

Asher's breathing was harsh and laboured, it filled the otherwise silent room. Leah moved for the first time in hours, she was stiff and cold and Jerusalem had not escaped the return to wintry conditions. The laboured breathing was Asher's only movement. She had held his hand in hers and it had remained limp. She wasn't even sure that he knew she was there, he had given no sign of recognition since her arrival ten days previously.

During that time, there had been a procession of advisers to the bedside of the stricken man. They had been full of words but had provided little physical help. They produced assurances that Asher was quite comfortable and they were of the earnest opinion that the sickness would have to take its course. It told Michael and Leah nothing they didn't already know.

They faced an undisputed problem. There were no true physicians anymore. Medical knowledge had become a matter of theory. During the years of the Kingdom, there had been little need for doctors. Sickness and death had been almost non-existent, especially during the centuries after the last of the Survivors had passed away. Michael knew a little when it came to the maladies of those who were high in their years, but he was completely at a loss when it came to dealing something as serious as that which had stricken Asher.

The immediate problem had been to identify what had caused the old man to suddenly collapse. There had been a frantic scrolling through the ancient, inadequate medical records held on the computer, before a diagnosis could be made. Eventually, it was decided that there was little doubt that Asher ben Jacobi had suffered a massive cerebral haemorrhage which had left his limbs totally paralysed.

The recumbent man coughed and jerked a little. It sounded as if there was an accumulation of fluid in the lungs. Leah watched him anxiously, not knowing what she could do to help. The coughing fit subsided and he was as motionless as before. She closed her eyes wearily, it was already late in the evening of this, the tenth day of her stay in Jerusalem.

She thought of Marcus, a half world away, there the day would have barely started. He would be at the Administration Building, wrestling with the growing problems in which he had refused to allow her to assist. She felt of more use to Asher, even though she was helpless to ease his physical condition. At least, she could sit at his bedside and hold his hand and hope that he did know that she was there.

Her children would be with Rebecca. Now, there was someone Marcus should have married. Rebecca was nearer to Marcus's age, she was forthright with her opinions and stood no nonsense when it came to expressing her point of view. She was totally unawed by her Administrator cousin and quite capable to asserting her rights. She was also completely under the spell of John and Rachael who knew precisely how to twist her around their tiny fingers. Leah smiled wistfully, she loved her children. It troubled her that she and Marcus had moved so far apart.

The door panel slid across and a shaft of light was broken by the shape of someone entering the room.

"Why are you sitting in the dark, Leah?"

It was a voice full of consideration and there was something else. From the moment she had arrived in Jerusalem, she had sensed something different in her relationship with Michael Ben Levi. It was a difference she had managed to keep at a distance, something she didn't care to allow to develop.

"I hadn't realised the light had gone."

"The sun set four hours ago! Did you fall asleep?"

"No - No, I was thinking of John and Rachael - and home."

Michael switched on a low light to one side of the room, it was shaded from the figure in the bed. He sat down opposite her.

"Marcus will be missing you."

"Perhaps. - He keeps himself very busy. Sometimes, I wonder if he remembers that I'm there."

As soon as it was spoken, she wished she hadn't made the comment. She laughed a little, trying to make it into a joke. Michael smiled slightly in response.

"How is Asher?"

She was glad of the opportunity to turn the conversation to the safety of neutral ground.

"I don't like the sound of his breathing - and he is coughing a lot more."

Michael rose and walked over to the bedside. He watched Asher intently. The breathing was heavy and rasping and there was evidence of the build up of lung fluid.

"In the days before the Kingdom, they knew how to deal with this condition. I feel so helpless, Leah. I have no idea what to do."

"Neither do any of the others who have come to visit him - isn't there anyone else?"

"Not in Jerusalem."

"What about the other Administrators - haven't they got someone?"

Michael hesitated.

"I haven't made it generally known just how serious is Asher's condition."

"Why on earth not!?"

"Call it political, Leah. There are signs of unrest to our north! You know what we are expecting!"

She stared at him.

"Michael! Nothing is going to stop Gog or his Horde when the time is ripe! In the meantime, Asher is dying and he deserves better than to be left to do so!"

Michael swung round, his dark face had flushed and he was defensively angry.

"Do you think I'm leaving him to die, Leah? I love this man! He's like a father to me! Do you realise how grossly unfair you are to make such a comment!"

Leah didn't retreat.

"And I love him too, Michael! I don't believe you're thinking straight!"

Asher's life is the first consideration. I don't care about your - politics - or whatever you want to call them - make an appeal to the other Administrators - Don't take the responsibility for Asher's death on your shoulders!"

They glared at each other, almost nose to nose. It was almost inevitable that he should lean forward and kiss her full on the lips. After a few seconds she pulled away.

"You had no right to do that, Michael ben Levi!"

"No! You are quite right - I didn't have any right - but I'm glad I did!"

He walked to the door and looked back as he left the room. He grinned at her and then made his exit. Leah sat down slowly by the bedside and looked sharply at the witness to what had happened. Asher's chest rose and fell and he stared at the ceiling. She took his hand, but there wasn't the slightest evidence of reaction to her pressure on it.

She hoped Michael would be stirred into action. Asher was losing the fight, slowly his strength was ebbing away. She felt a surge of real fear. If they were to lose Asher, they would lose the one man who could hold together a coalition to combat the rising power of Gog.

It soon became apparent that Michael had listened to her. Over the next few days, there was a trickle of response to the urgent message Michael had elected to issue to the other Administrators. Most of the replies expressed regret, they had no one with expertise. One or two of the others offered advice but nothing else. It was Joshua Aristides who arrived unexpectedly on the second day, with two elderly men in tow.

Michael had visited the sickroom and had calmly announced the news of their expected arrival without further comment. Leah sensed that for some unexplained reason, he was as inwardly disturbed by the projected visit as she was herself.

She was left to plan her own strategy on how to deal with Joshua. It was obvious that there was no way she could avoid meeting him without creating a diplomatic incident - and she was quite certain that Marcus would not favour that. It was of no consequence what the private history between them had been. Ever since the end of the Kingdom and the beginning of the subsequent strains on the relationships between the Administrators, there had been a concerted effort to tread the diplomatic paths as if on eggshells.

She decided to let events take their course and if she could be said to have any plan at all, it was that she would make no plans and handle everything spontaneously. It so happened that the first meeting with Joshua was in the company of Michael and his two experts - and of course, Asher. Joshua drew her to one side when it was clear that the other three wanted to examine the patient.

"Leah, my dear, I am so happy to see you again. I might have known that you would come to Asher's side when he needed you the most! I presume that Marcus is not with you? I thought not - I would hardly expect he was - I suppose you are out of touch with the latest developments, but there is evidence of a problem along the Arctic coast. Millions are moving southward - not so much into East Asia, but into the Heartland. They are moving south and west. As yet, they couldn't be described as Gog's Horde, but they're hungry, cold and exhausted. Marcus would surely be watching them with some anxiety - as are we all.

Poor Asher! I'm shocked to find him in this condition. I thank God he has Michael! He is a good man, who had the good sense to call for help when it was needed."

Leah looked at Michael and the two visitors, they had straightened up from their examination and were now engaged in earnest conversation.

"I agree, Joshua. Michael is a good man and Asher is blessed to have him. Tell me, how is your mother?"

Joshua twisted his face wryly.

"I'm sad to say that my little tyrant is very frail. It is surely one of the hardest things we have to endure in this time, the increasing frailty of our old ones. Especially, when they were once so vibrant and active despite their high ages. Maman is always very tired. She rests and sleeps her days away - and I think she longs for the time when she will be released from her mortal body.

It is very hard for the elderly, but it is even hard for men of my age. I begin to feel my years - I suppose my good friend and brother Marcus finds it the same? Of course! He has a wife to keep him young! I was foolish enough to allow the opportunity to pass me by!"

Leah forced a smile, it was not the direction in which she wanted the conversation to proceed. The three men left the bedside and joined them near the window. They looked solemn. One of Joshua's men acted as spokesman.

"We have very little expertise with the condition of the Administrator. It would seem that he has suffered a total loss of movement to both sides of the body. Sadly, we have come to the conclusion that it is a condition from which we could hardly expect him to recover! There is a further complication. His lungs are filling with fluid. He is suffering from pneumonia and the heart appears to be weakening - "

There was a moment of shocked silence, which Joshua broke.

"And what do you intend to do about his condition?"

His two advisers looked at each other. Joshua snapped:

"I see! You intend to do nothing! I did not bring you here to have nothing done! Asher ben Jacobi is a man who cannot be written off! I will not permit it!"

"Sir - we have no means to assist him! He needs medication but there is nothing within our knowledge."

"Nonsense! Scripture records that there is a herb for every ill!"

"I am aware of that, sir - but we do not know which herb to apply - or where it can be found - or how to identify them! We are ignorant of these things because they were never required during the years of the Kingdom! The knowledge has been lost!"

Joshua glared at them in frustration and then turned aside. He said softly.

"The very blessing of good health we enjoyed under the care of the Kings and Priests, now works against us. We took pains to preserve the knowledge of mechanics and the other physical sciences, because we realised that we had to utilise them for our own comfort. No one became ill, there was no disease, and so we neglected to preserve the knowledge of how to deal with medical and surgical conditions - May God help us when we have

warfare and the wounds of the combatants will need attention!"

He walked to the side of the bed and stared down at Asher. The recumbent figure gave no recognition. There were tears in his eyes when he turned away.

"We have such an urgent need for this man! Something must be done - anything!"

"We can offer no suggestions, Mr. Aristides. His condition is beyond our capabilities."

There was no point in further discussion, after a while, the four men left and Leah was left alone with the old man. She felt defeat rising within her - they were going to lose Asher ben Jacobi.

He lingered for another ten days. His condition slowly deteriorated and his friends watched helplessly as he slipped away. In the evening of the tenth day, the sound of his rasping breathing was finally stilled. Leah placed the hand she had been holding across his chest and then placed the other over it. The two men with her in the room remained motionless in the subdued light. She looked up at them and was mildly surprised to see the tears streaming down Joshua's face. Michael's features were set in granite.

The men covered Asher's face with the sheet and then the trio went out of the room of death. Joshua struggled to find something to say.

"I'm still not used to death - "

Michael's response was almost strident in its harshness.

"Are any of us? I fancy we'll see a great deal more in the days to come."

They entered Asher's study, a small side lamp cast shadows. A man stood by the window. He turned as they entered but said nothing. It was a reflex action which caused them to drop to their knees. Leah found herself stammering.

"Asher is dead, Lord - If you had been here, he wouldn't have died!"

The Firstling reached out his hand and touched her head. She started to weep quietly, it was something she couldn't control.

"Release your sorrow, my sister - your heart has been heavy for so long. Your friend and father, Asher, has found his place of rest. Do you wish to deny him his release from suffering? He is not Lazarus of Bethany over whom our Lord wept when similar words were spoken to him by the mourning sister, Mary. Asher Ben Jacobi has completed his journey on this earth. He is already busy with other tasks. Now is the time for Scripture to be fulfilled.

'At that moment Michael shall appear.

Michael the great captain.

who stands guard over your fellow-countrymen;

and there will be a time of distress

such as has never been

since they became a nation till that moment."

The Firstling walked to Michael and stretched out his hand. Michael took it and scrambled to his feet. Leah could see that he was physically shaking.

"You may be sure that he whose name you bear - Michael the Angel

Prince - will stand with you in the battle to come. Be strong! Be valiant! Stand up for your people, Michael ben Levi! Remember, to the sons of Levi was given the priestly tasks. You bear an illustrious name and the battle to come will be a battle for priests and holy men!"

The Firstling's figure was radiant, it increased the subdued lighting. Leah cried out and she thought her companions did also - and then the radiance subsided. There was a few moments of confusion before Michael touched the room's main lighting control. Joshua was trying to scramble to his feet, he was weeping again. He cried out:

"- And I thought the Kingdom had been taken from us. Our Father is wonderful and His goodness exceedingly great! He has shown us that he is still with us. My dear brother Michael, there can be no doubt that you have received a Godly commission. You can be sure that you will have my support in whatever is to come!"

He grasped Michael's hand in both of his. Leah watched them, she felt peculiarly detached. The Firstling's touch had freed her from something. It was almost as if she had been released from the feeling of strong emotion. Everything seemed so clear to her, but yet she knew that nothing had been altered in her life and she still faced the same problems and questions she had brought with her to Jerusalem. Michael asked:

"Do either of you know where the quotation is in scripture?"

Leah looked at her two companions.

"I feel that this isn't the proper time to search for biblical texts."

Michael nodded agreement.

"You're right, Leah. Asher's death has to be announced - and we have to make arrangements for his Committal."

Joshua declared enthusiastically.

"And we will both help you, Michael!"

Leah watched them quietly. The earlier feeling of detachment remained. The dialogue between the two men was almost trite, it sounded contrived, like stiffly spoken phrases from a second rate melodrama.

It was some hours before Leah could finally reach the solitude of her room. The dawn light was touching the hills to the east. By this time, the message would have been received in Salem and Marcus would be making preparations for the journey to Jerusalem. She had no doubt that he would come. The death of Asher ben Jacobi was a momentous event and his committal would be an impressive ceremonial.

She was bone weary but knew that she wouldn't sleep even if she went to bed. Instead, she sat in a chair and watched the dawn. She released the barrier of discipline she had imposed so that the arrangements for Asher would not be swamped in a tide of grief. She wept once again, her own private mourning for the man who had once been a father to her and who had become so estranged in recent years. It was a quiet grief, something to treasure.

There was a knock at the door. She dried her eyes before touching the control to open the panel. Michael stood in the doorway, he hesitated for a moment and then walked in. She closed the door behind him. He said nothing at first, then:

"I couldn't sleep - and I thought you wouldn't be able to either."

"I was sitting here, thinking of Asher - I wish so much that we could have been reconciled before - "

"He loved you, Leah - but in many ways he could be a stubborn man. I suppose it was an example of 'the evil of his own heart'. It's something we all have, one way or the other. He was very hurt when you ran off to Iberia with Marcus. He wasn't hurt because you went there, you must understand - he was hurt by the deception you both played on him. He had hoped for better things from each of you!"

The colour rose on Leah's cheeks.

"He shut me out, Michael!"

"Just as you first shut him out, Leah!"

He walked to the window and glared out at the increasing light. She could see the tension in his clenched jaw.

"Do we have to deal with old history and old mistakes, Michael?"

He turned back to her.

"No - you're right. We can't mend what has happened."

She nodded sadly.

"We can't undo old mistakes - they stay to haunt us."

He sat down close to her.

"Tell me, Leah. Are you really happy? Has everything worked out the way you expected?"

She didn't answer quickly.

"Perhaps, nothing ever works out the way we expect. Happiness, like a lot of other things, is relative. Yes, I suppose I'm happy enough. I have two beautiful children and a comfortable life."

Michael broke the pause which followed.

"And - you have Marcus - "

"Yes, I have Marcus."

"He's a very fortunate man - to have someone with him. An Administrator needs the support of a wife and a family."

"Having a crutch standing against the wall isn't the same as using it to help you to walk!"

She couldn't keep the touch of bitterness colouring the words. Michael caught a glimpse of weariness and defeat before she masked her expression again. He moistened his lips.

"Things could have been very different, Leah. If you and I - "

"Old history, Michael! There's nothing to be gained by living with what might have been."

He relaxed.

"I suppose you're right. I think, after all, I'll try to snatch a few minutes sleep before everybody wakes up and starts to panic!"