

Marcus tried to remember the last time he had had a face to face interview with one of the Kingly Priests - and realised that it had been a number of years. Of course, there had been those occasions when he had been a member of a group which had been visited on a regular basis. It was part of the doctrine that: 'All men shall be taught of God'. The Kingly-Priests had been, and still were, diligent in the function of leading all men to the knowledge of God's Plan.

A face to face meeting was rare, although it was open to every citizen of the Kingdom to seek out a Firstling and obtain an individual interview. It was more rare for the reverse to happen, for a Firstling to actually seek out an individual - normally, the Administrators were left to ensure the equitable distribution of the produce of the Kingdom. The Kingly-Priests and the great uncountable multitude who had been present at the Throne of God during the Wedding feast, concentrated themselves on the awesome task of teaching all who had ever lived.

The visible, physical creation and all those who were scattered across the face of the earth, were but a microscopic fraction of the number who once had been conceived by mankind, had died, and now dwelt in the numberless realms of eternity. There were myriads of souls, greater than the sands of the deserts which had been converted into fertile wheatlands.

Someone had made a calculation just before the Destruction. He had allowed for four generations to a century. There had been twenty centuries since the birth of Jesus until his time. He calculated that there had been eighty generations. His calculation was based on the premise that every man had two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents - and then sixteen - and then thirty-two - and so on. The answer to how many ancestors he could have expected to have, back to the time of Jesus, had been an astronomical number. A number far in excess of those who had been living at that time. The number had been approximately

2,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 - two million, billion, billion.

It showed him a number of things. Firstly, that every man, woman and child could make the same calculation about their ancestors and would come the same result. Even if man declined to call another his brother, they were certainly cousins, for all men shared common ancestry. Then, it showed him that over the centuries, branches of the great tree of his genealogy, had interwoven and spliced back into each other. It also gave him an indication of the vast numbers who had entered the realms of eternity over the centuries and the responsibility he had towards them, to try to lead them to the Alter of Grace established in the Apostle's Ministry.

It was small wonder that during the thousand years of the Kingdom, the Kingly-Priests had allowed the citizens of the Kingdom to deal with matters which were not vital to the soulish life. Marcus stirred in his chair, rose and walked to the window.

Now, one of them had manifested himself to him. He had been told

something and he had been shown something. As was so often the case, his natural instinct to take a course of action, had been diverted into another direction. He had been on the point of making the decision to follow Leah to Jerusalem, with his tail between his legs, admitting defeat in his mission.

The Firstling had directed otherwise. He was to persist with Joshua. He was to be Joshua's friend and supporter, despite his host's cavalier attitude to Leah. Marcus also had an alternative task and that was to convey the Firstling's message to Asher and Joel. No time frame had been set - once again, it would be left either to his discretion, or to the sequence of events which would unfold during the next few hours or days.

Almost on queue, the door chime sounded. It was mid-afternoon, Marcus had missed his lunch, but he was almost sure that his visitor would have nothing to do with his state of hunger. He opened the door and confronted a solemn faced Joshua. The silence was awkward between them.

"I have been looking for you, Marcus. You were nowhere to be found."

"I was admiring some of your art treasures. I hope you didn't think I'd left your house without thanking you for your hospitality. Incidentally, I feel I must thank you on behalf of my cousin - Leah felt obliged to leave in rather a hurry!"

Joshua stared at him thoughtfully.

"I am grieved that she felt it necessary."

"I hope you will agree that her decision was understandable. She saw no good reason to stay longer."

"You are angry with me, Marcus?"

Marcus shook his head slowly.

"I'm not angry with you, Joshua. I could only be angry if I thought you had been using Leah for some dubious purpose and if now I felt that you considered her no longer useful to you. I don't believe that you would be guilty of that sort of deceit. Leah misread your intentions - perhaps, it is best to leave the subject there."

"I don't want to leave the subject there, Marcus! It leaves too much unsaid - and too many suspicions unresolved."

Marcus shrugged.

"Very well! I don't want you to feel obliged to explain yourself to me. Leah is my cousin - and a remote one at that - I don't claim any responsibility for her, or the right to question your relationship."

"I am very fond of Leah. She is a charming girl - but, Marcus, isn't that the point? She is a girl - I am three hundred years older than she. I'm old enough to be her grandfather! Much too old for someone barely out of childhood!"

"I can't help wondering what those who lived before the Destruction would make of our conversation. In those days, anyone living to be three hundred years old, would hardly have been described as a mere slip of a girl - and anyone living to our age, would be expected to be endowed with so much wisdom that such a situation would be impossible to arise."

"The question of age is all relative. I have never been conscious of the years passing. One day follows the other, we work, eat, sleep, play and love, the centuries pass and we hardly notice. For all that, the age difference, the level of maturity is vastly different between someone of Leah's generation

and someone of ours. I could not bring myself to inflict an old man's thinking into the life of a young woman."

"Perhaps, it would have been better if you had thought about that before you encouraged a relationship to develop."

"It just happened, Marcus! I admit to being swept along by a certain restlessness. I was flattered when Leah looked in my direction and I was foolish enough to think that the obstacles could have been overcome. Then, recently, I've been thinking things over and I became more and more convinced that it would be most unwise to further our relationship."

"The girl deserved to be told, Joshua - not just ignored!"

Joshua sighed and nodded.

"You are right, Marcus. You are totally correct! Ever since you both arrived, the moment never seemed right. I prevaricated and the situation went from bad to worse. I have to admit to being a coward!"

Marcus smiled tightly.

"I never thought I would hear that admission from the lips of Joshua Aristides! As far as Leah is concerned, I don't know what is to be done - perhaps, nothing. I hope that one day, you will both have the opportunity to sit down quietly and talk and I hope the peace will be restored between you."

"I hope so too, Marcus - Now, I must ask: Is there peace between us?"

Marcus nodded.

"There is peace, Joshua. I would have liked to have seen things handled differently, that is all. Now, I must tell you, I had an interesting encounter in your library."

He carefully told his host about his meeting with the Firstling. At the end, Joshua's eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"He said nothing more, Marcus? Nothing about the resolution of our discussions?"

"Nothing! We are to remember Joseph - that's all."

"Which Joseph? There's Joseph the son of Jacob, there's Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, there's Joseph of Arimathea - I'm sure there are some others as well!"

"The clue is surely at where the pictorial bible was left open."

"The story of Joseph's dream when he was in prison! Come to my study, we must look at the text carefully."

Marcus followed his enthusiastic host through the corridors to a great room, which was almost the counterpart of the library where he had had the encounter with the Firstling. This room however, was much better lit and the centre of the floor was uncluttered by the rows of shelves holding ancient books. The walls were lined with them but the pride of place was given to a computer outlet of generous proportions.

Joshua gave a voice command for the required passage.

"Search Genesis for the passage relevant to the dream of Pharaoh which Joseph interpreted."

"Searching - The relevant passage follows:

'Genesis 41: 17-36

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "In my dream, I was standing on the bank of the Nile, and there came up from the river seven cows, fat and sleek, and they grazed on the reeds. After them seven other cows came up and they

were poor, very gaunt and lean; I have never seen such gaunt creatures in all Egypt. These lean, gaunt cows devoured the first ones, the fat ones. They were swallowed up, but no one could have guessed that they were in the bellies of the others, which looked as gaunt as before. Then I woke up. After I had fallen asleep again, I saw in a dream seven ears of corn, full and ripe, growing on one stalk. Growing up after them were seven other ears, shrivelled, thin, and blighted by the east wind. The thin ears swallowed up the seven ripe ears. When I told this to the magicians, no one could explain it to me."

Joseph said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dreams are one dream. God has told Pharaoh what he is going to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears of corn are seven years. It is all one dream. The seven lean and gaunt cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven ears of corn blighted by the east wind will be seven years of famine. It is as I have said to Pharaoh: God has let Pharaoh see what he is going to do. There are to be seven years of great plenty throughout the land. After them will come seven years of famine; all the years of plenty in Egypt will be forgotten, and the famine will ruin the country. The good years will not be remembered in the land because the famine that follows, for it will be very severe. The doubling of Pharaoh's dream means that God is already resolved to do this, and he will soon put it into effect. Pharaoh should now look for a shrewd and intelligent man, and put him in charge of the country. This is what Pharaoh should do: appoint controllers over the land, and take one fifth of the produce of Egypt during the seven years of plenty. They should collect all this food produced in the good years that are coming and put the corn under Pharaoh's control in stores in the cities, and keep it under guard. The food will be a reserve for the country against the seven years of famine which will come upon Egypt. Thus the country will not be devastated by the famine."

Joshua interjected.

"Computer - stop."

"End of quotation."

He turned to Marcus.

"I think we have our answer, my friend! Joel and Asher have been given the parameters - and so have I!"

Marcus nodded slowly.

"I think I have also been given the parameter for the duration of my visit. I must go back to Jerusalem immediately - and then on to Salem."

"I had hoped for a longer visit, Marcus."

"And so had I - but I believe that thoughts of holidays and sightseeing have to give way to the priority of putting into place what the Firstling has instructed."

"Are we agreed about that instruction?"

Marcus looked into Joshua's eyes.

"It was you who mentioned parameters, Joshua. Surely, we can't dispute what those parameters are? The Kingly-Priest has indicated to us that we must store up some of the plentiful harvests we now enjoy, against the time when there will be a famine in the land. Can we dispute those parameters?"

"I agree, Marcus - those are the parameters - but I want you to impress

on Asher and Joel an important point. The story of Joseph has nothing to say about building up an arsenal of weapons to resist a potential invader! I will work within the parameters of reserving future food supplies, but I cannot accept the necessity of storing materials to be forged into weapons! I am also prepared to make the same suggestion to those Administrators who are of a similar opinion."

Marcus nodded slowly.

"Do you think they will? Store up food for the future, I mean."

Joshua shrugged.

"Contrary to the opinions of Asher and Joel, I have no control over the actions of the four Administrators who usually support my views. They do so out of their own free will. I can't guarantee that they will be inclined to follow our lead. Tell Asher and Joel that I am not the leader of a political grouping. The four concerned have tended to agree with my arguments rather than those of Asher and Joel, that doesn't make me their leader and they would be the first to repudiate any such suggestion. I ask you, can you guarantee that those who support Joel and Asher will always do so under all circumstances? Will they also be sure to store food against a time of want?"

"We aren't dealing with an opinion, Joshua. This is the wish of the Firstling."

"Is it? Or, is it our interpretation of what we think is his wish?"

"Don't tell me that you're changing your mind!"

"No, I'm not changing my mind. I happen to believe that you have been given a message and I concur with your interpretation - I merely point out, that it is within the rights of others not to agree with what you have deduced."

Miriam made her excuses not to attend dinner that evening. Joshua and Marcus dined alone. The subjects of Leah and of the agreed plan to store food, were avoided. Instead, Marcus listened to Joshua telling some of the stories of his father's exploits. The meal was over and they were sprawled in recliners on the balcony overlooking the garden.

"We are actually a junior branch of the Aristides Clan. Spiros was a second son and like so many second sons, saw no profit in cramping the style of the heir to the dynasty!"

"That's a funny way of looking at things. Amos was Carl Steinbecker's second son, but he stayed around even though Joel was the one to take up the reins of being the Administrator when Carl became too old."

"I suppose that goes to prove that there are second sons and there are second sons. Spiros got the urge to strike out on his own. It was in the early years of the Kingdom and I suppose there were many challenges.

Communications between the groups of Survivors were slowly being established. They were finding each other, the components of the Kingdom were being welded together. Trade and inter-relationships were being established. It must have been an exciting time for a restless young fellow who had no taste for counting the number of ears of corn in each monthly harvest."

"And so, eventually he came to Bethany?"

"And there found Miriam - having first negotiated the watchful parents, the story goes that he carried her off on his trading ship! Actually, that's a piece of embroidery. They married in Bethany and then, after a while, he got

restless again - and then, he carried her off on his trading ship!"

Marcus laughed.

"And brought her here?"

Joshua nodded.

"He wasn't inclined to return home. He had been away for so long, that he felt it would have been an intrusion for the second son to return to the fold."

"Did he never read the story of the Prodigal Son?"

"Very likely not! Spiros was a man of action, not given to much reading."

"So, he came here and established this estate?"

"Correct - he had first come to Iberia during one of his voyages. He had trading contacts here and decided to settle. It had the advantage of being a comfortable distance from the senior branch of the family."

"And where are they situated?"

"My senior cousins are to be found at the eastern end of the old Great Sea. As our name implies, we are of Greek origin. Spiros went as far to the west as was possible but it wasn't a move born out of animosity. Spiros wanted elbow room. Actually, I'm on very good terms with my cousins to the east. One of them is the Administrator of the Asia Heartland."

Marcus felt himself go cold with the shock. He schooled himself to remain impassive.

"I didn't realise that - so your responsibility borders the Asia Heartland?"

Joshua nodded casually.

"There is no question of there being a political border, rather it is a blending. As you know, there have never been any hard and fast boundaries in the Kingdom, everything is arranged to coincide with ease of distribution, that's the governing factor. You might say that the Asia Heartland administration merges into the Western administration, which in turn, merges into the Southern African administration and the Central administration of our friend Asher. After all, we are one family and all citizens of the one Kingdom."

"And the Administrator of the Asia Heartland is one of your cousins?"

"Many times removed, Marcus - as is the case with most of us. I'm on very good terms with Alexei."

"Alexei?"

"Alexei Kharkov - now, if you want to hear a fascinating story of his ancestry, he has one to tell! Alexei is an old family name, one of the Aristides women married into the Kharkov clan, way back at the beginning."

Marcus cleared his throat.

"Is she still living?"

Joshua tuned to look at him.

"I could ask, if you like - is it important? She would be very old, about my mother's age, I would think. Her father was a Survivor - of course, he departed many centuries ago."

"I simply being curious, it isn't important."

They went to their beds soon after and Marcus wrestled with his pillow. He found sleep impossible. Too much was happening too fast and some of it was downright disquieting. Carl Steinbecker's chronicles had mentioned

something about a man called Kharkov and another named Alexei. It was bordering on the verge of fantasy to believe that there was some connection. It was even more unbelievable that Joshua Aristides was also linked through his ancestry, especially when Miriam, his own mother, was the daughter of someone else whom Carl had known in those distant days. Marcus asked himself: Was it so far fetched? Comparatively, there were not all that many who had escaped the consequences of the Great Destruction. Earlier in the day, he had been the one to remember that all men were cousins because their ancestry was interwoven.

His disquiet wasn't founded on the remote possibility that someone related to Joshua Aristides might have also been known to Carl Steinbecker. It was founded on the simple geography lesson he had been given. The responsibilities of Joshua were not confined to the western end of the old continent of Europe, even though he lived in Iberia. Marcus had already known that his responsibility embraced most of the Saharan wheatbelt, stretching far south to the Central African Administration and the boundaries of the tropical forests. He had been less sure of the eastern extremities.

He knew that the Central Area, that which embraced the old Middle East, Arabia, ancient Persia and Mesopotamia, had fallen to the responsibility of Asher. He knew that Joshua and Asher shared a boundary with the North African Administration based upon ancient Egypt. It was the boundary in Europe which disturbed him. There was a nebulous border of mutual responsibility with his cousin, Alexei Kharkov and this occupied the area formally known as Russia, which was the western extremity of the Asia Heartland!