

The battle raged all around him, but it seemed that as soon as one of the combatants fell to the ground, mortally wounded, another took his place and the titanic struggle continued. Michael was confronted with only one adversary - an elusive, slippery customer, who seemed able to avoid the most telling thrust. They were armed with the short swords which had been beaten out of sickles. They thrust and parried and the blades slipped past each one as they side stepped the blows. The blood sang in Michael's ears, he experienced a peculiar sense of exhilaration and yet, he knew that one false step would spell the end for himself or for the other.

The battleground was shrouded in a haze of light and noise. There were death cries, together with the hoarse screams of men who had taken a thrust which had not killed them. Michael concentrated on his adversary. He had suddenly changed tactics, retreating a little, as if to lure Michael forward. The Prince of the Covenant eyed him warily. Gog lunged forward and nearly caught him with the surprise move. This time, Michael connected with his sword and sliced what should have been a mortal blow, but there was no blood and Gog smiled slowly, a derisive, confident sneer, which told Michael that there would be no easy outcome to their combat.

The light around them intensified, so that it was impossible to see the other combatants. Michael watched, crouched and wary, conscious suddenly of an intense cold and extreme tiredness. He became so exhausted, that he nearly collapsed. It took an extreme effort of will to remain upright and alert to a renewed attack. A belch of fire emitted from the billowing haze in front of him and immediately, it parted and he was faced with a reptilian creature, whose tail lashed from side to side. Incredibly, it held a long sword in one of its claws.

It was an impossibility, no such creature existed, and yet, it confronted him. It also spoke, rasping, subhuman, but it was recognisable. The voice was that of Georgi Malenski!

"We come to the final meeting, Michael - one of us is destined to leave this field of battle as the victor - the other will surely perish!"

Michael did not respond. The representation before him was a the product of a nightmare. A dragon - perhaps, THE dragon of Revelation. It advanced towards him and he was enveloped in choking, sulphurous smoke and flame. Michael stepped aside and thrust out blindly with his sword. It connected and he heard a scream of pain. Quite suddenly he was thrown down heavily. He struggled to rise and could not, he was pinned by the reptilian tail. He was conscious of the battle raging around him, its noise and conflict echoed and re-echoed in a bedlam of sound.

A well known face loomed over him, it was confident, the gleam of victory in its eyes - almost at his throat was a sword. It was poised, ready for the death lunge and Michael accepted that he had lost the last fight, with a grim fatalism, he was quiet, prepared for death. From within him came a voice he hardly recognised, but it was his own.

"Michael does not die in this battle. Michael gains the victory and Gog will be vanquished!"

The sword wavered a little and the confident sneer was gone. Michael found a reserve of strength he hardly knew he possessed, which he channelled into an upward thrust with his knees. He caught his adversary off guard. The positions were reversed. Somehow, he had recovered his sword and he held it in his right hand and he wrestled to bring it to bear on the breast of the writhing figure he was trying to pin to the ground. Georgi Malenski glared up at him - free of the dragon form and even that of the monster he had become - this was the original Georgi Malenski - the Jonathan to his David. There was a pleading in the man's face, but Michael could not allow the element of pity to take hold within him. He wrestled with increased ferocity and slowly brought his weapon to the critical position. The panting man screamed into his ear.

"For God's sake, Michael - stop!"

Michael applied more pressure and there were other hands on him, hands which tore him apart from Gog, his adversary. Michael wrestled like a madman, this battle could not be inconclusive. The death of Gog must not be prevented!

"Come to you senses, man! Don't just stand there - Sit on him!"

The cry was plaintive - it also didn't sound like Georgi Malenski! The haze of battle faded, although there was a noise of another kind. Michael became conscious that he was wet. It puzzled him, he had not been aware that he had taken serious wounds, but if he was soaked in his life blood, then, so be it. He was being roughly shaken and he jerked open his eyes in protest. It took some time for them to focus. When they did, he found himself glaring into the face of Luke Belin. A little further down his torso, Eli Benjamin was sitting on his chest. They both looked as if they had been trampled on by a herd of wild horses.

"What happened?"

"You might well ask! Perhaps you could tell us!"

Michael looked around.

"What's that noise?"

"Wind and rain - Is it safe for us to get off you?"

"It would be more comfortable!"

"What happened to you?"

"Call it a bad dream!"

"Do you have them often? - I feel sorry for Leah!"

"It's a long story - but I was fighting Georgi Malenski - amongst others!"

"Most of the time you were fighting us - I have the bruises to prove it!"

Michael took Eli's hand and was hauled to his feet. He walked to the entrance to the stone hut, which had been commandeered for his command post. He found the reason for his wet condition, a stream of water was flowing in through the door. The hut was high on the plateau of Megiddo and facing the camp of the invaders, which was now hidden from them by sheets of torrential rain. Michael looked upward, the light of the comet rolled eerily around the sky, great billowing clouds were surging in from every direction and the wind was so strong that it almost sucked him from the door of the

shelter. The structure shook with its impact. Michael felt a chill race up his spine.

"It is beginning - the final scenario - just as Ezra foretold:

'Behold, clouds come from the east and from the north unto the south, and they are very horrible to look upon, full of wrath and storm. And they shall collide and smite against each other, a great multitude of stars upon the earth, and blood from the sword shall reach unto the belly, and dung from men unto the camel's hump.'"

Luke and Eli joined him at the door. Luke growled.

"I wouldn't like to imagine what it will be like down in the plain."

"Is this what Saul meant when he said that the comet's passing would cause a trail of damage?"

Eli nodded.

"The Earth will be passing through the tail by now - this is only the beginning!"

Michael shuddered, the air had become bitterly cold and the clouds above them surged and rolled as if they were in torment. Quite suddenly, it started to hail - at first, small pellets which quickly clad the bare rocks of the hilltop - and then, like the blows of a hammer, the pieces became larger, hurling out of the sky as if they had been propelled by a hand of fury. They assumed the size of small rocks and pounded against the stone shelter. Michael turned to his captains and shouted:

"Are our men under shelter?"

They nodded, Luke's answer was almost inaudible.

"Saul warned the captains - and if they had any sense, they took notice."

"May God help those who are caught out in this!"

They retreated away from the door. Michael found them staring at him solemnly. Eli broke the silence.

"This is really the last battle, Michael?"

Michael forced a smile.

"You will find yourselves redundant, Eli - you and your fellow captains - and all your men. Armageddon is upon us - and there is worse to come."

Without warning, the earth shuddered beneath them and the stone structure heaved, shook and seemed to writhe and twist - but it didn't fall. They were smothered in small debris and dust and nearly choked in its cloud. The shuddering continued for some time but not with the same intensity. The noise of the hail had stopped. Eli peered out cautiously.

"I must try to reach my men."

Michael nodded.

"Watch your step - I don't want it said that the only casualties we took, was one man with a sprained ankle!"

Eli managed a grin and was gone. Michael turned to Luke.

"I'm worried sick about Leah!"

His aide nodded solemnly.

"One thing is for sure - by now, she knows her husband has slipped away without telling her! I wouldn't worry, Michael - God will look after His

own!"

"The earthquake would have been centred on the Mount of Olives."

"Since when have you been a seismologist?"

"Since I read the prophesies of Zechariah. He said that in this day, a heavenly being would place his feet on the Mount of Olives and a great valley would be opened which would stretch as far as Asal."

Luke whistled.

"The Mount of Olives brings it right on Jerusalem's doorstep."

"Saul told us there could be earthquakes. They would be the result, if large enough pieces of the comet struck the earth - I think he said, 'it will ring like a bell'. We'd better be ready for more. I don't think our God is finished with Gog and his Horde just yet!"

On the Plain of Esdraelon, the tents of the invading army had been swept away and their occupants exposed to the full fury of the elements. The ground had quickly turned into a quagmire under the intensity of the downpour. Within living memory, it had never rained as it did. The drainage channels could not cope and the normally well positioned and constructed latrines, quickly filled and overflowed, adding to the misery of the rain soaked men.

Georgi Malenski emerged from his shelter before the earthquake struck, which was just as well, for the tiny villa collapsed into a ruin with the first impact. He looked back at it without emotion, if he had been within it, he would have been killed - but it was not yet his time - even the hail, almost as big as a man's fist, avoided striking him. It fell all around and there were terrible injuries amongst those no more than a few paces distant, but not one piece touched him. His calmness was unnatural and those who lay bloody and dying began to curse his aloofness.

The wind still blew with frenetic strength and the rain continued to lash down as he bent his body to face it and walk through the camp. His thin tunic clinging to his body like a shroud. He muttered to himself and those close enough when he passed, heard him reciting the words of Ezekiel the prophet.

'In my jealousy and in the heat of my anger I swear that on that day there shall be a great earthquake throughout the land of Israel. The fish in the sea and the birds in the air, the wild animals and all reptiles that move on the ground, all mankind on the face of the earth, all shall be shaken before me. Mountains shall be torn up, and terraced hills collapse, and every wall crash to the ground. I will summon universal terror against Gog, saith the Lord, and his men shall turn their swords against one another. I will bring him to judgement with pestilence and bloodshed; I will pour down teeming rain, hailstones hard as rock, and fire and brimstone upon him, upon his squadrons, upon the whole concourse of peoples with him. Thus will I prove myself great and holy and make myself known to many nations; they shall know that I am the Lord.'

The aftershocks from the major quake continued to rock the area. Michael managed to re-establish contact with his captains and found that they had secured their positions and that their men had sustained very few injuries. Eli returned after a while, it was at the time when Michael was

making another futile attempt to contact Jerusalem.

"Why don't they respond!? There must be someone at the communication centre! Either that, or the Jerusalem has been wrecked!"

Luke was trying to pacify him.

"You can't assume that, Michael - more than likely, the communication links have been knocked out. I'm sure everything is fine!"

Michael glared at him.

"On what basis can you make that assumption!? Damn it, man! Leah and my family are there! I don't know if they're dead or alive!"

"I'm sure everything is fine, Michael!"

Michael glared at him again and turned to Eli.

"Do you think you can find a volunteer who would take the risk to fly through this cloud of muck!? We must re-establish links to Jerusalem."

"I'll get on to it, Michael."

Eli ducked out of the doorway before Michael could change his mind. Luke coughed diplomatically.

"You don't agree with the move?"

"I hope you haven't created another Uriah the Hittite."

"Explain!"

"I don't need to - it must be obvious to you that Eli is already on his way to Jerusalem - he volunteered himself! I just hope he doesn't get killed in the hottest place of the battle - for the wrong reasons!"

"The hottest place of the battle will be here, Luke - down there on the plain. I've probably done him a favour by sending him to a safe area - and I resent the implication that I've deliberately sent him to his death!"

The hammer blows from the hailstorm eased and it became obvious to Malenski, that his army had taken many casualties. The ground was a swamp of mud and excrement. Men lay in the filth, some of them at their last gasp, whilst others had blood streaming from their wounds. The clouds still rolled and billowed above them, but the glaring light of the comet still illuminated the scene in stark reality. His captains began to assemble around him. He hardly noticed their condition. He was looking beyond them and beyond the moaning, cursing men, who had been the cream of his army. He pointed in a great sweeping curve.

"Can you see them, the hillsides are covered in men!"

His captains turned and stared at the harshly defined mountains. One shouted at him.

"I see nothing!"

Gog screamed in fury.

"You **MUST** see them! We are surrounded by tens of thousands of armed men, they are waiting to start their attack, I tell you!"

Another responded with a touch of derision.

"You're dreaming, Georgi - there is no one there - except ben Levi's toy warriors!"

Their commander's fury increased beyond the limit of sanity. He drew his sword and thrust it into the man's back. The blood streamed down over his hand and his captain fell to the ground. The others looked at him and stepped away, their hands on their own weapons. He yanked his weapon free and advanced on them.

"You are all blind! I don't need any of you! Ten thousand times ten thousand of the host of heaven are poised to sweep down on us and all you can do is deny the evidence of your own eyes!"

He swung round and pointed to the heart of his camp. The followers of the captain he had just butchered, were coming to their senses. They were slipping and sliding through the mud, but they came with drawn swords, there could be little doubt that their intention was revenge. Malenski screamed on.

"Can't you see the black angels of evil who stand ready to fight with us? We will conquer them yet! They have their ten thousands and we have our matching host! Gog will lead them - Gog will lead you all!"

Some of his captains remained loyal, why, it was hard to say. They saw the menace posed by the advancing avengers and they called their own men into action. Gog stood silent, paralysed by visions no others could see, whilst his army split into opposing groups who surged back and forth in mortal combat.

Michael watched from the heights of Megiddo. He saw the call to arms and the surging combat which ensued. He focused his glasses on the lone figure standing motionless in the centre of the affray. Incredibly, Malenski was untouched by the surging figures around him, even when it looked as if the fighting would flow over him. Michael took the glasses from his eyes, he stared at Luke.

"I must go down to him - the man has suffered a complete mental collapse. He isn't responsible for his actions, he doesn't realise what's happening around him. I must go to him!"

Luke lowered his own glasses and stared into his commander's tense face.

"It isn't your place to intervene, Michael! You are fond of reciting your prophecies to us and you tell us that they justify everything you do. I've never heard it mentioned that Michael ventures down on to the Plain of Esdraelon to rescue Gog from the inevitable consequences of his own actions!"

Michael looked at him steadily.

"I intend to go!"

"And I intend that you won't!"

Michael eyed him warily.

"I order you to stand aside - either that, or you can consider yourself dismissed from my service, is that understood?"

Luke nodded calmly.

"If that's how you want it - very well, Michael, I won't stand in your way - and I will try to explain to Leah and perhaps your son at a later date, how their husband and father sacrificed his life in a fruitless attempt to save a condemned man."

Michael smiled grimly.

"I will survive - and so will Georgi Malenski!"

"If you say so - "

Michael drew his sword and advanced to the door of the shelter. The hail had stopped completely and even the wind and the rain had died away, it was as if the elements were waiting for the next phase to unfold.

"One more thing, Michael."

Michael turned and received a perfectly executed knockout blow to the

jaw. He never knew what hit him. Luke looked down at the recumbent figure and ruefully nursed his knuckles.

"You have a hard chin, Michael ben Levi - like the rest of your head! I suppose this means the end of a perfect friendship - but I never did tell you that Marcus Steinbecker gave me additional orders. He told me to take care of Leah's interests at all times - I failed him, but I certainly won't fail her! That, was for Leah and your son!"

He carefully removed the sword and put it well out of reach. Its owner was still out cold and looked as if he would stay that way for a while. Luke peered out of the window slit and focused his glasses on Georgi Malenski. The man who called himself Gog, was still standing motionless, whilst his army disintegrated into a brawling, bloody shambles around him.

On the heights of Megiddo, Luke could distinctly hear the noise of the battle, the screams of the dying and the hoarse shouts and shrieks of men in mortal combat. Wherever he turned the glasses, he found the same scene. The whole Plain of Esdraelon was a surging mass of fighting figures, sliding

327

and slipping in the mire.

Michael uttered a little groan. Luke lowered his glasses and turned to meet the consequences of his insubordination. He had no idea what the penalty might be for knocking out the commander in chief of the defending army. He supposed that in former days, it would have been the death sentence. He doubted if such an extreme action would ensue on this occasion, but he was also quite sure that Michael ben Levi would think of something appropriate.

Michael slowly came into focus and found himself the subject of his aide's steady gaze. The Prince of the Covenant touched his jaw and winced. He moved it around carefully. He said softly.

"I think you've loosened some teeth."

"I'm sorry."

"You do realise that you're fired?"

"I assumed as much - at least, you will be able to give me a testimonial - which is more than my previous employer could! I'll pack my bags."

"You haven't got any!"

"Then, I'll start walking."

Michael managed a painful smile.

"Leave it to the morning - what's happening out there?"

"Carnage - take a look - but, if you try to go down there, I'll hit you again - you can't sack me twice!"

Michael nodded and got to his feet, he took the glasses silently and concentrated them on the motionless man standing unscathed, in the middle what remained of his loyal captains.