

Joel Steinbecker had risen with the dawn. It was not an unusual occurrence, he found that he needed little sleep as he grew older. He walked out from his bedroom, on to the great balcony which ran across the back of the house. His father, Carl, had loved this place and the view it gave to the sweeping ranges of the hinterland. The house had been built to command the panorama of the precipitous plunge to the valley below and the soaring peaks beyond. The old man placed his hands on the stone of the parapet and sniffed the fresh morning air. He had lived in this house for over eight hundred and fifty years. He had still been a child, when finally and reluctantly, Carl had consented to move his home from the crumbling lighthouse. His father had bowed to the conclusion that the structure had become unsafe. Joel had still been in the prolonged period of childhood. It had been a fleeting sadness for him that he was no longer able to scrambled down the cliffs of the headland upon which the lighthouse had stood, and bathe in the rock pools at its base, but the sadness had given place to the excitement of finding the natural pools and waterfalls which cascaded from the cliffs near to his new home.

Joel smiled to himself and shook his head. It must be a sign of his advancing years to have such vivid memories of such a distant time. So much had changed in the intervening eight hundred and fifty years. The young Kingdom had matured and now, was growing old like him. His thoughts had taken him to a time which no longer existed and one which could never return. The idea stayed with him as he ate a small breakfast of fruit - a time which could not return. He asked himself the question: Why was it that it could not return? Had something been lost? Or was it that he was glamorising something which had never really existed in the form he had

imagined?

He finished his meal and made ready to leave the house. He hesitated and walked out to take another look at the view. It was something he normally didn't do and he could think of no reason why he should suddenly change his pattern. He looked to the distant peaks and the deep cleft of the valley, just being touched by the rising sun. He turned away and his step was brisk as he walked to the Pod waiting for him at the front of the house. If he had wished, he could have summoned a driver to take him through the hills to the city. He wasn't alone in the house. He peered at the shuttered windows and felt sorry for the sluggards who preferred their beds to such a glorious dawning.

There was also an element of mischief in his decision to pilot himself.

It also showed that he was still quite capable of functioning as a human being, despite the opinions of some of the younger set who thought stagnation began at the nine hundredth year! He carefully set the coordinates of the Pod and it glided away on its programmed journey.

Two rituals remained before he began his daily tasks. The first, some regarded as a stubborn duty, it was not a thought he shared. It was something his father had always done and Joel had chosen to continue. It involved a detour from the shortest path to the Administration centre and if he had taken a driver, he would have been conscious of a certain reluctance.

The younger generations disliked visiting the Memorial, it meant recognition of a time they did not understand.

Joel was very aware that there were not many cities left in the world, which could claim to have preserved the site of the destruction which had overtaken them. Father Carl had insisted on its preservation and Joel had been just as insistent. It remained as an important reminder to those who hardly believed that such times could have ever existed.

The Pod swayed through the valleys which descended to the urbanised plain around Salem. He revelled in the speed, well aware that his more cautious offspring would have been horrified at the pace which had been set by their ageing ancestor. The Pod slowed to a more sedate pace as they entered the narrow caverns between the looming towers and pinnacles of Salem. Joel wrinkled his nose in distaste and wished that he wasn't always reminded of the story of Babel. He reminded himself that even at that distant time, it hadn't been the tower which had been at fault, it had been the attitude of the builders. When Satan was released, what would be the attitude of the builders of these towers?

The Pod slowed even more and eased through the commuter traffic which described a great arc around the site of the Memorial. The traffic problem was always cited as a good reason to dispense with the Memorial. Despite all his arguments, the size of it had shrunk over the centuries. The Pod came to a halt in the centre of the open space. Joel silently eyed the twisted shapes of shattered buildings and fused stone.

Here and there, even after the passage of a thousand years, the shadow of someone who had once lived and was passing at the moment of annihilation, was etched into the mouldering stone. He had always thought of it as being a kind of immortality, but even he found it hard to accept what had taken place here.

His father had been graphic in his description, but it was almost beyond the imagination of his attentive son to comprehend. Three mighty flashes of light, hotter and brighter than even the sun in its current sevenfold enhancement of light, had erupted in milliseconds and an entire city had been devastated. Millions had died and millions more followed as a result of the deadly poisons which had been generated.

He looked around critically. The clinical, clean lines of the city towers loomed over the site. The Memorial was no more than a well in the midst of the multi-storied edifices which had been built around it. He wondered how long the well would survive after he was gone. Perhaps it didn't matter, the reason for it being preserved had passed. They were already storing food against the time of want. Marcus was doing exceptionally well, his reports were encouraging. Joel returned to the Pod and released the next set of coordinates, there was no purpose in remaining with the silent memory of the ancient dead.

The Pod moved off and made its way back into the main stream of the traffic. The pace was now strictly regulated, Joel Steinbecker, as well as anyone else, had to fit into the pulse of the mighty city. It was perhaps, a further expression of rejection of being regulated, which caused the Pod to ease off the main stream once more and park in front of the great wall his father had built across ancient Pringle's Head.

There appeared to be no one else on the headland. It was early and the steady stream of visitors who came there each day, had hardly lifted their heads from their pillows. His Pod was alone in the parking lot. The doors in the barrier wall slid across as he approached. Joel smiled and nodded towards the half obscured scanner. The operators knew his habits. This was the second ritual, the daily walk to the end of the headland and the moments he spent gazing out over the ocean. At one time, he had sought the place to crystallise his thoughts and plans for the efficient conduct of his stewardship - now, it was less for that reason; with his advancing years, it was a time for dreaming dreams and living in memories.

He took much longer now, to come to the point of the headland. He took his time, especially up the steeper parts of the climb. Today, he paused

and looked back at the wall. The door had been closed behind him. No one else would be permitted to enter whilst he walked the headland paths. The wall stretched across the cliff top from edge to edge. It could never be classified as a fortification - it could never have resisted a determined assault.

It was a barrier nevertheless. In his flights of imagination, Joel always thought of it as keeping back the encroaching towers. For the first time, he realised that his private domain was not so private after all. The blank windows of the soaring pinnacles of the city, stared out over the manicured gardens of the headland and anyone who took the trouble to watch, would have seen an old man wandering the paths, or sitting on his dizzy perch at the very edge of the cliff.

The plants and shrubs to each side of the pathway, were golden with the gathering light of the rising sun. Soon, the white path would become dazzling. He walked on, the way was flatter once more and he didn't pause again until he came to the site of the old lighthouse. Nothing remained but the ancient platform of stone upon which it had been built. It was the place of his birth. Joel contemplated it, somewhere nearby, his father had held him up to the storm clouds like an offering and he had drawn his first, protesting breath. Joel shook his head, he was bemused by his train of thought. He walked on to the ledge of rock looking over the ocean. He eased down thankfully and clasped both hands over the top of his staff. The ocean wasn't empty, great transporters plied back and forth from the port beyond Jacob's Bay. The Bay was a clutter of small craft. Once, three submarines had found refuge after dealing their death blows to the city. Now, it was a marina of pleasure boats. Along the shoreline was a sprawl of houses. On the other side of the headland, the northern shoreline was much the same. Joel sighed

a little, Salem had become a large city. He looked out over the ocean at the birds wheeling and calling in the bright sunlight. A gentle voice said softly:

"You are very thoughtful my dear brother Joel."

Joel turned startled and automatically started to drop to his knees. The newcomer shook his head and held his arm.

"It isn't necessary between us, my brother Joel."

Joel sucked in air. His chest was suddenly tight.

"My Lord is most kind."

The Firstling gestured to the sea traffic.

"It was not always like this - even before the time of the Great Destruction. In those days, there was much traffic also, but of a different kind. As well as ships of commerce, there were ships of war. This was an important military base for the vessels of one side in the ideological struggle which took the attention of so much of mankind. Now, we have a Kingdom of Peace and the traffic is always for the benefit of the citizens."

Joel responded fervently.

"May it always be so, Lord!"

The Firstling turned to him and smiled gently.

"But, you know that it will not always be so, brother Joel. The time will soon be upon us when Abaddon, the angel of the bottomless pit, will take his key and release Satan. The influence of the Evil One will be unleashed again and the conditions which follow will be in accordance with the spirit which will then prevail. Your thoughts have been occupied for many years with the consequences of this event - You know full well, that peace cannot be the prevailing condition."

Joel nodded slowly.

"I spoke without thinking, Lord."

The Firstling's grip tightened slightly.

"I wasn't giving you correction, brother Joel, I was giving you the confirmation you have always sought."

Joel stared at the eternally young man who was seated next to him.

"My brothers in the council will be delighted when I tell them your words, my Lord!"

The Firstling shook his head.

"My words are for you alone, brother Joel. I wanted to reassure you that you have followed the proper path and the programme you have established for the storage of food to carry you over the time of famine is an expression of your faithful obedience. No! You will not tell your brothers, that isn't the purpose of my coming to you."

Joel waited, his heart was hammering again. The Firstling turned to him and his smile increased.

"I have not only come TO you, brother Joel - I have come FOR you! I have need of you elsewhere and you have finished your course in this realm!"

Joel's mouth opened in surprise and then closed again. He struggled to find words.

"I am always at your command, my Lord."

The Firstling nodded.

"You have been faithful in your commission, now I will give you another commission."

Joel looked around the sun flooded headland, with the bay on the one side and the broad sweep of the coastline on the other. He already felt a separation from it. He still breathed, his heart still pulsed. He was not even aware when both functions stopped and the physical scene became merged

into what had been unseen to his eyes and ears. Images which had been dulled in his memory during the long centuries of separation, suddenly became focused and those he had once known, moved towards him to envelope him in their love.

The Firstling sat silently and waited on the stone ledge beside the lifeless body of Joel Steinbecker. He eyed the gnarled hands still clenched over the staff the old man had used and looked with affection at his serene face. The Firstling waited for the younger man, who even then, was hastening along the path leading from the barrier wall.

Marcus could not describe the urgency which had suddenly forced him to hasten towards the end of the headland. It wasn't fear or anxiety, it was more the knowledge that something momentous was either happening, or was about to do so. He emerged from the well manicured shrubbery which flanked each side of the path, on to the cleared platform of rock which had surrounded the base of the old lighthouse. He saw the two forms sitting still, gazing out over the ocean. He recognised Father Joel immediately and felt a surge of relief.

He started to move forward and then stopped abruptly. The conversation might not have been for his ears. The other man spoke.

"Come closer, Marcus Steinbecker."

Marcus moved forward cautiously. Joel hadn't moved. Something wasn't as it appeared. The other man rose and Marcus felt his knees buckle. He sagged down on to them just a few paces from the ledge and for a reason he couldn't explain, he started to weep.

"Are you so sad, my dear brother Marcus? Are you so grieved that Joel has found his rest? I can assure you that he is now in a realm from which he would not wish to return. Be happy for him that he does not have to endure

the physical onslaught of Gog and his Horde!"

Marcus lifted his face upward to look into the eyes of the Firstling.

Tears still flowed unchecked.

"I have spared you the anguish of physical parting and the distress which comes when you see a loved one decrease in vitality to the point of death. You can take comfort that Joel Steinbecker laboured in full vigour until the his physical end and that now, he has been given a task to which he is well suited.

From this time on, it will be your turn to take up the burden. I now give you a task to which you have been trained. You will assume the stewardship which Joel Steinbecker has laid down. You will care for the natural needs of those who were in his care, for the remaining time of the Kingdom and through many of the troubles which will follow."

The Firstling moved forward and placed his hands on Marcus's head.

The grief drained away and something intangible surged through him. Then, the hands were gone and when Marcus cleared his eyes of tears, so was the Firstling. He got to his feet and hesitantly walked towards the seated figure. Joel could have been mistaken for a man who was lost in deep thought. He stared out over the ocean. Marcus looked into his eyes, they were not as yet, glazed in death, instead, there was a joy which still lingered in them.

Marcus felt almost detached from reality. He knew that there were things to be done and that it was his task to attend to them, but he lingered for a few minutes. He stood with his back to the precipitous drop to the rocks below. At another time, he would have been conscious of the height, but not then. Something still remained from the presence of the Firstling. Joel had once described it as the essence of peace. Marcus hadn't fully understood what he had meant, but now he did. There was an aura of remoteness from

the bustle of reality. He sensed the presence of Joel - and of others. They were watching and waiting - for what, he wasn't sure. Perhaps, it was to give support and strengthening for the task he had been given.

Marcus looked at the body of the old man and knew he would miss his wisdom and council. It was almost impossible to imagine the world without the presence of Father Joel. He had always been there to solve the awkward questions. He had, in recent years, developed a certain irascibility, but it had never been malicious, rather, it had been that of a mischievous child. Marcus slowly pulled his communicator from his pocket and patched into the Central computer. Now, the whole earth was to learn of their loss.

Marcus followed the custom of the Kingdom and consigned the body to the earth at the end of three days. There was no great gathering of dignitaries to commemorate the event. It was strictly a family affair and those of Clan Steinbecker who could attend, did so and even then, these numbered over five hundred. They passed before Marcus like a blur of faces. Some he barely recognised and some were no more than strangers - young men and women who were the third and fourth lineal descendants of the cousins of his own generation. One he did recognise. Leah came and stood before him, her eyes sad and lowered.

"We will miss the wisdom of Father Joel, Marcus."

"He was part of our lives for many centuries, Leah."

She moved on to make way for the next in line. His eyes followed her momentarily and then he jerked them back to focus on an earnest spoken, multi-removed cousin, who was murmuring his thoughts.

In the evening of the third day, they gave the old man's body back to the earth. It was a silent ceremony, each knew that the essence had already gone and was working in another realm of the Lord's Kingdom. The shell

which had once housed that essence, was lowered into the earth and covered over and then silently, they turned to disperse. Marcus was deep in thought, Asher had initiated a meeting of the twelve Administrators. The major item on the agenda was the progress being made to store against the time of need. He sensed that there was a hidden agenda. The necessity to re-establish the bonds which the death of Father Joel had loosened. Bonds which would allow the twelve Administrators to work together as one.

Leah fell in step beside him.

"Why do we still feel such a loss when a loved one is taken, Marcus?"

With our knowledge, it shouldn't be so hard to accept."

"Perhaps, it isn't so much that we consider it a loss, rather, I see it as an absence of someone being present. We are cut off from the storehouse of their personality, we are separated from tapping into their wisdom and comfort. We are deprived of the ability to contact them and gain their support.

If there is a loss, I think it is this."

She was quiet for a moment.

"You will make a good Administrator, Marcus."

He looked at her sharply.

"I wasn't aware that it was known that I would be the Administrator."

"Asher knew - he told me."

"Who told him?"

"He didn't say - but I think he knew before the news of Father Joel's death was announced!"

"I told no one at the time, I was too concerned to take care of Father Joel."

"I think he was told by our Kingly-Priest."

"Ah!"

"All the Administrator's know, Marcus. Something similar happened when Joshua Aristides was nominated."

Marcus tried to sound noncommittal.

"Have you heard from Joshua lately, Leah? I haven't received a word from him since our visit."

"There's always a flow of messages from his Administration to ours. Occasionally, he sends greetings."

They walked on in silence.

"Where are you staying, Leah?"

"Your office billeted me at Father Joel's house - I suppose its your house now - I hope you don't mind?"

"I own nothing, Leah - Father Joel's house or any other - I live there - and why should I mind?"

"No particular reason - I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable! Why should I feel uncomfortable?"

"Why do you pick up every word and make it a challenge, Marcus Steinbecker?"

He stopped dead and grinned at her in the darkness.

"This reminds me of the first time I visited Jerusalem - we were prickly with each other then - After a while, as I recall, we established a truce. Do you think we could do the same now?"

She smiled back.

"I suppose we were sounding like an old married couple, Marcus."

He took her arm and walked on in silence. The more he thought about it, the more being an old married couple sounded like a good idea!