

Gog appeared to hesitate to cross the undefined border into the heart of the Central Administration Area. He held back the forces who were poised to do so. His captains murmured between themselves but lacked the courage to question the commands of the grim faced man, who had shown that his look could destroy. They had little else to complain about, Malenski had applied his undoubted administrative talents and ensured that each corp. of his sprawling army was furnished with the support they required to press home their objectives.

His commanders, far distant in the south, pressing down the Nile, or converging on to the borders of the Central African Administration, were given their heads. Only when it became a matter of cohesion and ensuring that one corp. did not outstrip another, did he intervene. When he was obliged to do so, his reasons were fully explained - and more importantly, accepted.

He had kept his most loyal - together with his least trustworthy captains - closest to him. Gubkin became his aide-de-camp and, together with the captains about whom he was sure, was given the task of watching the cowed Scandians, who had witnessed the unbelievable destruction of Pik Sedova. Malenski was under no illusions that they would be cowed for long. The Scandians were ruthless men, who would soon find a rational reason for what had happened; this would replace the superstitious fear which was now their driving force.

Malenski had installed himself in the great mansion which had housed Micah Perga's headquarters. He even used the defeated Administrator's office. He instituted a nightly briefing with those of his captains who were not in the field. It took place in luxurious surroundings. It was a deliberate ploy, specifically to rub home to the Scandians, the degree of his success without the benefit of Pik Sedova's leadership, and to keep the uncultured wild men of the north off balance.

They had met as usual, at the end of another day. As usual, they were provided with a review of the progress of each of the corps. It took the form of a series of reports delivered by one of the Micah Perga's civil administrators, who had had the sagacity to change sides and offer his services to a new master. Malenski didn't particularly like him and certainly distrusted him - but he served a purpose. Joseph Assad rounded off a well constructed report.

"So, you will see brothers, that the third corp. is progressing rapidly southward along the Nile Valley and is now in the vicinity of the Great Irrigation Lake. The latest report indicates that the pumping stations have been secured without damage or disruption. The fourth corp. is now investing the Tibetsi Ranges and has encountered the anticipated pocket of resistance in that area. The latest update indicates adequate resources to flush out the defenders within the indicated time frame. Elements of both corps are in mutual contact and are in no danger of being outflanked. The border with the Aristides Administrative Area is secure and there has been no evidence of

potential intervention."

The man drew happily to a close and even managed a timid smile in the face of the implacable, steady, unsmiling gaze of Georgi Malenski. It wavered away into a nervous swallow. Malenski stirred.

"Thank you, brother Assad - you are now excused."

They waited as he hastily retreated and the door panel closed after him. One of the Scandian captains stirred restlessly.

"He had no report of the first and second corps!"

Malenski glanced at him.

"I think we do not have to waste our time listening to reports of what we well know. The first corp. has secured Nile City and New Alexandria and the Delta. The second Corp. has occupied the area between the Nile and the Central Administration Border."

The same captain pursued the point.

"And is doing nothing but sitting on their hands - it's worth remembering that idle men become restless men - there's rich pickings over the border."

"We have pickings enough - we're not here to rape and pillage for the sake of it!"

The man looked down from the steady gaze. It was the first indication Malenski had given that he had no sympathy with what had happened in New Alexandria and Nile City. His reply was a defensive mutter.

"The men were promised their pickings."

Malenski nodded.

"Sedova promised it - and we all know that Sedova thought he was in command. There will be no more promises and bribes!"

The captain was stung into one last shot.

"Then, you will lose the men you have! They don't fight for no reward!"

Malenski's response was mild.

"If there is any dissatisfaction - even amongst the captains - they can open their mouths and they can go back from whence they came - I want no malcontents - I don't need them. Our army is swelling with those willing to follow - Libyans, Egyptians, Ethiopians. Other reports tell me, even the Persians are deserting Michael ben Levi and welcoming our farmers crossing

Gubkin intervened for the first time.

"So, you believe that the words of prophesy are being fulfilled, brother Georgi?"

Malenski shifted his eyes to him.

"The words of prophesy will always be fulfilled, brother Nicholai - what specifically do you mean?"

"Why! Where it says: 'Libyans and Cushites will follow in his train', and again: 'He will overrun land after land, sweeping over them like a flood - .'"

Malenski said softly.

"Go on, what comes next?"

Gubkin swallowed.

"Amongst them the fairest of all lands, and tens of thousands will fall victims. Yet all these lands including Edom and Moab and the remnant of the Ammonites, will survive his attack."

The silence was charged. Malenski continued softly.

"It seems you have a point to make, Nicholai."

"My point is this - You have always insisted that the words of prophesy are to be fulfilled. If we follow one, then we must follow them all - on that basis, we must cross into the Central Administration!"

The silence was longer this time. Malenski's face was immobile then he closed his eyes and sighed. He dismissed the other captains.

"... But, you remain, Gubkin."

The room emptied and then he opened his eyes. Gubkin sat opposite him, wary and poised for further battle. Malenski stared at him without smiling.

"You have something more on your mind, I think."

Gubkin nodded.

"I will speak freely - "

"A brave man, considering what happened to the mighty Sedova!"

"What happened to the mighty Sedova would have happened anyway! He led the lifestyle of a lecher and indulged in unimaginable orgies. He went into towering rages when the veins on his neck would bulge to the point of rupture - it was only a matter of time before he was felled with a stroke!"

Malenski's face eased into a slight smile.

"So, the fearsome monster Gog has not proved his ability to kill his opposition in a single look? Is that what you are telling yourself - or is it what you really believe?"

"What I believe, or what I do not believe, is not of much consequence. You can dispose of me or anyone else with a nod of your head - so, one way or the other, you take care of your 'opposition'."

Malenski asked gently.

"Do you count yourself as opposition, Nicholai?"

"I oppose assumptions, brother Malenski! I want to ask you a question."

"Go ahead."

"You talk of being driven to what you must do by the words of scripture. You follow a course of action dictated by the words of Daniel the prophet. You say you are compelled to follow these 'directions' because it is inevitable. You tell us that you have 'hooks in your jaws' by which God is forcing you to follow a course of action dictated by His will. Yet, in another breath, you deny our God and say you worship only the god of the citadel and fortress - the god of conquest - "

"You haven't yet asked your question, Gubkin - you have made a series of statements!"

Gubkin stared at him without wavering.

"Can you answer me this: Which way round is it? Are you incapable of exercising your own will because the words of prophesy are compelling you - OR - or are you following your own course and trying to fit the words of prophesy to agree with your actions!?"

There was a long silence.

"An interesting alternative, Nicholai - a question I have often asked myself. I can't answer you - anymore, I suspect, than a similar question can be answered. Was Judas a free agent when he betrayed Jesus, or was he predestined to do so? - after all, there is a prophesy about that too! Many

learned men since the time of the First Apostles have troubled themselves with trying to reconcile the doctrine of free will, with that of an omnipotent God who has predestined our course - some decided one way and others took the opposing view. We must add your question to the general debate. Is Gog obligated to be Gog because he is predestined to be the monster from the north - or does he have a free will - and as you suggest - tries to force the prophesy to agree with what he does!?"

"I must tell you, Georgi Malenski, that I do not hold much faith in ancient prophesies. I have followed you so far, because the Georgi Malenski I knew at the mouth of the Lena, was a dedicated man, a loving man, who cared for his stewardship and was loved by those who benefited from his efforts. That Georgi Malenski led us out of certain death and fought to keep us alive, since then, he has provided food for millions.

I do not follow a man who is forcing himself to believe he is Gog! Gog will lead us to Armageddon - that is, if we take notice of what is written. You are trying to convince yourself that you are Gog and you believe you can do nothing to change your destiny - If you want my advice - you will try! Break the chain of events that you think you are following - do something which is not prophesied! Prove to yourself that you are a free agent!"

Once again, there was a protracted silence. The two men sat opposite each other across the desk. Malenski's eyes were closed.

"I hear what you saying, Nicholai - I will give it some thought - You might be right. In the meantime - as our Scandian comrades have said - we must not sit on our hands. Prepare the second corp. to sail in two days - we will enter into the 'Fairest of all Lands' via the Port of Elat. Our thrust will take us to the east of the Salt Sea. I am entrusting the attack to you, I'm quite sure you have already laid your plans. For the time being, we will avoid an encounter along the coastal strip - that may come later. I don't have to remind you that Michael ben Levi DOES read his prophesies, therefore, you can expect a tough resistance. He will not roll over and play dead like Micah Perga!"

Gubkin wore a look of defeat, Malenski had listened to what he had had to say, but it had apparently made no impression. The man who had convinced himself that he was Gog, was determined to follow to the letter, the recipe for disaster contained in the ancient writings of a long dead prophet of Israel. When Gubkin returned to his quarters, he was almost in despair, after some thought, he despatched a communiqué to Gorki, there was only one man who might still persuade Georgi Malenski to abandon his suicidal course.

Two days later, the second corp. had already sailed to effect its landing at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Gubkin could not shake of an uneasy feeling about the whole exercise. There had been no attempt to disguise the fact that an invasion was about to take place. It was almost as if Malenski was signalling his intentions to the defenders. They would be well prepared to repel the landing.

The transporters were already well into the gulf, when Ruri Karpov presented himself at the Nile City Secretariat. Malenski greeted his senior advisor with surprise.

"I wasn't expecting you, Ruri - "

"I thought it advisable not to send a communiqué about my movements, Georgi. I had to cross a lot of hostile territory to reach you."

Malenski looked up sharply.

"I thought we had stabilised Suskov's territory - or has something happened to cause a disturbance?"

Ruri nodded.

"The winter has happened, Georgi. Within the last week, the temperatures have plummeted, we are getting another flood of refugees from beyond the Urals. Many who settled there have uprooted for a second time and are flooding to the west into Europe. They are stretching our resources to the limit. Compounding the problem, the Scandians to the north are on the move again and causing our militia a great deal of trouble. I haven't enough men to meet all the pressure being put upon us. I can't train new recruits quickly enough - in any case, you have the cream of our young men here with you."

Malenski eyed him without blinking.

"There's something else -"

Ruri nodded.

"Chernienko is forcing our people off the land to the south, he's trying to roll back our settlements over the old border of his stewardship and beyond, into Suskov territory. Much the same thing is happening in Anatole Barenkov's stewardship - Feodor is attacking the militia posts, neutralising them and then evicting our farmers! I can't juggle my resources to meet all the threats! - I didn't want to trust this to a communiqué."

Malenski nodded.

"You're right, of course! I will send you five thousand militia from the rearguard in Greece. You must spread them as you see fit. If possible, give Feodor Chernienko a short sharp lesson which he will not forget!"

His visitor looked relieved.

"Thank you, Georgi - it will be a great help. You've been listening to my tale of woe - and I haven't offered by condolences to you - Those who knew you from the beginning, knew how much you cared for Elena?"

Malenski turned to the window.

"As you are well aware, at the time of her death, Elena was no longer my wife! It was her decision to make her life elsewhere with our son. I mourn her loss - and that of the child she tried to bring into this world - but our life together was a mirage, a dream from another time. I have learned to move on!"

Ruri eyed the rigid back of the man who had once been like a brother and was now a stranger. He asked softly.

"Before I return, will I have the chance to see Piotr?"

Malenski turned.

"He isn't with me - I left him with his mother, he is in good hands."

Ruri couldn't help his mouth gaping in surprise.

"In Jerusalem! Georgi, is that well advised? The boy could become a hostage!"

"I said he was in good hands. Michael ben Levi will not treat him as a hostage! On the other hand, what place has the boy with me? All he will hear are tales of Gog, of war, of conquest, of pillage and of rape! That is not the

place for my son!"

"Then, Georgi, bring him home! You've done enough! Let others feed our millions. Come back to Gorki and take command of the situation there - it's your home!"

Malenski eyed him steadily.

"Gog has no home - except the far recesses of the north - and from there, he has already been led out. Gog has to follow the course laid out for him. He has no other option. That course does not include him taking his son back to an empty shell of a house, whose mother is dead, together with the love which once existed there!"

Within the hour, Ruri was on his way back to Gorki. His mission had failed, but he had had no opportunity to report its failure to the man who had initiated it. Gubkin was sailing further into the narrow cleft of sea between Sinai and Arabia. On either side, the watchers in the hills counted the flotilla of ships which carried his men and estimated the numbers who would make their landing and bring war to the land of Esau, ancient Edom. The word was relayed to Michael ben Levi in Jerusalem and the order was sent out: Let no man delay, leave your homes and your possessions, flee into the hills and from there, worry the flanks of the enemy, give them no rest, by day or by night. Wear them down, sap their energy, erode their confidence.

It was also on this day, that Feodor Chernienko and his cousin Alexander Barenkov, counter attacked the depleted garrisons Malenski had left in the forward positions in the Balkan Mountains. A strong force of the mounted Cossacks, Feodor had drilled and trained, surge into the valleys between the hills, slashing and carving their way through the ranks of men who had been used to easy victories. Within three days, they had cleared the way to the south, to the old coast above the Aegean polders where some craggy outposts, which had once been islands, still held out against Malenski's forces. Within another two days, they had turned to the west and were recovering the lands along the coast of Salonika and the adjacent polders. Thus it was, that the reinforcements promised by Georgi Malenski to Ruri Karpov, failed to materialise. They were fighting for their lives against the determined charges of men who had nothing more to lose.

Much the same thing happened further north. Alexander fought his way through the narrow gorge of the Iron Gates and surged through into the plain of the Danube. Resistance was light and forward groups of his cavalry were soon threatening the main Alpine camp from which Sedova had launched his attack. The Balkan peninsular was in chaos and in a great arc round into southern Russia, the counterattack put pressure on the sorely taxed forces of the invader from beyond the Urals. Compounding the problems for Ruri Karpov, was the relentless pressure from the north, in the form of the new Scandian bands, who, if anything, were more ferocious than those whom Sedova had faced in the first encounters.

Gubkin pressed doggedly forward, the nightly attacks on his camps were well organised and inflicted heavy losses. The morale and stamina of his men were undermined by lack of sleep and thin rations. By day, the flanks and rear were constantly under attack from groups who materialised from the undergrowth, inflicted their wounds and then withdrew before resistance could be organised. Gubkin resorted to sending out patrols. They had limited

success, capturing one here and there, but then, they in turn were decimated by a counter attack. In that way, he lost a lot of men.

In the course of ten days, they had managed to penetrate within sight of the Salt Sea. The mountains of Moab and Ammon, were even more difficult terrain than those of Edom. Gubkin knew he stood on holy ground. He looked out across the dazzling, white expanse of the Salt Sea and watched the commerce of the Central Administration taking place, in the form of the transporters and shuttles which plied to and from the Terminal. Michael ben Levi was ensuring that it was business as usual, ignoring the invasion force which stood poised on the doorstep of Jerusalem.

Gubkin's pulse quickened, he was so close. If he was to divert his men to cross the expanse of the Salt Sea - perhaps, no more than forty kilometres - they would be on the threshold of the ultimate victory. It was surely what Georgi Malenski wanted - Gubkin remembered the conversation he had had with him: 'Break the chain of events that you think you are following - do something which is not prophesied! Prove to yourself that you are a free agent!'

If he was to take Jerusalem, it would break the prophesied chain of events - it would be something which was not prophesied - It would prove that Georgi Malenski was not Gog! - Then, perhaps, they could all go home and settle down to the comfortable life which was now no more than a distant memory!

Somewhere on this mountain range, Moses had once stood and looked over into the Promised Land. It must have been with considerable longing, for he already knew that he was not to be permitted to enter. Gubkin's train of thought was disturbed by yet another outcry from the men he had brought so far. They were under attack once more, Gubkin swore aloud, there would be more casualties. His men were more battle weary than if they had fought a hard battle. The constant raids had worn them down. He looked again at the tempting prize - it would be suicide. They would be picked off as they crossed the expanse of open salt. He made the decision to press forward to the north, following the eastern shore of the salt pan. If Jerusalem was to be taken, it would be by rounding the head of the ancient sea and by a frontal attack through the Judaeen hills.