

Leah thought back over the conversations she had had with Ambrose. After the private session in his inner sanctum, she had sat with the family for the evening meal. Compared with previous occasions, the mood was subdued. They were beginning to feel powerless to handle the pressure of events which was building up around them. The strain was beginning to tell. This was confirmed on the following day, when Ambrose bade her farewell. He had faced her, his Mongolian features set in severity.

"Do what you can for us, Leah. You are cut in the same mould as Marcus - perhaps most of the Steinbeckers are. Our situation is holding, but I can't predict for how long. I have a gut feeling that there's worse to come. The conditions in this place have gone back hundreds of years and they're similar to those which faced my ancestors. They had to confront bleak windswept plains. They were nomads, who were forced to move from place to place because of the conditions.

They moved their herds of wild horses and asses to the south with the onset of winter and then north again in the spring. The governing factor was where they could find pasture. This is not a fertile place - not without the benefits of the Kingdom - not without the sevenfold light of the sun and the promise of a harvest in every month. The numbers we have around us here cannot be supported - and I remember Marcus telling us that starvation is a sharp spur!"

She had promised to do what she could - and she had meant what she said. In her heart, she knew it would not be much. Events were moving too fast.

When she arrived back in Salem, she found a message waiting for her from Michael, it was a scripture reference:

Daniel 11:20-24, followed by the words, 'It is beginning.' she made it her first task to scroll up the reference. It read:

*'A contemptible creature will succeed but will not be given recognition as king. Yet he will seize the kingdom by dissimulation and intrigue in time of peace. He will sweep away all forces of opposition as he advances, and even the Prince of the Covenant will be broken. He will enter into fraudulent alliances and, although the people behind him are but few, he will rise to power and establish himself in a time of peace. He will overrun the richest districts of the province and succeed in doing what his fathers and forefathers failed to do, distributing spoil, booty, and property to his followers. He will lay his plans against the fortresses, but only for a time.'*

Leah eased back in her chair and reread the text. The implication was clear enough: For 'king' she transposed a recognised authority. A usurper will arise who will assume control of a specific area. Michael was suggesting that already this was taking place and that this would be Gog!

She could only assume that one of Alexei Kharkov's 'governors' was at last showing his hand. Someone had usurped power, he was not somebody

appointed by a Kingly Priest in the usual way, but by hypocrisy and pretence, he had seized power!

It was a question of how far he had got. It appeared as if he had already started to crush localised opposition and to ignore those who still followed the appointed authority. The leader of the appointed authority, that is, Michael, the 'Prince of the Covenant', was powerless to stop him.

In the immediate future, they could expect a great deal of clever political manoeuvring. Gog's power base would initially be quite small but by astute alliances, he would gain strength without resorting to war. This would be followed by a time of consolidation of his power and he would virtually buy followers from the proceeds of what he would appropriate. Within this period of peace, he would start to prepare for the final conquest.

Michael had not identified him, perhaps it was too dangerous to do so, even over the supposedly secure diplomatic channels. There could be no telling to what degree they had been infiltrated. She drew a small amount of consolation that there was still time for her to do something to try to alleviate the suffering in Ambrose's area and this became her immediate priority.

It wasn't the only section of the Far East Administration which experienced difficulties. Reports started to come in of massive problems to the south. Flood waters had broken the dikes along the major rivers of China and India. Millions of people had been swept away and vast areas of urgently needed crops devastated. The pressure was building, it was being applied relentlessly. If she had time to think of the halcyon days which had once existed during the Kingdom, her thoughts seemed more like dreams and fantasies.

She saw little of her children. Her days began early and finished long after they had been put to bed by the ever efficient Rebecca. She snatched a few hours with them when she could; they were precious moments but she couldn't hope to make up for the neglect of other times. She began to feel eased out of her rightful place as their mother and sensed that Rebecca was gradually usurping her authority. It was ironic, as Michael's deputy in Salem, she had almost limitless authority. On the other hand, she was powerless to prevent her children from slipping away from her.

The great tidal surge of refugees continued. The storehouses under Ambrose's control rapidly became depleted. The only recourse was to open up fresh reserves and organise a massive airlift to the critical areas. The same applied in the flood disaster areas. She soon realised that it could only be a stopgap measure. Despite the over abundance of harvests towards the end of the Kingdom and the building program of storehouses, there had to come a time when even these would be exhausted.

They were approaching the time when the story of Joseph in Egypt no longer applied. The seven lean years which had followed the seven years of plenty, had been finite. After the seven lean years, it could be presumed that the conditions returned to normal. Normality would never return in their days. Their destiny included Gog and his Horde and then the Final Days.

The message from Michael was only one of many problems which required her immediate attention. The rest of the day was spent in trying to grapple with priorities and with conferences with her senior assistants. It was already dark when another report was placed on her desk. It had arrived by

special courier, it was for her eyes only. She paused with wrestling with yet another problem of logistics and eyed the deep red, sealed cover. It promised a diversion from other matters, but she hesitated to pick it up. She was almost certain she knew what it contained and intuitively, she knew it was something she didn't want to know.

She opened the seals and extracted a holo-disk. She inserted it into the reader and waited for the images to form. A stranger emerged from the focusing haze of light, a three dimensional image who had stared into the image recorder. The result was almost a lack of interest in the subject matter, which was delivered without emotion. Normally, Leah would have been irritated by the casualness, on this occasion, it tended to reinforce her self-imposed cocoon of restraint.

"These are the findings of an investigation into the causes of an incident involving a special Suborbiter Flight 173, destination Jerusalem, Central Administration Area, at 10.15 hours, Day 269, Year 1003.

The said flight terminated abnormally, with the loss of five persons.

This investigation has been initiated by Gideon Steinbecker, son of one of the deceased.

A preliminary review of the circumstances leading to the abnormal termination of Flight 173 follows:

The flight proceeded normally for fifty-nine minutes and forty-four seconds of the scheduled two hours and ten minute Flight Plan. Predefined in-flight communication was followed. The Suborbiter attained apogee at this point. It then departed from the pre-programmed flight path. The deviation resulted in an irretrievable loss of navigational integrity. Coincidental with this deviation, the vessel lost structural integrity, the cabin depressurized and the crew and passenger expired."

Leah halted the transmission and closed her eyes for a moment. It was a conscious effort to open them again. The death of Marcus had been reduced to a cold-blooded statement - 'the crew and passenger expired'. She knew she was being emotional and unfair. The report was an attempt to find a scientific explanation for a set of circumstances which still remained a mystery. She activated the transmission again.

"The vessel assumed an eccentric orbital path which delayed any attempt for an investigation team to effect a rendezvous. It was found necessary to await an appropriate orbital cycle, before a rendezvous could be achieved."

She stopped the recording again and stared at the frozen figure of the official. She had captured him with his mouth slightly open. It made him look a little like a codfish. So - they HAD achieved a rendezvous with the stricken ship! She resumed.

"Investigation of the hull confirmed that it had been ruptured. Examination of the rupture suggests that it was the result of an internal explosion."

She paused the transmission once more. She felt suddenly cold. The implications were becoming clear. She knew that there had always been a number of possibilities as to why the suborbiter had deviated from its flight path and had lost integrity.

The easiest to accept had been that it was the result of an incredibly

unlucky accident, perhaps caused by a collision with a meteorite, or even some manmade space junk from over a thousand years earlier, when man was so intent to launch himself into space.

An alternative possibility, had been that there had been a malfunction - an almost unheard of failure - in the suborbitor's power unit, which had caused an explosion.

A third possibility had been the one she had dreaded and found the least easy to accept - sabotage!

She touched the controller and the official came to life and continued.

"Preliminary examination of the ship's controls and motive unit, indicate no malfunction. The deviation from the flight path was as a result of an additional, powerful propellant which originated in an explosion. The same explosion ruptured the outer hull of the vessel!"

Leah closed her eyes once more and this time, the tears flowed down her cheeks. Marcus had been killed in an act of sabotage! He had been assassinated! She listened to the dispassionate voice with eyes shut.

"Traces of explosive material were found at the site of the hull fracture. Preliminary analysis reveals it to be a material used extensively in world-wide mining operations.

Conclusions: The suborbiter was the subject of an act of sabotage by a person or persons not yet identified which caused flight path deviation and the resultant loss of the passenger and crew."

She opened her eyes in time to see the anonymous man fading from the holo-pad. She could have rerun the report. It was standard practice and with other material she might have chosen to do so, with this - the cold-blooded summation of Marcus Steinbecker's death - she couldn't. It was already well into the evening and she felt exhausted - and desperately, she wanted to feel the warm bodies of her children in her arms.

A holo-conference with Michael was scheduled for the following day. She always made it her practice to enter the room which contained the holo-station early. In earlier days, it had been a matter of good manners. In these times, it was a matter of politics. No one liked to be kept waiting and the pre-Kingdom concepts of the value of time, were beginning to dominate the thinking of those who had the responsibility of administering what remained of the Kingdom. On this occasion, there seemed to be a conspiracy to prevent her from entering the room in time for the start of the transmission. There was a succession of irritating trivia, which was brought to her attention as if only she could deal with it. By the time she entered the room, her annoyance level had risen to the point of intolerance.

The transmission had already commenced. The image of Michael occupied the space beyond the empty chair which should have housed her before the commencement of the transmission. It was only when she took her place in it, that Michael looked up. He took in her flushed face with a growing smile. He said nothing.

"I'm so sorry, Michael! I was delayed by absolute nonsense. I can assure you that I'll have a lot to say when we're finished!"

He stared at her, the grin broadened.

"You're very beautiful when you're angry, Leah!"

She glared at him.

"I don't think this is the time nor is it the place for that old cliché, Michael!"

He lounged back in his chair.

"I feel like taking you in my arms and kissing away the anger lines!"

She drew in her breathe.

"In which case we can be thankful that twenty thousand kilometres separate us!"

He shook his head mournfully.

"You seem to be determined to take away all life's little pleasures."

"I think we should get down to business and stop wasting valuable power resources!"

He sighed.

"I can see that you're determined to be practical - and there's nothing more determined than a practical woman!"

She opened one of her reports.

"I thought we were going to discuss what else we could do for Ambrose in Mongolia, Soo Ching in China and Paul Vijay in Burma."

Michael's response was almost languid.

"Yes - I suppose we were - I'm sure another minute or two wouldn't make a great deal of difference to the situation. It so happens, I've already taken steps to help Paul and Soo from the resources in Arabia and Japan respectively - and don't tell me it was your responsibility and I ought not to have interfered. I knew you would agree and I wanted to devote this session to other subjects."

She eyed him silently and waited. He went on:

"The situation in northern Asia and Europe is coming to a head - I presume that you've studied my reference to the Book of Daniel?"

She nodded. He went on.

"Events are piling in on top of each other. Things are happening so fast, it's almost impossible to keep everyone up to date. Total anarchy rules from the mouth of the Lena in the east, to the coast of Scandia in the west. There is a disorganised surge of refugees moving southward away from the fearsome weather sweeping down from the Arctic. There is a total collapse of authority and control. The stronger are murdering and pillaging the weaker. They fight over a handful of grain or a half-rotten root, gouged out of the frozen ground. Our storehouses have been pillaged and then left in flames. The only thing slowing the advance to the south is that there are pitched battles taking place between groups which have coalesced around some

Joshua has tried to do something on his northern flank but he doesn't have a standing army. He can do very little to stem the tide. As far as Alexei is concerned, there is nothing but total silence. We can only assume the worst, he is either dead, or he is totally isolated. The indications are that the movement of the northern population has already overwhelmed his headquarters on the Yenesei. They are moving southward and westward towards the Himalayas and towards the Urals. We can assume that they will find it hard to cross the Asian peaks, so we can expect the focus of their advance to be towards the Urals and the Russian steppes.

Eventually, they will clash with the movement south from Scandia and when they have settled their differences, a mighty horde will stand poised

and ready to surge down on the Mediterranean Basin, the Fertile Crescent and the granaries of Egypt."

Leah saw the exhaustion on his face. She longed to reach out and touch him, but he was twenty thousand kilometres away. He looked at her and smiled.

"We expected it, Leah. I knew that one day, someone would have to tell someone else precisely what I have just told you. It shouldn't be a surprise to us. The problem is that now, the Prince of the Covenant can do nothing to stop them. They are like a forest fire which is burning everything in its path and like a forest fire, it cannot turn back on itself and return. Everything is destroyed behind them, the land has been razed and pillaged. There is only one thing missing to our eyes, and that is a central leader. I suspect that he has already emerged somewhere in that huge body of disorganised people - the chaos is so great that we haven't yet seen him, but when he does come, we will be surprised to find that he is already well established."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment, then Leah leaned forward.

"You believe that Alexei isn't able to function as an Administrator - his headquarters has been overwhelmed. Why do you think that?"

"Because we haven't been able to get a response from them for ten days. The communication links have been disrupted. I have even talked to Grigor Suskov in the Urals. I must say, I didn't get a great deal of co-operation from him. All he would say was that he had not been able to contact Alexei Kharkov for the same period of time. He had sent out scouting parties, some of whom did not return. As yet, he is secure on the European side of the Urals, but on the Asian side, there is chaos. I formed the impression that he didn't really believe what was happening and that it was all a bad dream which would go away as soon as he woke up!"

Leah smiled slightly.

"That sounds like Grigor Suskov. When Marcus talked to him three years ago, he formed the opinion that Grigor and his people saw no reason to change the habits of a thousand years on the supposition that something might change. Grigor Suskov is an ostrich!"

Michael grinned.

"I think you've got the wrong part of the world for ostriches, my darling."

She ignored the endearment.

"So, there isn't much we can do except to try to feed our stricken population and wait for events to come to a head on the Russian steppes?"

Michael nodded.

"We must wait for Gog - and that timetable isn't in our hands. We know what we can expect, but not when - "

Leah made to rise.

"There's something else, Leah."

She eased back in her chair, she knew what the change of subject implied. Michael eased another folder from beneath the pile he was carrying. It was red, the same colour as that which had contained the holo-disk she had viewed on the previous day. The smile was gone, replaced with such a

loving compassion, she felt like weeping without another word being spoken. His voice was very gentle.

"We must deal with this, Leah."

She nodded briefly and leaned back her head.

"I received a copy of this report - as did you - because of the position of authority we both hold. I know the subject is extremely painful for you - as it is for me in a different way. Marcus and I were never really close, but I think I could count him as more than an acquaintance and I am grieved to think that he was a victim of murder. Leah, we must also understand that there are others involved, the crew of the ship. Their families will demand a further investigation. They will call for justice."

She nodded and then found her voice.

"I know, Michael. We will be under very watchful eyes - especially those of Gideon."

"Gideon? - Ah! Marcus's son! I see that he was the one to insist on the investigation - he was perfectly within his rights, of course."

"Of course!"

"You don't like him?"

"Gideon is a self-opinionated windbag! I sometimes wonder how a man like Marcus could sire a son like Gideon - or a daughter like Deborah, for that matter!"

Michael's grin returned. She glared at him.

"What's so amusing?"

"You, my darling! You're beginning to sound like the fictional version of the typical stepmother!"

"You can rest assured that Gideon and Deborah are not the fictional version of poor, downtrodden stepchildren! Both of them have always considered their father was out of his mind to marry a woman young enough to be his granddaughter!"

Michael leaned back in his chair and roared with laughter. A loose leaf from one of his reports fluttered to the floor, it came to rest under Leah's chair.