phrase tells us:

*'Yet all these lands (including Edom and Moab and the remnants of the Ammonites) will survive his attack''*

"I don't call that very encouraging, it sounds as if we are going to take a mauling!"

"I can assure you that it will be nothing compared with what will happen to Micah Perga and his people!"

Luke wandered to the window.

"And into that turmoil, you sent Deborah, Gideon and David - and Kurt Weber - perhaps, your punishment will have lethal implications after all, Michael!"

The answer was slow in coming.

"Perhaps - Tell me Luke - What place would those four have had in the Camp of the Saints, when Gog launches his final assault?"

Luke turned and looked at him squarely.

"I thought Judgement was reserved to the Time of the End, Michael - or have you suddenly developed the ability to look into the hearts of men and see if they are guilty or innocent!?"

Michael returned his stare without blinking.

"I hope you're not going to join the general chorus of complaint, Luke! In the absence of any other authority, or indication about what should be done, I have taken what I believe to be appropriate steps. One way or the other, we all have to face the future. I may not be able to look into the hearts of men to see if they are innocent or guilty, but I am also not able to predict their destiny. They may or may not become involved in the assault Gog is about to make on Egypt - I can't know that. I punished them - but I left them their lives!"

He related the conversation to Leah, later in the day. She was silent at the end of it. He moved restlessly in his chair.

"Well! Don't you have something to say?"

"What do you want me to say, Michael? That I approve of the way you handled my abductors? That I agree with your taking away their privileges of citizenship? That I think Luke was wrong to suggest that you've become a judge? Honestly, Michael, I don't know whether you did right or wrong. There are some things which are too hard to put into comfortable categories. Only time will tell - and the only approval which matters, is that which you will or will not receive before the Godly Throne!"

The silence was heavy between them for a while. It was some time before Michael asked:

"How is Elena?"

"About the same - you have heard nothing from Georgi?"

Michael shook his head.

"I can't understand it, Leah. Surely, he would have made some sort of reply - even if it was simply to say: 'I'm not coming.'"

"What do you intend to do about it?"

"What can I do - I can't force the man to acknowledge my message!"

"Send another - somewhere other than where you sent the last."

Michael nodded slowly.

"I could try New Athens - we have had no communication with them for weeks but it might be worth a try. Malenski ought to be with his main force."

"With Sedova's army - Do it now, Michael!"

He looked at her sharply.

"Any particular reason?"

Leah hesitated.

"She needs him - now!"

Michael got up without another word and went to the communication centre. For good measure, he not only sent a copy of the original message to New Athens, but to a dozen more port cities along the southern coast of Greece. He mentally urged Georgi to respond, he couldn't shake off the feeling of foreboding about the impending birth. When he returned to where he had left Leah, he found that she was gone. One of the house servants told him:

"She received a message - Sister Malenski has started her labour!"

Elena Malenski was in labour for seventy-five hours. At the end of that time, she managed to give birth to her child, it was a boy, but it was so traumatised by the struggle for birth, that it died after a few minutes. Elena was extremely weak. The long months of privation and starvation, took their final toll. She lost the battle for her own life and followed her new son into death a few hours later. Leah had stayed with her for the entire time, but the man Elena had desperately wanted to see, failed to come. Elena slipped out of life, unable or unwilling to remain any longer. From Georgi Malenski, there had been no response to the urgent messages Michael had ordered to be sent on a repeated basis.

Leah returned to her home in the Judean Hills, she was totally spent. Michael led her into a small reception room which faced out over the darkened valley, where once she and Marcus had listened to the

communities singing psalms of praise and of peace. It seemed an eternity from that time of tranquillity and love. She was very quiet at first, not enlarging on the bare facts which had already been conveyed to Michael. He held her in his arms and said nothing. She felt numb, she had lived through the desperate fight for life, every step of the way. Elena had tried so hard, but the child had been too big for her, and the midwives had had insufficient skill, and there was no one who could help her. Eventually, the tide burst and she wept for the sheer futility of what she had witnessed.

Michael held her and let her expend the grief. When she had quietened down, she asked.

"What is going to be done about telling Georgi Malenski - and Piotr?"

"First things first, Leah. I will get hold of Georgi, one way or the other. He MUST be told - as for Piotr - he must be told too - and beyond that, Georgi must make the decisions about his son."

He felt her stiffen in his arms.

"You won't allow him to take the boy away!?"

"He is the boy's father, I can't refuse to allow him access to his son."

"No, Michael! You can't allow Piotr to go to that monster - Elena fought so hard to keep him away from the influence of war and armies and the glorification of conquest."

Michael repeated emphatically.

"We have nothing to say in the matter, Leah. Georgi IS the boy's father. He has the right to do as he pleases with his son - and as yet, he hasn't been proved to be the monster you think he is!"

She eased back from his shoulder and stared into his face.

"Sometimes, I don't understand you - There isn't the slightest doubt in the minds of most of the people to whom I talk, that Georgi is Gog. You simply refuse to accept the evidence which is staring you in the face. How many more deaths, or evictions from property held for centuries, or rapes and pillage, are you going to ignore? Georgi Malenski is Gog - and Piotr has no place with him!"

"I repeat - Georgi is the legal guardian of his son and I have nothing to say!"

"Then, I will have plenty to say if he shows his nose here to claim his son. I will tell him of a desperate woman who tried so hard to bring his child into the world, and who lost the battle before it began, because of the indifference of the man she loved, who couldn't be persuaded to leave his army of conquest to come to her side when she needed him. I will tell him how she whispered his name at the moment she died. I will tell him of the ebbing away of gladness and joy, which shone in her eyes when she finally gave birth, until it was taken from her with the knowledge that the child wouldn't breath. I have a lot to tell Georgi Malenski - and not even you, Michael, will stop me!"

She fled from the room and Michael was left to stare into the darkness which shrouded the garden. He thought out what had to be done and then called Luke. He appeared very quickly. Michael waved a hand over the lighting control and stared at him. Luke's expression was heavy with sympathy.

"I suppose you heard what Leah said?"

"Sorry if I intruded on your privacy - it's just that I've learned to be close by at this time of the day - it seems to be the time when you have your best - or your craziest ideas and need someone off whom to bounce them."

Michael smiled slightly.

"It sounds as if I made one of my more intelligent choices when I asked you to take over from Simon - he had much the same sort of philosophy."

"Philosophy?"

"Best summed up as: Keeping Michael from making a thorough ass of himself and steering him in the way of prudence and diplomacy - I must tell you, he didn't always succeed - and neither will you. Sometimes, there are circumstances which demand neither prudence, nor diplomacy - and I rather think this is one of them!"

Luke held his peace and waited.

"I want to know where Georgi Malenski is to be found. I won't take any excuses and I don't care if you work the staff until they drop. I don't want to deal with his underlings, or even his second-in-command. I don't want to know where he was yesterday, or where he might be. I want to know where he IS - so get to it, Luke. We have a long night ahead of us!"

He looked in on Leah. She was in bed and very quiet. He wasn't sure whether she was asleep or laying awake in the darkness. He didn't adjust the lighting control, instead, he left her and closed the door manually. He went back down to the communications centre. Luke was at work with three assistants. He didn't disturb them either, instead, he returned to the reception room and tried to work out what he was going to do. Over two hours later, Luke appeared at the door of the half lit room. Michael adjusted the lux and looked at him quizzically.

"Malenski is in New Athens - He was positively identified as flying in six hours ago. He's been closeted together with Sedova and his captains for the past three hours. I would suggest they're putting the final touches to their plans for the invasion of North Africa. We haven't tried to organise contact - I would suggest that if we tried, we would receive the run-around from his aides - So, what do you want us to do now, boss."

"Contact New Athens and tell them to expect me in two hours, at which time it is imperative that I speak face to face with Georgi Malenski on the subject of Gog - and other matters!"

Luke nodded, he was white to the gills.

"I guessed that you had something like that in mind, Michael - and it simply can't be allowed!"

Michael eyed him mildly.

"And who intends to stop me - you?"

Luke shook his head.

"Not me, Michael - Leah!"

Michael shook his head slowly.

"Leah won't stop me - I've made up my mind!"

"To commit suicide!"

"My time isn't now, Luke - Now, if I was to send you, I might not be so confident - you might be slaughtered by Sedova's men - but not me. It isn't my time!"

"Fatalistic mumbo-jumbo! If someone sticks a knife into you, you'll die

like anyone else!"

"But no one will even try, Luke. So, prepare a Shuttle - I will travel alone - STOP ARGUING - I will travel alone - and if you value your position with me, you will keep these arrangements confidential!"

Luke glowered at him, opened his mouth to protest, thought better of it, turned on his heel and stalked out of the room. Michael watched him go and smiled a little. Luke was becoming a good friend. He had meant what he said earlier, he had made a good choice.

He managed to get away from the house without rousing Leah. His departure from the Salt Sea Terminal was equally private. The message to New Athens had been relayed to every other reception station within two thousand kilometres. There were many people who were being roused from their beds to hear the news that Michael ben Levi was on his way to parley with the man they were all calling Gog.

Two thirds of the way across the Eastern Basin, he picked up an escort. He saw them converging upon him from a number of bases along the Grecian coast. In a matter of seconds, it would be determined whether they would shoot him out of the sky, or whether they would afford him due diplomatic privileges. When a dozen or more Shuttles formed into a loose formation around him, he was sure that he would soon come face to face with Georgi Malenski.

It wasn't immediately so, his Shuttle was escorted to a terminal close to New Athens. It was still dark, so he could see nothing of the ancient treasures which still remained from over three and a half thousand years earlier. He was much more acutely aware of the large man who greeted him. Michael eyed him squarely. He had no doubt in his mind that this was Georgi's general. Pik Sedova bared his yellow, broken teeth in an unattractive grimace. Michael assumed it to be a smile.

"Welcome to New Athens, Administrator ben Levi."

"I thank you for your welcome, Pik Sedova."

There was a slight jerk of surprise.

"You know me?"

"Who hasn't heard of Pik Sedova, the colleague of Georgi Malenski, who is demonstrating such military genius in this time?"

Sedova wasn't used to the diplomatic niceties. He jerked his head in acknowledgement.

"Then, you will know that the purpose of this visit is already doomed to failure, we have no intention of listening to pleas that we should hold our hand against those who are determined to stand in our way."

"And that is what you believe to be the purpose of my visit?"

Sedova glowered at him.

"What else?"

"I have something for the ears of Georgi Malenski - a private word which concerns him personally - and nothing to do with the plans for the conquest of North Africa and Egypt!"

Sedova jerked again and then the unattractive grin returned.

"We have no plans of conquest, Administrator ben Levi."

"Perhaps not, brother Sedova - but Gog has!"

Sedova stiffened.

"Are you accusing us of being Gog?"

"I wasn't talking of accusations, brother Sedova, but of prophesy. Gog is going to invade North Africa and Egypt, nothing and no one can stop it. The word will be fulfilled!"

Sedova looked uncertain, Michael calmly waited for an answer.

"I don't know about prophesies, or what this Gog is supposed to do. I only know what I intend to do!"

"Which is no concern of mine, brother Sedova - you must do what is in your heart - and I must do what is in mine. At the present moment, what is in my heart is to speak with Georgi Malenski."

A voice came from behind him - it was one he knew.

"And so you shall, Michael ben Levi!"

Michael turned on his heel. Georgi was standing a few paces away, directly behind him. Michael had no idea how long he had been standing there, listening to the conversation. Michael nodded a greeting.

"I am happy to meet you again, Georgi."

Malenski nodded and gestured to a Pod which had been brought into the reception area.

"We will go somewhere more private."

Michael turned back to Sedova, he caught the barely suppressed expression of contempt which had been directed at his commander. Michael felt a sudden chill down his spine, Georgi was walking on a tightrope.

"Thank you for greeting me, brother Sedova - and for given me the opportunity to speak with you."

Once again, there was a terse nod of uncomfortable acknowledgement. Michael turned away and entered Georgi's Pod. They moved out of the reception area and gathered speed. It was just dawn and the light was enough to outline Malenski's profile. He looked even more emaciated than before - but the intense nervous energy was still there. In Michael's estimation, he would not have slept in the previous twenty hours - or even more - but he still radiated an almost frenetic energy.

"You are lucky to get away with your life, Michael. I think Sedova was intrigued when he knew you were coming. He senses that you will ultimately oppose him and his army. If Gog is infamous, you are also famous - you are the one who stands up for his people. Sedova is intrigued with you, but perhaps I came at the right moment."

Michael murmured.

"So, Jonathon did save David, after all."

Georgi glanced at him and smiled slightly.

"Jonathon was always bailing out David - read your books of the prophet Samuel!"

Michael smiled back, but it was difficult - he knew the easy relationship would soon end when he had broke the news about Elena. Georgi's next comment was casual.

"I'm quite sure your dangerous trip was not motivated by the desire to pay a visit to strengthen our friendship."

"Dangerous?"

"The Eastern Basin can be a treacherous area to cross in the dark."

"Perhaps - but my reason was urgent."

They had arrived in front of a small house set on the side of a hill. There were no guards in evidence. Georgi either saw himself as a man of destiny, or he was extremely indifferent about his own safety.

He led the way into house, room after room illuminated as they entered. Georgi tossed an explanation over his shoulder.

"The previous owner preferred to rely on his body heat to activate everything, rather than waving his hands around."

He gestured to a recliner and poured two drinks from a decanter. He silently offered one to his guest.

"Before we get down to the pressing business which has brought you on your night mission, let us share a drink - as friends."

Michael nodded and held his glass high in a silent toast. He threw the liquor down his throat. Georgi eyed him steadily for a moment, then:

"So, Michael - what is it? Are you going to appeal to me to stop the invasion of North Africa!?"

It was a challenge as well as a question.

Michael shook his head.

"You either will, or will not, go ahead with your plans - it isn't the reason why I am here - Tell me, Georgi, have you received any of my messages?"

Georgi shook his head slowly.

"Messages? The only message I have received was handed to me this evening. I was also told that it has been relayed around most of the Mediterranean - so it was hardly private! But, I understand your caution."

"I have sent other messages, spaced over the last three weeks - they were urgent - but we received no response."

Georgi set down his drink and stared hard into Michael's sober face. He whispered:

"So what was in your urgent messages? Has something happened to Piotr - or Elena?"

Michael nodded grimly.

"Which!?"

"Elena - I am so sorry to tell you, Georgi - she had a difficult time in the birth of your child - she is dead!"

It was incisive, it was clean, it was brutally factual - the word was said - she was dead.

Georgi's face was frozen into immobility. When he managed to speak, his voice was a rasp.

"And the child?"

"A boy - he also died!"

He explained softly, what had happened. The desperate messages sent, but which had never been received, the battle Elena had fought and lost. Georgi sat hunched in his seat and stared at the floor. When Michael was finished, he looked up and stared at him.

"I thank you for all you tried to do for her - now, please, I want to be alone for a while. You will find a room at the back, there you can rest."

Michael hesitated, he wanted to reach out to him - to offer some sort of comfort.

"I wondered if we could pray together?"

Georgi's face was contorted in anguish.

"I no longer pray - what use is it to pray to a God who does not listen to me? I have no god, read your prophecies! Gog worships a god his ancestors didn't know - the god of the citadel and the fortress! Conquest! - that is my God!"