

The image of Micah Perga dissolved into nothing and the holo-pad cleared of the subsequent haze of light. Michael sat motionless for a few moments. The so-called conference had been very brief and Micah Perga had been unyielding, some would have described his attitude as defiant. It had been with extreme reluctance that Michael had initiated the request for discussion, in the first place. Circumstances had driven him to do so, but he might as well have saved himself the effort. He spoke aloud in the empty room.

"I presume you have a recording of our discussion?"

An anonymous voice responded through the communication link to the control room.

"That is correct, brother Michael."

Michael collected the holo-cube and returned to his office. Strictly speaking, it breached protocol to replay a private conference between Administrators, without the agreement of both parties. On this occasion, he was quite ready to break with convention and allow his advisors to air their views on the outcome. They stood around the room waiting for him to join them. He gestured to chairs and then took his place behind his desk.

"You are aware of the reason why I talked with brother Perga?"

There were silent nods.

"Our latest information is that he continues to make raids on the towns along the southern coast of the Grecian polders. I have no idea of what he thinks he can gain by so doing - and I'm still no clearer as a result of talking to him - perhaps, you'd better hear what he had to say."

He inserted the cube in a reader and waited for the three dimensional image to form in the cleared space in front of his desk.

Michael had entered the conference room first and was seated waiting for his fellow Administrator to materialise. It was not long in coming, clearly, the technicians had eliminated the protracted period of waiting to which he had been subjected. Micah Perga had emerged from a haze of light and had sat silent and glowering, in apparent proximity. In reality, he was several hundred kilometres distant from Jerusalem, in Nile City.

There was the usual polite form of greetings, neither of which sounded very sincere. The formalities over, Micah had come to the point.

"I understand you have something to say to me, brother ben Levi. Can we bring this discussion to the point and make it brief? I have a great deal to occupy my time."

"I agree, brother Perga, we are both busy men. I will ask you directly, what is the purpose of your raids on the southern European coast?"

There had been a moment of hesitation.

"Call them pre-emptive strikes - call them what you will - call them a protection of my interests in the ports under discussion."

"Your interests?"

Perga allowed a hint of sarcasm to touch his reply.

"I DO have interests - commercial interests - I presume you have

agencies in these ports as well, it shouldn't be any surprise to you when I use the term!"

Michael ignored the sarcasm.

"Do your interests justify armed raids on the territory of another Administration?"

Perga leaned forward.

"When my agents are butchered without mercy and when the Administrator concerned seems incapable of dealing with the hostile forces who have invaded his territory - yes, I do believe I am justified in trying to correct the situation - even if it does result in sending my forces into the territory of another Administration - more especially, when the territory in question, has been appropriated by another Administration with questionable legality!"

Michael eyed him steadily.

"I think you are inviting retaliation, brother Perga - I'm sure you haven't forgotten what happened the last time you tried unilateral action against Pik Sedova!"

There was an interesting rush of blood to the face of Administrator of the Nile, it began in his thick neck and flooded to his temples. It was clear that he was having great difficulty in keeping the conversation on diplomatic terms.

"I can assure you, brother ben Levi, that I will teach this so-called, upstart general of Gog a salutary lesson. Especially if he tries to cross the Eastern Basin and bring his rabble into Africa."

Michael nodded.

"As long as you remember the words of prophecy, brother Perga - especially the description of what you must expect if he comes for the third time into the Kingdom of the South - the consequences will be disastrous!"

"For him, perhaps - not for me! I bid you farewell!"

The recording ended abruptly. Luke permitted himself a low whistle, there was an uneasy shuffle from the rest of the advisors. Michael looked from one to the other.

"No one can accuse me of not trying to reason with the man - he's courting disaster. Sedova will retaliate, of that we can be certain."

Luke broke the profound silence.

"Michael, this raises a very pertinent point. You laid a great deal of emphasis on scriptural prophesy. Answer us this question: - What good does it do to talk to Micah Perga, or anyone else for that matter, if we are of the firm conviction that the prophesy is going to be fulfilled? Couldn't it be argued that Micah Perga is driven to do what he's doing and Sedova will be driven to respond - it's the mechanism by which the prophesy will be fulfilled. You could say: 'for thus it is written!'"

Another of the circle interjected.

"Luke has a point, Michael. This reminds me of the interminable discussions we had in the last days of the Kingdom. There were some who could not be persuaded that the prophesies would be fulfilled exactly as written and were quite sure that God would change his mind - I think they quoted His change of heart about the destruction of Nineveh. There were others who were equally adamant that everything would occur as written -

you must admit, Michael, that so far, everything has occurred according to the written word - so, isn't Luke right? What good does it do to talk to people like Perga? They are driven to do what they must do and accordingly, prophesy will be fulfilled!"

There was a murmur of assent. Michael nodded.

"As I remember, it was our good friend Joshua Aristides who held the view that God would change his mind. Asher and Joel Steinbecker were equally certain that he would not. I think they said that the outcome wasn't negotiable! Very well, brothers, I take your point - from this time forward, I will stop trying to salvage the situation and allow events to follow their predestined course. It isn't possible to be the conscience for the rest of mankind - they must answer for their own actions and we must answer for ours!"

When he was alone again, he keyed in the co-ordinates for the words of prophesy:

*'At the time of the end, he and the king of the south will make feints at one another, and the king of the north will come storming against him with chariots and cavalry and many ships. He will overrun land after land, sweeping over them like a flood, amongst them the fairest of all lands, and tens of thousands shall fall victims. Yet all these lands (including Edom and Moab and the remnants of the Ammonites) will survive his attack. He will reach out to land after land, and Egypt will not escape. He will gain control over her hidden stores of gold and silver and all her treasures; Libyans and Cushites will follow in his train.'*

Even though he knew the wording almost by heart, the text sent a chill down his spine. They faced the 'time of the end', the 'King of the South' was already making 'feints' against the 'king of the north'. Micah Perga was faithfully complying with the words of Daniel, when he sent his armed raiders against the overrun European ports. The retaliation of which Michael had warned him, would surely come, Pik Sedova would never allow such a demonstration of defiance to go unchallenged. Without a doubt, a great army would be gathered and then the final resistance to Gog, would crumble away. He would 'reach out to land after land and Egypt would not escape'.

Michael cancelled the scrolled display and squeezed his eyes wearily. He was at a total loss to explain how a man as well versed in scriptures as Georgi Malenski, was so blind to what was taking place. Pik Sedova could be excused, perhaps he didn't have the depth of knowledge - the spiritual insight, but Georgi ought to see what was happening. Perhaps, he didn't care anymore, perhaps, he had already resigned himself to the inevitable. Perhaps, Luke and the others were correct, there was no point in trying to alter the tide of destiny. Perhaps, they all had hooks in their jaws, which drove them on relentlessly to complete the train of events which would culminate on the Plain of Esdraelon.

The news from Elena wasn't good when Leah joined him that evening.

"I think its only a matter of days before the child is born. The midwives fuss around and put up a great pretence that they know what they're doing, but I'm sure Elena isn't fooled. She's become unnaturally calm - she's always

had that great wall of reserve, but this is something quite different. I don't know how to put it exactly - she's - she's surrendered! If something goes wrong, I don't think she'll fight - "

Michael took her hand.

"Then, we mustn't allow things to go wrong, get other midwives if you think it will help."

"You don't understand, Michael! There are no other midwives, we've had all there are to be had - I even called the one who attended me with John and Rachael, from Salem. At least, she's been open with me. The child is too big - Elena can never give birth in the normal way!"

"Then - there has to be an alternative way - women have been giving birth since Eve - they must have carried big babies before!"

Leah shook her head.

"What do you think we are? We haven't got a bag of tricks - if one way doesn't work, we try another! The only alternative - is surgery!"

He stared at her.

"I remind you, Michael, we could find no one to save Asher. We have no surgeons - we've lost the art!"

She left him in order to look in at John and Rachael. He sat for a long time before he came to a decision.

The message he sent to Georgi Malenski was carefully worded. Michael had no idea where he was to be found. His latest information on Georgi's location was, as usual, several days old. He prayed that the communiqué would reach him before the birth started, but as the hours passed with no response, his optimism faded. It was either the case that the message had not got through - or Georgi Malenski had elected to ignore it.

On the following evening, Leah returned home with Piotr on her hand. Michael greeted him and won a shy smile from the solemn little boy. He looked up and raised a questioning eyebrow. Leah shook her head and escorted Georgi's son to join her children. She came back after a while.

"Elena asked me to bring him here. Her excuse was that she didn't want him around when the birthing started. It makes sense, but I'm sure she has another motive. She clung to him when they parted, as if she knew she would never see him again!"

"I hope you're exaggerating!"

"I don't think so - a thousand or more years ago, her attitude would have been described as a death wish."

"I wish we could do something to raise her spirits - to reassure her. Has the birthing started?"

"Not yet."

"There might still be time."

"Time for what?"

Michael stared out of the window.

"I've sent a communiqué to Georgi."

"Telling him what, exactly?"

"That Elena needs her husband during what could be a difficult birth!"

"You did that without consulting her?"

Michael turned almost angrily.

"I think the question of her survival is a greater priority than the

delicate state of her relationship with her husband. Georgi should be with her!"

Michael had chosen the usual route of contact through Anatole Barenkov's Vistula headquarters. The message was received, duly recorded, subjected to a perfunctory inspection by a junior, rather bored aide, who, in any case, had a profound belief in the divinity of his master and his correctness in sending the woman Elena away. The message was considered of trivial importance and placed in a pile of general correspondence which the great man might or might not inspect at some future time. So it was, that Georgi Malenski never received the communication which might have brought him to the side of his stricken wife.

Malenski was preoccupied with the southern pincer which was applying part of the stranglehold on the last remaining area of Alexander Barenkov's stewardship. To the north, the other arm had come to a standstill. The wintry conditions in the Carpathians threatened to delay the advance across the mountains until the return of more clement weather. In any case, the northern pincer was comprised of farmers and a few armed escorts. Georgi would have liked to have reinforced them by detaching some of the battle hardened troops from the Sedova force, but the constant harassment of the Grecian ports made that impossible. The situation brought him to the camp of his general for the first time in several weeks.

He was received with elaborate courtesy, but he was not fooled. Sedova still ruled, together with his cohort of Scandian captains. Gubkin and his companions were under suspicion and had been quietly manoeuvred into positions which had them scattered through the small sieges being mounted against the strongholds which had not surrendered. It might have been the time for Sedova to remove his commander, but he held his hand, he still had a use for the organising genius Malenski undoubtedly possessed. Sedova made a great show of consulting with his commander. On the evening of Georgi's arrival, a conference of the captains was called. Malenski looked around them, they were, in the main, Scandians and Sedova's picked followers. He eyed them, one after the other, whilst listening to Sedova's summation.

"Every few days, our southern enemy runs supplies to the Aegean strongholds - at the same time, he lands diversionary forces at various places along the polders and runs sorties against the garrisons. I'm forced to keep too many men tied down to watch my rear. I can't supply enough men to the bring sufficient pressure to cross the Balkan Mountains - if I could, I promise you, I'd hand Alexander Barenkov's head to you on a platter!"

Malenski nodded and stared steadily into the blood streaked, muddy eyes of his general.

"I've heard your complaints, brother Sedova - what are your proposals to resolve the problem?"

Sedova bared his broken, yellow teeth in an unattractive grimace which was supposed to be a grin.

"I could ask you for time to train another hundred thousand men, brother Georgi - but I think you're an impatient man."

"You already have approaching four hundred thousand men! What would you do with another hundred thousand? We still need farmers to plant

the crops to feed you."

Sedova's grin widened.

"Brother Georgi, with your farmers, we could return the favour, by invading our enemy to the south - and this time, we would not come back without all the food and supplies we needed - then, you could have your hundred thousand farmers back!"

The Scandian captains were smirking. Malenski eased down on to his back on the pile of skins upon which he had been sitting, crossed his hands behind his head and stared up at the flapping tent roof. He felt the eyes of the silent captains on him. He was a vulnerable target and open invitation for a knife thrust - but he sensed their uneasiness. He was too confident and that had them off balance. There was a long silence, before he propped himself on one elbow.

"I remember a conversation we had not so long ago - one which led us to change direction. Your advice was good then, Sedova. You told me that the south was the way to go - now you are telling me the same thing, but this time, we will face a determined enemy, not a few farmers led by an ineffectual steward.

To cross the Eastern Basin, will bring us into direct conflict with the forces of another Administration. Before you advise me to take this course of action, I want you to be very sure that you can handle the challenge. One thing more, you will not have an extra one hundred thousand men - you will have to conquer Egypt, Libya and the lands beyond, with the resources you have. The only concession I'm prepared to make is, that we will hold the line along the Balkan Mountains with a minimal force - no more than a garrison - and they had better be good men, your rear will need to be well protected. The rest of your men, you can redeploy to teach Micah Perga the lesson he so richly deserves!"

Sedova and his captains gaped for a few seconds and then erupted into a scream of jubilation. Sedova roared:

"By the god the women love, Georgi - I didn't think you had the guts! Forget the head of Alexander Barenkov, you can have that latter - this time, I'll give you the head of Micah Perga."

Malenski nodded quietly, he held aloof from the general uproar of approbation. Sedova sensed there was more to come. The position had changed, he was content to humour the intense man who confronted him, he sent his captains away to spread the news through the camp. It would serve a double purpose - it would raise morale - and there would be no way that Georgi Malenski could change his mind. He was almost in a convivial mood when they were alone.

"Will you drink with me, Georgi?"

Malenski nodded. Sedova poured a generous measure of the rotgut brew which was distilled in the camp. He watched as Malenski swallowed a generous portion.

"You seem to have changed, Georgi - there's something different about you."

"Different? In what way?"

Sedova lounged back and leered at him.

"I don't know - perhaps, you've taken a woman!"

Malenski stared back.

"I haven't taken a woman, Sedova - I need no women - Tell me about this god the women love!"

Sedova stared at him and then stared at the ceiling.

"You can't tell me you haven't seen what they've put up on the hilltops? You travel around. I'm told that every hill is crowned with them these days!"

"Crowned with what?"

"To put it politely - fertility poles!"

Malenski tipped the remainder of his drink down his throat and slowly extended his glass. He didn't lower his eyes from those of his general. Sedova topped up another liberal refill.

"And - these are supposed to represent the god loved by women?"

Sedova was becoming quite expansive.

"What else do you expect from simple people - we haven't all got a high education. I admit, there wasn't much evidence of it during the last thousand years, but the people have always seen the need to make sure the fields are fertile and that the harvest will be good. You would be the first to admit we have need of good harvests - so the people go back to the old ways - and enjoy themselves at the same time!"

Sedova erupted into a baying laugh. Malenski smiled and nodded.

"I suppose you'll tell me next that there's a goddess beloved of men?"

"You can bet your sweet life there is! One thing our Scandian comrades have taught us, is to value the old ways."

"So the Scandians brought their gods with them?"

Sedova became serious.

"Don't blame the Scandians - these fertility gods were called by many different names in all parts of the world - it's part of our basic nature - just as is the tilling of the soil and the need for a good harvest - it's basic!"

Malenski sipped down the remainder of his drink.

"And - it was one of these things you erected on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem?"

Sedova became stone cold wary.

"Correct! We showed them that we can penetrate right into the centre of their sacred city and that there's no one who could stop us!"

Malenski nodded slowly.

"But someone will stop us one day, Pik Sedova - and there is nothing you or I can do to change it!"