

Michael closed the door panel quietly behind him and stood with his back to it. He watched Leah sitting motionless in a chair by the window. It faced out into the great cleft of the valley below the parapet. She gave no indication that she knew he was there. He felt sapped with emotion - first Asher - and now, Marcus Steinbecker. He closed his eyes momentarily and then opened them abruptly. He couldn't allow himself the indulgence of emotion.

"What can you tell me, Michael?"

She HAD known he was there. He walked to the window and knelt by the side of her chair.

"Not a great deal more than we already know. The Flight Control Centres at the Salt Sea and in Salem, both confirm that the suborbiter reached apogee - that's the apex of the orbital path. Everything appeared to be in order. Shortly before it was due to begin the downward curve of the flight - something went wrong. As yet, they don't know what. The suborbiter failed to start the descent and continued outward into space. Ground monitors indicated the loss of integrity about the same time."

Leah nodded slowly.

"What does 'loss of integrity' imply, Michael?"

He hesitated.

"It can mean a lot of things, Leah."

"Tell me what it meant for Marcus!"

"If you wish! - The investigation hasn't progressed very far, but as far as Flight Control could tell, there was a sudden evacuation of the cabin pressure. They believe the cabin skin must have ruptured but they can't pinpoint the cause. For what little consolation it gives, Leah - it would have been over very quickly for the occupants!"

She nodded again.

"Thank you, Michael. I don't need to know more than that - excepting - Why! Why did it happen to Marcus?"

He took her hand and held it between his. She was icy cold.

"I wish I could answer that question, Leah. Marcus will be greatly missed."

He sounded as if he meant it. For the first time, she turned and looked at him. The strain and weariness was very visible.

"You should rest, Michael - you look worn out!"

"Don't worry about me! I'm concerned about you!"

"I'll be all right, I have a lot to think about. Do you think you could keep everyone away? I don't believe I could cope with a lot of sympathy, just at the moment."

He squeezed her hand, rose to his feet and left her alone. Perhaps her request had been selfish, but for as long as possible, she desperately wanted to maintain the cocoon of remoteness which cloaked her. She tentatively allowed her thoughts to turn to Marcus. She released a few of the less personal memories. Long before she had actually known him, she had known

of him. During the three hundred plus years of her existence, he had always been in high profile. He was not only a senior member of the Clan Steinbecker, but especially in recent years, he had enjoyed the confidence of Joel, their patriarch. Where Father Joel had been, Marcus had not been far away. Now, they were both gone and she was beginning to realise that the bottom had dropped out of her existence. Asher was gone too, and he had been the alternative foundation for a significant portion of her life.

She glanced at the chronometer. So little time had passed. In two hours, her life had changed irretrievably. A little over two hours earlier, she had been waiting for a flight which had never arrived. The events of the two hours were at one and the same time, each sharply defined in her memory and yet, disjointed and blurred, as if they had no continuity. After the episode at the spaceport, Michael had collected her and whisked her away to Asher's house.

As yet, there were only a few who knew of Marcus Steinbecker's death. Joshua was in conference with one of the other Administrators and the news could not have reached them. Leah was glad, it was a respite before she had to be strong and face the tide of commiserations.

The news would be circulating in Salem also! She suddenly thought of the children and stood abruptly. She thanked God that Marcus had lacked the imagination to bring them to Jerusalem as a surprise! She was also thankful that they were so young. They had loved their father and without a doubt, would miss him. Her lip quivered and the dam wall of her grief broke.

By the time Joshua had returned, she was dry-eyed again. Her head ached with the act of weeping. She still sat in the chair by the window, as if trying to hold on to the fading light. She suddenly found herself lifted from the chair and clasped against his chest. It was ironic, there would have been a time when she would have been thrilled by such a display of emotion.

Joshua was crying, she could feel the tears soaking into the material of her dress. She wondered who was offering comfort to whom. He drew back from her and she could see the tears furrowing down.

"Oh! My dear, Leah! I am so sorry!"

Her answer was mechanical.

"It was God's will."

He stared at her. She went on.

"It would have to be so, wouldn't it? It couldn't have happened unless He had allowed it!"

He responded cautiously.

"I'm glad you can see it that way, Leah."

"We mustn't weep for Marcus, Joshua! In a few short years, all of us will follow him and he has been spared a great deal of anguish."

He continued to stare at her.

"What will you do, Leah?"

She hadn't given it much thought, she gave an impromptu answer.

"Go back to Salem I suppose - my children are there. I won't stay for long, I have no desire to be the widow Steinbecker!"

Joshua blinked, she sounded so emotionless. Her tone was hard, almost bitter.

"And what then?"

She shrugged.

"I'll come back to Jerusalem - It's ironic, isn't it? I never did close down my house here. It was something I had intended to do so many times and something always came in between."

Joshua stood in the window recess, his face visible in the last light.

"You could always come to Iberia - "

The answer was crisp and defined.

"I think not, Joshua. I like Jerusalem, it's the centre of things."

"It could be the centre of things in more ways than one. In fact, it could become quite a hot spot - you have your children to consider."

"One of us once made the observation that nothing could alter the coming of Gog and his Horde - or the consequences it would bring for the rest of the earth and the realms of eternity. On that basis, it doesn't much matter where I am or where my children are. In the final analysis, we have only a little way to go before the Time of the End."

He couldn't find anything to say to her, she was so rigidly controlled. If she had wept he could have consoled her - or perhaps, wept with her. If she had looked helpless and incapable, he could have provided the strength she needed. This steely, almost bitter control was unnerving and he felt himself helpless in the face of it.

"Leah, I will always be ready to help you - to offer a home to you and your children if you do decide to leave Salem - or if you have second thoughts about Jerusalem."

"You are very kind, Joshua. I am truly grateful for your concern. I have already made the decision. I will leave Salem, it would hold too many memories for me to remain. I feel in my heart that I must be in Jerusalem until - until everything is over!"

Joshua left soon after. It was already late in the day and she was spared further expressions of sympathy. In the next days there was a steady stream of callers coming and going to the house of Asher ben Jacobi. The demise of two notable Administrators was unusual enough to encourage a greater than usual interest. Michael and Leah were joint recipients of the condolences. They received the callers together and offered refreshments in exchange for expressions of sympathy. Leah was the focus of attention, if only for the bizarre way in which Marcus had died. There was also something about her carefully controlled poise which attracted curiosity. More than one eyed the couple - the darkly, handsome Michael sitting next to his pale faced, beautiful companion and formed private conclusions.

Seven days after Asher had died, he was laid to rest. He provided the mortal remains for the Act of Committal, although it became a memorial service shared with the invisible presence of Marcus. Leah stood with Michael as joint mourner for Asher. She was totally controlled, remote in her composure. A few hours before the ceremony, it had finally been confirmed that there was no immediate possibility of recovering the remains of her husband from the erratic orbit of the wrecked suborbiter. It would be his final resting place.

She listened to the words of Asher's eulogy and the various speakers who came forward to add their contribution. There was no mention of Marcus - she accepted the omission. It was as it should be, Asher deserved the

respect of being Committed on his own account. Until the very last moments of the ceremony, there was no sign of a Firstling - and then their Kingly-Priest walked into their midst. The crowd had listened silently to the procession of speakers but now the quietness became intensified. They had automatically dropped to their knees.

The Firstling took his place in the centre of the room and looked at them silently. Leah waited until his eyes rested on her. As always, it was a look which burned into her soul. The love and warmth, the caring and consolation, washed over her. Her carefully maintained composure crumbled and she wept without restraint. Michael drew her to him and they knelt together with his arm about her shoulders.

The Firstling approached the bier and looked down at the body. He placed his hand on those of Asher.

"I have listened to your words of memorial for Asher ben Jacobi, and I have agreed with every sentiment. He was a man of resolution and dedication, of fierce loyalty to his God and to his neighbours. He was a product of the Kingdom of Peace and the teaching of all men by our God and Heavenly Father. This mortal shell remains and today will be returned to its physical origin. Already, Asher ben Jacobi has passed into another realm of the eternal Kingdom and is active once more in the tasks which have been allotted to him.

Let us never forget that we are all the recipients of the grace of this Eternal Kingdom of our God. We should not be deluded by those who say that everything has changed and that the Kingdom no longer exists. It is their argument that Satan has been released and has regained his control of this earth and that the Kingdom has been destroyed.

In the visible sense, it cannot be denied that the benevolent conditions, which the earth has enjoyed for a thousand years, have changed. In the invisible sense, nothing has changed, for the Kingdom of God is not bound to the visible but to the invisible. It is not temporal but eternal. Our Lord Jesus once told us that the Kingdom of Heaven is within! The Kingdom therefore remains, and will do so as long as we hold it within our hearts and protect it from the evil activities of the Destroyer.

As always, I counsel you to beware of the Second Death! The time comes, indeed it is at your door, when the great Judge will call you all to account!"

The Kingly-Priest walked through the crowd and left the chamber. Leah heard Michael exhale raggedly. He released her and rose to his feet and then assisted her to stand. He waited until everyone else had also risen.

"Brethren, we have heard the words of comfort expressed by our King and Priest. We can take confidence in his words that the Kingdom remains and that we have a sacred duty to ensure that it continues to live in our hearts until the moment when we are all called to account.

Asher ben Jacobi was described as being a product of the activity of the Lord and his Firstlings during the thousand years of their teaching. We are also born of this same instruction. We have experienced the benevolence which was poured out upon us. May we also and finally, be accounted worthy to receive the same commendation as that which Asher has received.

It is now time to return the mortal remains to the dust from which they

were created. I bid you to say farewell to our friend and brother!"

Michael took Leah firmly by the arm and led the way from the room. Those carrying the bier followed and then, the rest of the assembly. There were silent crowds flanking the streets of the city, as they led the cortege to the burial place. Leah thought back of the many times such a procession would have been seen during the long history of the ancient place. Jerusalem would have seen the passing of many kings and mighty people. Asher was no less than they and perhaps, greater than some.

She walked for Marcus too - the same ceremony would not - could not - be repeated for him. She wondered how it was in far off Salem and knew that with the committal of Asher, there was no longer an excuse to remain away. She listened to Michael intoning the words of the Act of Committal and watched him perform the simple process of farewell. He didn't look the patriarch, he looked more like one of the warrior kings of Israel - a David, perhaps. He faced the same, almost insurmountable odds as the ancient king - but he also could place his trust in the Almighty and know that if God was for him, who could be against him!

Suddenly, she felt impatient to return to Salem and see out the trauma which awaited her there and then, to hasten back to this city set in the navel of the world. She was more than ever convinced that this was the place she had to be when the End of all things came upon them. Across the circle of mourners, she sensed Joshua Aristides watching her. She didn't look in his direction. He had appeared to avoid her since she had declined his offer to return to Iberia. It was a typical reaction. She was a little surprised that she could see it so clearly. She was also a little astounded that she hadn't recognised Joshua for what he had always been and had fancied herself to be so much in love with him.

Some hours later, in the quietness of what had been Asher's home, she was finally able to sit and relax. There had been the usual gathering which always followed a Committal. There had been final reminiscences and appreciative words on the worth of the dearly departed. It had been the occasion for some to remember and say nice things about Asher whilst they still had an audience, Now, they were gone and she had sought the refuge of her room.

It was close to sunset. The western sky was clear. It was so like the conditions they had often enjoyed during the years of the Kingdom and it was the time of day which Asher had particularly loved. It was the time when he would sit and watch the shadows lengthen and it was a time when he allowed his thoughts to run free. Leah smiled a little. He had had wonderful thoughts; wonderful schemes to be planned - but they were never more than pipe-dreams which he would acknowledge as such after a while and at which he would roar with laughter when he reflected on them. The sunset in Jerusalem would always remind her of Asher!

She rose and started to select the clothing she intended to take with her to Salem. Her return hadn't been discussed, but she intended to take the suborbiter home. Given the circumstances, she could have been excused for avoiding the method of transit which had taken the life of her husband, but she had come to the resolution that she wouldn't take an alternative. It was a final mark of respect for Marcus. She would soar up to where he had died and

be close to him for one final moment - just as they had been close to Asher for one final moment earlier in the day - and then silently, she would commit his body to the dust between the stars.

Michael raised no arguments when she told him she had to return to Salem.

"I know you must do it, Leah. I also want you to know that if you do decide to come back to us, you will be more than welcome."

She could read much more in his eyes than what was contained in the words. The same look was there when he kissed her on the forehead in a prim farewell at the Salt Sea Terminal on the following day.

The clamour which had accompanied her arrival in Salem, had almost approached the level of hysteria. The reception area had been crowded with the Clan Steinbecker - most of whom she only knew vaguely. Outside of that solid circle of mournful and consoling faces, there was a greater crowd of other citizens, who could not claim ties of blood. David, Marcus's secretary, had been thrust by the force of circumstances into the forefront. It was he who grasped her hand and couldn't find anything to say at the critical moment.

Others reached out to touch her as if to do so would somehow give her strength. The effect was the contrary, she felt the virtue drain from her, it was as if her strength ebbed away. She looked around for her children but they were nowhere to be seen. It was the most sensible thing someone could have decided and she supposed she had Rebecca to thank for it. She was almost carried through the reception area to a waiting Pod and bundled inside like a package. Somehow, a path was cleared around the vehicle and it moved clear of the pressing crowd. She closed her eyes in exhaustion and David cleared his throat nervously.

"We tried to avoid the crowd, Sister Steinbecker - but somehow, word got out. Actually, there have been some who have been camping at the spaceport for a glimpse of you."

She opened her eyes and stared at him in astonishment.

"Whatever reason could they have for doing that?"

There was another man beyond David, someone she didn't immediately recognise. He interjected in a voice loaded with disdain.

"Sensation seekers, Sister Steinbecker - people pretending to be compassionate."

She switched her gaze to him. He sounded an interesting man. He was a heavy built and solid looking. She judged him to be a few years older than Marcus - she corrected herself - than Marcus had been.

"Where are my children?"

"They waiting for you - at your home, Sister Steinbecker."

David sounded so pathetically eager to please. He added hastily.

"I should introduce you to Brother Kurt Weber."

"I'm not one of your Steinbecker cousins, sister!"

She smiled briefly and nodded.

"Marcus spoke of you many times, brother. You look after the Gazera Province."

His face twitched into a responsive smile.

"I wager Marcus had much to say about me - we rubbed the best out of

each other - like steel and flint, we made sparks. He was a man I could respect."

They were passing the wall across the headland. She averted her eyes from it. It provoked too many memories. Soon after their marriage, Marcus had continued the tradition of walking there. It was also the place where she had announced her decision to marry him. The Pod was taking a devious, roundabout way from the spaceport to the hills. David volunteered the information.

"The usual route is crowded. Brother Kurt thought a detour - "

Leah nodded, it sounded as if Brother Kurt was called the shots and filling the vacuum left by Marcus. A disjointed phrase crossed her mind: Nature abhors a vacuum. Someone would have to fill the Administrator's place, but that was something which wasn't open for negotiation - or even power grabbing. During the years of the Kingdom, it had been strictly the role of a Firstling to nominate the incumbent.

The strategy of the detour had avoided most of the crowds and soon they entered the security of the grounds of her home. It didn't feel such anymore, perhaps it never had been her home. There was too much history, first Carl and then his son, Joel, and then, more recently, Marcus and his young wife and their children. The continuity should have brought happiness, but particularly since the subtle influence of Satan had been brought to bear, she had felt the weight of the departed earlier occupants. She had had the sensation of being watched and assessed, not only in all she did, but in all she had thought.

Her children were tumbling down the steps from the house towards her. They had broken free of the tall, older woman who had brought them through the main door. Leah stooped down to clutch them into her arms. She was smothered in kisses and exuberance and before they quietened down, she was half laughing and crying.