

About two thirds of the way along the North African coast, Saul asked his brother to change course to the north. It coincided with the completion of the crossing of the ancient Gulf of Sirte and having the Tunisian mountain ranges dead ahead. Eli raised an enquiring eyebrow.

"I suppose you realise that this would be about the limit of Micah Perga's Administration? Joshua Aristides's responsibility starts just beyond those mountains. I would have thought it to be a good place to take a closer look - the last reports were to the effect that Malenski hadn't crossed over them, preferring to avoid entanglements with Joshua's defenders."

"Correction - they were the last reports we received and would be some days old. The situation may well have changed. I take your point, however - but my interest is the land bridge."

"The link between Europe and Africa, you mean? I often wonder why it was ever called a land bridge, to my way of thinking, it was never more than an open expanse of treacherous swamp, which even made Pik Sedova have second thoughts."

"Or, Georgi Malenski - whichever version of the story you prefer."

"So, why the interest?"

"If there is any place to show us if the water level of the Eastern Basin has increased, it will be there. Your treacherous swamp will have become a shallow lagoon!"

Eli wheeled the shuttle to the north and followed the old coast. At first glance, the dikes along the reclaimed land adjacent to the Tunisian shore were holding and there was little evidence that the saline waters had penetrated.

"It looks good so far - "

"On the face of it yes."

"Does pessimism come with age?"

"Perhaps - but prudence replaces the impetuosity of youth!"

Dead ahead, was the mountain of Pantellaria. Eli eyed it with caution. The last reports indicated that it was still held by the forces who had been loyal to Micah Perga, but much could have changed in the meantime. If there was any point where they might be challenged, it was here. He wasn't quite sure what he would do, or could do, if he was confronted with an order to land. Saul said quietly:

"Veer away from the mountain. I am quite sure we have attracted their attention, but we should not appear provocative."

"I have no desire to appear provocative! As far as I am concerned, we started to appear provocative when we altered course to the north!"

"You are being petulant again!"

"Take a quick look at what you want to see - and let's get out of here!"

Saul was studying the surface below.

"Can't you bring us down lower?"

"We are not a sail boat!"

"I have the utmost confidence in your skills to prevent that from

happening."

Eli slowed the shuttle to a crawl and hovered just above the surface. Pantellaria seemed to loom over them, although it was fully twenty kilometres distant. There was no sign of life. The structures on it seemed to be intact and as always, brooding and watchful.

"Get a move on, Saul! I don't like this place!"

"Change course to bring us to the tip of Cape Bon."

"And then what!?"

"Then, we will spy out the land and make a rapid landing to confirm my suspicions!"

Eli's mouth sagged open momentarily and then he shut it into a grim line. He accelerated abruptly and treated his brother to a rough ride to the African shore. Saul said nothing. Eli patrolled along the reclaimed edge of the dikes at the outer edge of the polders.

"I have no intention of going further inland."

"This will be quite satisfactory. I want to take some measurements."

"Is this really necessary!?"

"Do you imagine that I would risk life and limb if it wasn't?"

"I don't really know, Saul - I don't really know."

They flattened a perfectly good garden crop in the corner of one of the polders, it close to the outer dike wall. Saul was out of the shuttle door before the power drive had closed down. Eli raised his eyes to the ceiling and watched his brother scramble up the inner side of the dike and stand on the flat access path on the top. Saul stared out into the ocean, quite motionless. Eli gritted his teeth, he was a perfect target for anyone inclined to loose an arrow into his scrawny back.

Saul fell to his knees and peered over the far side, he was less of a target, but appeared in imminent danger of overbalancing into the Western Basin. Eli had calculated by this time, that they were just within its confines. His brother regained his feet, took a sharp look inland and then descended the slope in some haste and regained the shuttle. He bundled in through the door and closed it.

"We have attracted attention, little brother!"

"I'm not in the remotest degree surprised - big brother!"

Eli gunned the ship into life and lifted it away from the soft ground. He headed out over the ruffled waters of the sea. He looked over his shoulder, Saul was still peering out of the window.

"It was a woman with two small children, Eli."

"I hope you are not asking me to go back and rescue them - if so, I refuse!"

Saul shook his head sorrowfully.

"What frightened people we have become, Eli - in such a short time. In the Kingdom of Peace, it would have been unthinkable for us to have abandoned them."

"We don't know that we have abandoned them - they could have been a decoy, perhaps her husband and fifty brothers were coming up behind - did you think of that?"

"On the other hand, perhaps we were her last hope - did you think of that possibility?"

Eli glared at him.

"Do you want me to go back?"

Saul shook his head again.

"You are right, of course - we can not take the risk."

"Did your little adventure give you the answers you wanted? - Saul, you are completely hopeless when it comes to your own security! You stood there, a perfect target - and advertised our precise position."

"Nothing happened to me - and yes, I did get some answers - and yes, my pessimism has increased. There is a steady and rapid current flowing from the west. That is the opposite to what one might expect if the Gibraltar pumping stations are working as they should. Their task is to evacuate surplus water into the Atlantic - the current is flowing in the wrong direction."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that we had better make a rapid transit to the Gibraltar Dam and then to the Sierra Nevada headquarters of Joshua Aristides!"

In Jerusalem, Leah continued to act as deputy to her ailing husband.

Each morning she woke, hoping for the return of the man who had led the Administration with such surety. Without a doubt, there was some improvement, and at times, it was almost as if he had succeeded in breaking free of whatever was binding him, but the glazed expression would return after a while and he would retreat to where she was unable to reach him.

It became impracticable to continue using her home as a temporary headquarters. It was too far away from the Administrative centre and it was there, that Michael's staff tried to wrestle with the queries and problems which flooded in on a daily basis. The whole process of decision slowed to a crawl because it was necessary for messengers to make their way to her home, to and from the Secretariat. On the third morning after Eli and Saul had been despatched on their fact-finding mission, she made up her mind to move herself to the Administration headquarters. The news was greeted with wails of protest from her devoted house staff. She listened patiently and held firm.

"You say that it's too soon after the birthing. You say that the baby is too young to be left. You tell me that he relies on me for feeding. I agree with you all - but I want to remind you that Michael got me out of bed and brought me here one day after the birthing - another short journey across the city by shuttle, will hardly send me or the baby into a rapid decline! The baby comes with me - and so does Michael. The other children can stay here for the time being - you will thoroughly spoil them and they will love it! So, you see, there's no problem - all we need is a little reorganisation."

She had her way and so it was, that by the end of that day, she was firmly ensconced in the centre of Jerusalem, together with Michael and Adam and two house servants. There was even less room in the small apartment which Asher had once used, but they would manage. She looked around the well known rooms and could almost imagine Asher watching her and smiling quietly and muttering something about his little tyrant. It was a term Joshua had often used about his mother. She wondered why she should suddenly think about him, but she supposed it was because, by this time, Saul and Eli would be drawing close to the sprawling house in the Sierra Nevada ranges, in the hope that he would be there - that he had survived the visitation of the comet, even if he had survived the onslaught of the Scandians.

After she had greeted the posse of secretaries, who had hovered around to ensure that she was safely established and was once more alone, she realised afresh how hamstrung they were without the communications facilities they had taken for granted for such a long time. Jerusalem could have been an island - the Administration Secretariat itself, could be an island. There were insufficient Shuttles and most of them were dedicated to the task of transporting the corpses of the fallen from various places within Israel, to the burial ground in the Valley of Abarim - or had been despatched on critical missions, like that of Saul and Eli.

They were reduced to sending messages by hand and if she needed to know the position in some more remote area of Israel, by the time the news could be brought to her, it was already outdated. It was an impossible handicap if she wanted to restore the Administration back to where it had been before the advent of the destructive forces of Gog.

It was already late in the afternoon and she was weary. Her staff had tried to insist that she should rest, but they had had to acknowledge defeat. She was not left alone for long, the control pad on the desk illuminated. At least, they were not reduced to walking to the door and calling for attention. She opened the channel.

"Brother Malachi Judah requests a meeting."

She got to her feet and walked to the door - this was one of those occasions when it was justified. She opened the panel and put her hand in his and then led him into the office. He smiled gently and stared intently into her face.

"Greetings, sister Leah - my dear, you look very tired. You must not extend yourself so much. I should not have troubled you at this hour!"

"Greetings, brother Malachi - I am tired, but I am not too tired to see such a valued old friend and helper."

"You are much too kind, my dear - and you overrate me, I think."

"I needed advice - and here you are!"

She led him to a chair close to the window and sat opposite him. He was breathing a little heavily. He smiled ruefully.

"I must say that I find the loss of the Pod system very trying. I suppose it only goes to show how lazy we have become and that we seem to have forgotten how to use the two legs which our God has given us."

"I know what you mean, uncle Malachi - I have had a lot of thoughts about how we are hamstrung by our loss of communications - and our loss of mobility. I can see no answers in the short term."

"I understand the power supply is one of the critical factors?"

She nodded.

"As you know, we have managed to rig an emergency service, but it is barely enough for domestic needs."

Malachi nodded.

"It will take a long time before we are back to normal, I think."

"I very much doubt if we have that much time, uncle Malachi!"

He watched her resting back in the chair. She was clearly exhausted.

"My dear, you must take a rest. The problems will still be with us tomorrow!"

She laughed.

"You might be surprised at how many people have said the same thing to me today."

"And they are quite right! Nothing is to be gained by you becoming ill - and you have your new child to consider! Forgive an old man the luxury of giving you a well deserved lecture!"

"You are forgiven, uncle Malachi - it reminds me so much of Father Asher."

"I have thought a great deal about him during recent days - I wonder how he would have coped with the current situation."

"He would have been in total command - he and Father Joel - they would have conspired and schemed together and they would have found the answers much more quickly."

"Even they could not have done the impossible - and it is rapidly appearing that the impossible is what we are facing. We simply do not have the resources, so much was destroyed by the hail of fire."

"As I said before, perhaps we will not have enough time to recover completely. Perhaps Our Father has other plans."

"Of that we can be quite sure, daughter! Our Father will soon summons us, but in the meantime, we must do the best we can - just as it was in the days before the First Resurrection, so it will be in the days before the Second - we must occupy until Our Father is satisfied and then, He will call an end to all of our efforts and we shall appear before His Throne!"

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Then, Malachi went on:

"My dear, I came to see you today, firstly to see how you are - and I must say that I do not like what I see! Secondly, I feel it is essential that I speak to Michael!"

Leah sat to attention, she eyed the old man warily.

"Is that really desirable - or even necessary, uncle Malachi? You know how unwell he is."

"Leah - quite frankly, I do not know how unwell he is! Nor do the rest of his advisors. Please! Do not misunderstand me - none of us doubt your word that he is not well enough to perform his duties, but on the other hand, none of us have seen him since the day of the Battle of Armageddon. There are certain matters which only he can address. I have delayed on the particular problem which I wish to place before him, but I am afraid it can no longer be left unresolved."

Leah stared at him and leaned back in her chair.

"What if I was to tell you that you might not even get a response from him? There are times when he seems to fade away into some remote place, where not even I can reach him. Uncle Malachi, I very much doubt if you will get a coherent answer out of him, no matter how urgent your business!"

Despite her control, the tears trickled down her face. Malachi stood and reached down and drew her up from the chair. She cried on his shoulder. It had been a long time coming, but at last, she released her grief. She sobbed.

"It's as if he died at Armageddon and not Gog! I can't understand! He was supposed to be victorious, but he has been defeated - but Gog died too - we know that! Michael saw his body - Georgi Malenski. From that time, Michael has been fighting to come to terms with something - perhaps, it is

with himself!"

The weeping subsided and the old man held her out at arm's length.

"It is really essential that I see him, my dear Leah! I insist - this is a matter of military discipline and cannot be delayed."

She nodded and wiped her eyes. She was back in control.

"As long as you realise the situation, uncle Malachi. I will take you to him."

She led the way to their communal room. Michael was sitting in front of a roaring fire, staring at the flames.

"Michael - Michael - Malachi Judah has paid us a visit, he wants to talk to you."

Michael looked round slowly and appeared to take some time to come into focus. He rose to his feet and extended his hand in greeting.

"Brother Judah, my dear friend."

Malachi took his hand and held on to it far longer than was required by the act of greeting. He turned to Leah.

"My dear, I would like to talk to the Administrator alone - it is a confidential matter."

Leah nodded reluctantly and made her exit. She closed the door panel on the two men and wondered if she had done the right thing in exposing Michael to the visitor.

Within the room, they sat facing each other.

"We have been worried about you, Michael."

"We?"

"My fellow advisors - your advisors - your illness has given us considerable concern."

There was a flash of the old humour.

"I can assure you, it is giving me some concern, also!"

"Michael - I have a serious matter to put to you, which concerns a senior officer of the Defence Militia. I felt it proper to talk to you. Leah can hardly be expected to give a response to this matter."

Michael appeared to make a great effort to concentrate. He nodded

"Go ahead, Malachi - I'll do what I can."

"Excellent! The problem concerns a man who has deserted his post. As far as we can determine, something happened to him during, or shortly after Armageddon. His fellow officers can't be sure of all the circumstances, but his reaction was to desert the battlefield and abandon his men. He didn't run away in the physical sense, we know exactly where he is to be found, but he refuses to return and take up his responsibilities. Our question to you is this: What punishment should we impose on this character?"

Michael stared at the old man.

"You have no idea of the reasons for his behaviour?"

Malachi shook his head slowly.

"The most we have been able to learn is that something triggered it. It reminded someone of the story of Jonah after he visited Nineveh - perhaps, you will remember. God had threatened to destroy the city and all its inhabitants, but changed his mind. Jonah went out into the desert and was very annoyed at the change of plans. He sat down and waited to die and then a small gourd grew around him to shelter him from the blazing sun and he got

relief. Then, the gourd died and he lamented over it. God said to Jonah, you lamented over the death of the gourd, but you would rather see Nineveh and all its inhabitants die.

As far as this man's fellow officers can see, he is angry with God because He fulfilled his Plan at Armageddon - and because Gog died!"

Michael stared into Malachi's relentless eyes. The old man went on.

"You should recognise that officer, Michael! It is you! You have fled from the battlefield and refuse to return! You hide at home and let your wife live for you! You appear to be angry with Almighty God for allowing your friend Georgi Malenski to die - and you still refuse to acknowledge that he was Gog - I do not believe you ever acknowledged him to be such! You persisted for a long time, to refuse to recognise the obvious fact. I counsel you, Michael ben Levi - do not provoke Our God your Father! He gave you the victory in a mighty battle - now you must rejoice and be thankful in the victory!"

I want to add another reminder. It concerns your ancestor David. Once he lamented when a battle had been won by his soldiers and his captains complained that he refused to give them credit and encouragement and that the victory was hollow because he wept over the dead. I give you the earnest advice to heed that old story and fall on your knees in thankfulness for the deliverance of the Father, who has shielded Jerusalem, His Holy City and the Camp of the Saints from the evil which Satan attempted through his servant Gog and those who accompanied him!"

The old man rose and towered over his host.

"It may well be, Michael ben Levi, that you will have no further use for me as your advisor. If that is the case, then, so be it. I served Asher, your predecessor, for many decades - and I have served you as loyally. I have never believed an advisor to be a 'yesman'. I had many a battle with Asher when I thought he was acting wrongly and sometimes our discussions were heated. I believe you are acting wrongly. You are sinning against your wife and new son as well as against your responsibilities. Leah and your baby, should be enjoying your adoration at this time, instead, you ignore them, you stare into the fire and Leah struggles to be a new mother and to carry the load you have thrown down. Think on what I have had to say to you, my dear brother Michael - and may Our God bless you!!"