

25.

An early start had been indicated in Alexei's message. Marcus ate a solitary breakfast and felt a little disturbed that Leah had not chosen to join him. He had ensured that Alexei's message had been relayed to her. He wondered if she was having second thoughts about leaving Jerusalem. There was always the possibility that seeing Joshua once more, might have caused old hopes to resurface. He pushed the thought from his mind. It wasn't a profitable exercise to dwell on such suppositions and he had other matters to think about. There was one thing he had to accept and that was the little time Leah had been given to settle her affairs. She had been at his side throughout the conference and for most of their brief leisure time as well. It was nearly the time of departure before she put in an appearance. She placed her hand luggage close to his.

"I hope you had breakfast."

She eyed him solemnly.

"I managed to snatch a bite to eat. Organising the troops takes a little time, you know."

Marcus nodded, he wasn't going to allow himself to be put on the defensive. He knew from personal experience how long it took to 'organise the troops'.

"You mustn't sacrifice your own priorities when it isn't necessary, Leah. My staff have been with Father Joel and with me for quite a long time - they know what has to be done and you can rely on them to lay the ground work for implementing the conference decisions."

She flushed slightly.

"I wonder if you really need a personal assistant, Marcus."

He schooled himself to give a casual answer.

"Rest assured, Leah - I need you - and I want you."

She stared at him and her flush deepened and she turned away abruptly.

"I hope I gave you enough time to settle the past."

"The past?"

"The ties with Jerusalem and all that's happened during the past few years."

"There's nothing holding me to Jerusalem - and the last few years are best forgotten."

He tried to make his voice light.

"Then, we must look to the future."

"And the present - "

"Of course! The present promises to be very instructive - even exciting! What did you make of Alexei's itinerary?"

"A grand tour of the land of Magog."

"Don't expect to find Gog lurking behind every bush!"

She managed a smile.

"Gog is the prince of Rosh, Meshech and Tubal, I wouldn't expect to find him lurking in the bushes."

"And we shouldn't expect him to know that he is Gog, either. Today, he is likely to be the very opposite, for he will be 'turned about', if I remember my Ezekiel correctly."

A Pod was waiting to take them to the Salt Sea Terminal. For the most part, they rode in silence. Marcus was very conscious of her being close to

him. Once again, he rehearsed pretty speeches but none of them sounded adequate. It was only when they passed the valley leading to Asher's house, that she stirred.

"I never exchanged a word with him, Marcus."

There was an element of sadness in her voice that made him want to take her in his arms. He resisted the impulse.

"Neither did I, Leah. I cannot imagine why he should be so deeply offended. I had thought better of Asher ben Jacobi."

"He's put up a great wall between us. If there is anything left for me to do in Jerusalem, it is to try to break down that wall."

"I'm sure the opportunity will come, Leah. Asher is going to need us when Satan is released and the focus of his rage is directed against the visible symbol of the camp of the saints. That means Jerusalem and the land of Israel."

"You still believe in a physical battle, don't you?"

Marcus nodded.

"The battle will take many forms, some symbolic, but yes, I do think one of those forms will be a physical attack against the physical Jerusalem."

The Pod was descending the last slopes to the valley of the Jordan.

The expanse of the Salt Sea was dazzlingly white. The pilot who had destroyed the nuclear capability of the area at the start of the Great Destruction, had described it as a blinded eye. Millennia before that, God had destroyed the cities of the plain because of their evil. Marcus remembered Leah's own words: 'Not even ten children could be found who could be described as worthy'. How much worse it would be when Gog besieged the city they had just left and fire would rain down from heaven to destroy him and his great army.

Alexei Kharkov was waiting for them in the reception area of the Terminal. He rose and took Leah's hand and pressed it to his lips. The old fashioned gesture brought a blush to her cheeks.

"It is so refreshing to find a young woman who can still blush, my dear! Brother Marcus, I am delighted that you still have the mind to accept my invitation, especially after I detailed my itinerary. I so rarely have the chance to visit the western extremity of my area. This provides me with the perfect opportunity - but we shall be delayed for only two days. I hope you are agreeable?"

Marcus bowed slightly.

"It will be my pleasure - and instructional. I have a great deal to learn and I thank you for the opportunity."

Alexei wagged his finger.

"You have little to learn, I think and particularly, when it comes to the skill of a tactful answer."

The old man was more shrewd than he appeared. Marcus took note, Alexei Kharkov was far from senile and could provide some surprises. He led them to the spacious cabin of a large shuttle. He confided.

"Whenever I can avoid travelling by suborbiter, I do. It plays havoc with my digestion!"

Marcus and Leah exchanged glances and smiled.

"Ah! I see you've heard that complaint before! Joel Steinbecker had the same problem, I think. Advancing years bring common maladies. Of course, I am some years younger - a mere nine hundred and sixteen. My father and mother were young Survivors."

The pilot lost no time in getting the shuttle moving. They rose from the Pad at a slightly more gentle rate than usual and Marcus assumed it was in

deference to Alexei's delicate digestion. The course was slightly to the northwest and brought them directly over Jerusalem.

"Flying over the city always seems to emphasise how small it really is."

The old man seemed eager for conversation.

"Father Joel once told me that it was kept deliberately small."

"That might be so - I can think of no reason other than it might be historical - unless smallness was evaluated as being inconspicuousness.

Perhaps, the designers after the Destruction, had one eye on the future, when Gog will come from Magog with his mighty Horde and Jerusalem will be under siege. Maybe, they thought he might overlook it if they kept it small!"

The old man laughed at his own humour and his guests joined in politely.

"Are you of the opinion that there will be a siege of Jerusalem and that Gog will come out of Magog?"

Alexei looked at him sharply.

"Of course! Today, we go to Magog and we will fly over Meshech and Tubal. Our first port of call will be in Rosh!"

Leah interjected before Marcus could respond.

"And, do you think we shall meet Gog, Father Alexei?"

Marcus looked at her in shock. The old man seemed untroubled by the question.

"Who knows, daughter! I can tell you, there have been many discussions about the identity of Gog in the circle of those with whom we shall break bread this evening. There is a theory that Gog does not even know himself. It will be interesting to see if fresh faces can identify him - you must tell me whom you suspect!"

Marcus responded quickly.

"If we tried to do that, we would be sure to do someone an injustice."

"Maybe - you might be right. Judge not - lest you are judged by the same measure that you mete."

They had crossed the coast and were gathering speed, following the ancient, eastern shoreline of the Great Sea. Marcus was paying little attention to the scenery, Alexei's directness was disconcerting. The appearance of other worldliness was a facade - either that, or he was hopelessly naive.

The polders of the Anatolian coast loomed ahead and ancient Tarsus was the point where the pilot turned the ship due north and gained elevation for the crossing of the Taurus mountains. Marcus felt the history of the region rising to greet him. Below them, the armies of Alexander and Darius had played cat and mouse with each other before they had finally met in the uneven battle which had resulted in the defeat and flight of the Persian king. Paul who once had been Saul, had been born in this province of the Roman Empire. Beyond the mountains the heartland of the Hittites had produced a warrior race whose weapons of iron had devastated the might of Pharaoh and those of their other neighbours who knew only how to work with copper. They were crossing the land of Meshech and Tubal and beyond them, Gomer. The rolling mountainous plateau of Anatolia was stretched out beneath them but in a surprisingly short time, the depths of what remained of the Black Sea, lay ahead. Marcus became aware of Alexei watching him. The old man seem to be delighted with the impact of the journey, he was like an enthusiastic tour guide from a bygone era.

"We are crossing evocative country, this area was indeed a crossroads for kings and warriors. Mighty battles were won and lost beneath us.

Reputations were enhanced or irretrievably shattered by the sword. Kings

were deposed or became emperors. Their empires rose and were splintered when weaker men reigned after them. So much toil and blood, gain and loss, for so little a land! Ah! You see ahead? The Black Sea, one of the more outstanding accomplishments of the Kingdom."

It wasn't strictly true, but Marcus didn't argue. The central depths remained. With the draining of the Mediterranean, the ancient link through the Bosphorus to the Sea of Marmara had been closed. The city of Constantine guarded a waterless cleft between Asia and Europe and great polders extended out to where the ancient sea bottom fell away to the great depths. It was the northern part of the old sea which had been drained, especially around the mouths of the Danube and further north, the Dneister and the Dneiper. The peninsular of the Crimea jutted out to cut the drained basins in two and formed a mountain rampart for the polders of Azov on the eastern side.

It would be churlish to describe it as an insignificant work, but it was a matter of scale. Compared with the Gibraltar Dam, everything else tended to be minor. Alexei was like an excited child, moving from one side of the cabin to the other, to point out some feature. The mountains of the Crimea moved past on the left side of the shuttle and the slow descent into the land of Rosh started. The old man sat down at last and beamed at them, he was a little flushed from all the exertion.

"I want to assure you that our first stop has nothing to do with narcissism! It is sheer coincidence that one of my regional headquarters is in the ancient town of Kharkov - call it very simply, an accident of geography! Incidentally, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the land of Rosh!"

Marcus stared out of the window at the rolling terrain. It stretched almost featureless in every direction. It was typical steppe land, broken by

watercourses, some of which were quite large. He assumed them to be tributaries of the Don. Strictly speaking, this was not the true land of Rosh, in the times before the First Resurrection, it would have been classified as an insult to describe it as such. This was the ancient Ukraine and once, Kharkov had been a focal point for the Cossacks who had ranged along the northern shores of the Black Sea.

In the present day, the Cossacks would not be the ones to strike fear into the hearts of those who lived in unfenced cities, but perhaps, it might be their descendants who carried a fierce heritage. He could almost imagine a great concourse of people gathered and on the move, surging southward to meet up with others, to form a confederation to assault the open land of those who sought to live in peace.

Alexei interrupted his thoughts.

"There is nothing left of the ancient city of course. It was a casualty of the Great Destruction. In fact, the present city is placed some distance from the old site. To my taste, it is a place without a great deal of character and there is little of interest to explore."

He managed to sound as if he didn't want to encourage investigation of the provincial city. Marcus chided himself, he was beginning to see something sinister in everything around him. He put it down to an association of ideas. The Land of Rosh and the potential for it to produce a future menace, was colouring his thinking.

The shuttle descended slowly to an unsuspected landing pad. Quite clearly, it was nowhere near the city. The ship came to rest. Alexei was beaming like a child who was bursting to show off some great secret. Marcus recognised a suppressed version of the impatience Joel had always demonstrated when it came to the end of a journey. He glanced again

through the windows on his side and could see nothing but an expanse of grassy plain, with a fringe of trees bordering it.

The other side was a little more interesting. He could see a small reception committee waiting patiently for the passengers to disembark. They stood in front of a cluster of buildings which looked strictly utilitarian. Severe and straight lined, typical terminal buildings.

Alexei was already at the door of the cabin. Marcus and Leah followed him along the short passage leading to the outside. One of the crew helped the old man down a ramp to ground level. Others were handling the luggage. Marcus took a look at the reception committee. If he expected to see the glowering face of Gog, he was disappointed. If anything, the three young men who greeted Alexei with obvious expressions of affection, had angelically open faces. He found himself being introduced to one after the other and being drawn into a friendly hug, which was a little unexpected. He put it down to a local custom. He was reassured when he saw Leah receiving the same treatment.

One of the three attached himself to Alexei and they engaged in a profound conversation, most of which Marcus could not hear. One of the other two appeared determined to act as the escort for Leah. Marcus tried to take the development in his stride. They were guests after all, and their hosts were trying to ensure their comfort. It was surely not significant that the young man was close to Leah's age and showing extreme attentiveness. The third man was at Marcus's elbow and this demanded his undivided concentration. This was Anatole Barenkov, if the nature of the relationship to Alexei had been explained to Marcus during the introduction, it had escaped him. The same could be said for the one escorting Leah - he was Alexander, brother to Anatole. The third man had been introduced as Feodor Chernienko

and he was pouring out his heart into Alexei's attentive ear.

They crowded into a Pod and the flood of inconsequential chatter was maintained. It was an imminently forgettable conversation and gave Marcus plenty of opportunity to keep an eye on Leah. He told himself he was being ridiculous. He knew he was! He felt as if he was! Leah was quite old enough to take care of herself and until he made his feelings clear, he had no right to assume proprietary attitudes.

They rode for a half hour through rolling countryside. One thing struck him - it was unproductive. It was not under cultivation and from its appearance, had not been so for a long time. It was covered in a tangle of luxuriant grass. If it could grow grass, it could grow wheat. He nearly asked his attentive companion why and then thought better of being too inquisitive. Quite suddenly, they rounded the contour of a rolling hill and a low set, spacious house blocked their path. Alexei leaned back from over the front seat.

"Welcome to our destination for this day. Feodor has kindly opened his home and his heart to us!"

Marcus murmured something appropriate. They drew closer to the house and he could see that an orchard had been planted to one side and beyond that, what looked to be a small vineyard. Manicured lawns and flower gardens stretched out to the other side and across the front of the house. It was a charming place, almost an artistic presentation, but the comparison to the uncultivated heathland still troubled him.

The inside of the house matched the well manicured surroundings.

There was a great deal of carved and polished wood, vaulted ceilings braced by stone buttresses which housed the flues for the huge fire places. It appeared to be a deliberate attempt to copy the medieval great halls of fifteen

hundred years earlier, where the lords sat at huge oak tables and entertained their guests and were served by an army of retainers.

Marcus and Leah were shown chambers which were on the same lavish scale as the communal rooms. Rich fabrics hung from the window openings and the walls. The beds and furniture were covered in the same way. There were concessions to the modern age, of course, but these were hidden away. The communicator was disguised as an antique coffer. The light control, as a crystal vase. Marcus experimented, the controls triggered artificial pendant lanterns. He played with them for a while and then felt the presence of someone else in the room. Leah was leaning against the open door entrance, trying to choke back her laughter.

"You were having such a wonderful time, Marcus!"

He grinned back, it was good to see her laugh. There hadn't been much evidence of humour during the past few days.

"I was trying to find my way around the controls."

"You don't have to explain! Actually, I thought you were trying to blow the master computer! You were issuing so many conflicting commands, you should have given the control module a nervous breakdown!"

He looked shocked.

"Surely, you can't believe there would be a master computer controlling this? I had visions of some poor little serf frantically flicking switches to agree with the demented character manipulating the controller."

She closed the door.

"That's better - we don't want some busybody reporting that we're laughing at the local electronics industry!"

"This is pretty unbelievable!"

"I call it opulent - I know that's a good, old fashioned word, but that's

what comes to mind. There's something else - it just doesn't ring true. I have the feeling that it's an elaborate facade."

"Hiding what?"

"I wish I knew, Marcus. I wish I knew."

Marcus toyed with the controller again and the lights flashed on.

"I wouldn't keep doing that, Marcus. Someone might think you're signalling somebody."

"You're in a peculiar mood! I suppose it has something to do with the attentive Alexander."

"Was he - attentive, I mean - I didn't notice. Obviously, you did!"

"My ears are still ringing with the barrage of conversation from the time we met until the moment we got here."

"They were just being polite - acting the perfect host."

"And definitely layering on the reception far too thickly. Another facade, perhaps?"

"I thought Alexander was rather charming."

"I rather thought you did!"

She explored the view beyond the window.

"The garden is beautiful."

"Beyond the garden is a wilderness."

She turned and looked at him.

"What's troubling you, Marcus."

He sat on the edge of the bed.

"Perhaps, I'm beginning to question whether we did the right thing when we accepted Alexei Kharkov's invitation. We're being shown something and we have already agreed that it isn't what it seems on the surface. Joshua Aristides warned me to be very watchful. He said that I might see something

which will be important for us all. I'm beginning to think he was right!"

She had stiffened a little at the mention of Joshua. Her voice was carefully controlled.

"I hadn't realised that you'd spoken to him."

"We met last evening."

"I can't think of any good reason why he should make such a comment - after all, Alexei is a distant cousin."

"Perhaps, he knows something about Alexei that we don't - and maybe, we'll see something that he's already suspects."