

Marcus sat quietly in his quarters and thought over the events of the first day of the conference. The debate over the authenticity of the message had occupied most of the morning session. It had come down to a matter of procedure - or so he had been assured. It was emphasised that no one doubted his honesty. It was never in question! Every one was at great pains to ensure that he fully understood their point of view. Normal procedures had not been followed. It had been their experience that such important instructions were always verified before two or more unrelated witnesses. It was pointed out that before the provision of the message, there had been a great debate, lasting over many decades, with regard to preparation for the period after the end of the millennium. To start storing food against a time of need, had been suspected to be a unilateral attempt to forestall any further debate on the subject.

Marcus had diplomatically accepted the assurances and then had suggested that a simple question to a Firstling would have provided all the verification needed. The conference then moved on to the next item on the agenda and this really brought home the extent of the controversy. Each Administrator was asked to provide statistics revealing the status of food surpluses. It became clear that a significant percentage had not wholeheartedly complied with the directive. Others appeared unprepared to provide the data. Alexei Kharkov was one of them. Marcus formed the impression that he wasn't really sure what was happening in the distant corners of his vast stewardship.

So little time remained. The question which now had to be asked was whether there was enough time make up the shortfall. This would be the

problem to be addressed on the following day. There was a tone from the door control. He got to his feet in anticipation, hoping that Leah had decided to join him after all. When he opened the door, it was Michael ben Levi who stood facing him. The young man's expression was politely neutral. Marcus gestured him to enter.

"Welcome, brother Michael. I wondered if we would have the opportunity to meet."

There was no immediate reaction. Marcus tried to act the host.

"A little wine, perhaps?"

"Thank you."

It was a start! Marcus busied himself at the dispenser.

"I presume I have you to thank for these pleasant quarters."

"I hope you have everything you need."

"Leah and I are very comfortable - as are the rest of my staff."

He saw the slight reaction to Leah's name and waited. Michael sipped his wine and didn't appear to be in any hurry to get the purpose of his visit.

Marcus switched to another subject.

"A very interesting session, today. I thought we might have heard a great deal more from Asher."

Michael relaxed a little.

"I think he was more interested in letting the others have their say. He had little to contribute."

"I'm surprised to hear that - after all, he could have pointed out my error. I had the opportunity to tell him the instruction directly, but neglected to do so."

"You would have to ask him about his motives."

"Of course, Michael! I wouldn't dream of pumping information from an

Administrator's assistant. You are all renowned for your strict and confidential loyalty!" Michael took a gulp of his wine. Marcus went on smoothly.

"Is this a local vintage? It's very palatable."

The young man nodded, Marcus wasn't even sure if he heard the question.

"Well! It's good to meet you once again! You look well. How are things with your life? Please! Don't take that question as an attempt to pry!"

Marcus laughed at his own humour, he managed to raise a fleeting smile. Michael put down his glass. Marcus waited patiently.

"I came to ask about Leah."

Marcus twirled the stem of his goblet between his fingers.

"Do you think I'm the right one to approach? Leah's the one with all the answers."

Michael ploughed on.

"I wondered if she intended to return to Jerusalem."

"I don't believe so - I offered her the position of being my assistant and she has accepted. She believes that her usefulness in Jerusalem is at an end. Of course, there's always the possibility that she might alter her plans!"

Michael was silent. Marcus suggested gently.

"Why don't you say what is really on your mind?"

They faced each other and Marcus was suddenly aware of the difference in their ages. Michael was young and vital, darkly handsome, and very close to Leah's age. Marcus would have been the first to admit that the bloom of his own youth had faded - some might have said - was spent.

"Before you went to Iberia, you suggested to Asher that - Leah and I were - involved."

Marcus's eyebrows raised a little.

"I suggested nothing improper, Michael. I pointed out to Asher that he was under the wrong impression if he had thought that Leah and I were involved at that time. I suggested that she was attracted to someone else - Asher was the one who decided upon you as the candidate!"

"With a little prompting from you, I think!"

Marcus moved restlessly.

"Possibly! But it was essential for her to meet with Joshua Aristides."

He saw Michael's eyes widen in shock and realised he had said too much."

"I thought you were aware of the relationship, Michael - I'm sorry. The situation between Asher and Joshua seemed to place them in opposing camps and Leah thought it was wise to keep her private affairs to herself. We had to employ a little subterfuge to get her to Iberia. When she returned and Asher found out the true state of affairs, he decided use you as his assistant instead of Leah."

He poured another two glasses of wine and handed one to Michael.

"You know, brother Marcus - I actually came here this evening to ask you if the way was clear to approach Leah! I wanted to know if you had declared any intentions - it seems that I have to ask Joshua Aristides instead!"

Marcus debated his answer.

"You can save yourself the trouble of approaching Joshua - it's over - in fact, it never really started. To answer your other question - no, I haven't declared my intentions - but I fully intend to do so when the time is right!"

Michael placed his glass on a side table.

"Thank you for your candour, brother Marcus."

"You are more than welcome, brother Michael."

It was all strictly formal and polite and he farewelled his guest at the door. He watched the tall, young man march briskly away. Marcus sighed - perhaps, it was a case of there being no fool like an old fool. What on earth could cousin Leah see in him, when she had the choice of Michael ben Levi? The visit gave him more food for thought. Whatever the outcome, he had crystallised his own thoughts and had committed himself to a course of action. He smiled a little, he had reached the age when he couldn't have anticipated that he would be caught up in the formalities of the courting ritual. Michael had strictly observed the correct protocol. He was interested in taking a partner in life. He had done his research. He had found a possible contender for the same lady. He hadn't been sure of the status of the interest. He had formally enquired - and Marcus had given him an answer. No doubt, it was not the answer he had wanted to hear, but such was the nature of the Kingdom, there would not be an unseemly competition to win the favours of the lady in question. Michael would back off and turn his interests elsewhere. Marcus reminded himself that this was what he had done when he had detected the liaison between Leah and Joshua.

He sighed, life was becoming very complicated. He could almost hear the echo of Joel Steinbecker's hoot of glee at the turn of events. If Joel had still lived, Marcus knew he would have been the object of merciless teasing. He went to his bed and tried to rehearse the way he would approach Leah. The more he tried to devise a pretty speech, the worse it sounded. In the end, he gave up in frustration and eventually managed to sleep.

During the next day, he had little time to worry about his private life. There was a great deal of assessing and reassessing concerning what had to be done to ensure adequate stocks for the time of need. In the end, it came down to number juggling. Those responsible for the shortfall, promised to

accelerate their harvesting and storage programs, whilst those who had already increased their yield to the utmost, undertook to find extra percentages to sow, harvest and place in storage.

At the end of the second day, the Administrators made ready to disperse back to their areas of stewardship. Marcus looked around them as the meeting drew to a close. With the exception of the Kingly Priests themselves, with the Lord as the King of Kings, there was no more influential a group walking on the face of the earth. They had planned to maintain the well being of the earth's population into a time they could hardly imagine. Each one would now return home to set in motion the agreed plan of operation. For some reason, the old saying from scripture came into his thoughts: 'Man proposes but God disposes'. It was still His Kingdom.

There was a surprise awaiting him as he was about to leave the conference hall, old Alexei Kharkov took him by the arm.

"Brother Marcus, you would give me great pleasure if you would accept my invitation to break your journey homeward with me for a few days. I would be delighted to welcome you and your assistant to my home."

Marcus hesitated, it was hardly time he could spare, but something told him that it could be profitable in the long run, to accept the invitation. He glanced at Leah, but her face was carefully composed.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure, brother Alexei. But, necessarily, it must be a short visit!"

The old man's face lit up.

"Of course! Of course! You are very busy and will be more so after our decisions. Perhaps, we could consider joint projects - something similar to the arrangements I have with my kinsman Joshua on the Russian plain."

Marcus spent the next few hours reorganising his schedule for the next

week. The first thing he had to contend with was a curious reluctance on the part of Leah."

"Naturally, you will want me to go directly home to Salem and get things moving in your absence."

He stared at her in surprise.

"I need you with me, Leah."

"Someone ought to organise the home office and get people moving in the right direction."

"We're not even quite sure of what that direction is going to be. I need your input, especially if we're going to discuss joint operations with Alexei."

"He's an old man - you don't need me to hold your hand."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence!"

She flushed.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"An apology isn't necessary - but the real reason for your reluctance would be appreciated."

"There's no reason to give you - I'm your personal assistant, so perhaps, I should be with you."

He had to be content with that, clearly he wasn't going to be further enlightened. She excused herself just when he was about to suggest they had dinner. He was saved from eating alone by a call from Joshua Aristides. It was a suggestion that they should share the evening meal - Leah wasn't included in the invitation.

Marcus presented himself at Joshua's suite. On the surface, it was the getting together of old friends, but he wondered if there was some hidden motive for the sudden invitation. Joshua had greeted him enthusiastically on the previous day, but after that, he had not gone out of his way to be over

supportive during the discussions. It was always possible that the presence of Leah was creating an inhibition.

Joshua's welcome was warm when he presented himself at the door of his suite and as far as he could tell, it was sincere. The barricades considered necessary for the sessions of the conference, had been dismantled. The meal was simple and well prepared. Afterwards, they sat in recliners opposite each other. Joshua eyed him silently.

"So, Marcus, there have been drastic changes in your life. It was foreseeable - Joel couldn't last for ever."

"I wish I could have foreseen it."

"Come! Don't tell me that you didn't realise you were being groomed for the task!"

"Does it matter how much you are groomed? It's the Kings and Priests who do the choosing."

"Of course! But the choice is made on the basis of many factors, not the least being your capability to fulfill what is demanded of you."

"I miss Father Joel."

"It might surprise you to know that I miss him also. It might have appeared that we were on opposing sides in a great number of important matters, but his wisdom and ability to get to the core of the subject, will be sadly missed."

"I always thought of him being with us when the Millennium comes to an end. I could visualise him leading the counterattack against the onslaughts he always described so vividly. He once painted us a terrible picture of disease, war and famine. He said we would be like Adam and Eve when they were cast out of Eden. He asked us to imagine what their reaction must have been when they saw death for the first time, or the thorns and

thistles strangling their crops, or the pestilence sweeping through the population, or the stirrings of lust and anger - emotions they couldn't understand."

Joshua nodded and murmured.

"We have a little over three years - a very short time and beyond that, we hardly dare to think."

Marcus leaned forward.

"Are you saying that you've now adopted the view that the Kingdom of Peace will end? You were so sure that God would alter His mind as He did with Nineveh."

"Many things have changed since the time when I held those views. I have seen the results of applying the message to be like Joseph in the land of Egypt. I have seen the yield increase when I haven't thought it possible. I have seen my storehouses filled to overflowing with the abundance of the harvest. I have observed the restlessness in the minds of some of our brother Administrators - our conference has shown how confused one or the other has become. This is only the forerunner of the conditions which will come when Satan is released. Now, these conditions arise out of the evil of their own hearts - what will it be when the unbridled power of the Evil One is released?"

"The prospect fills me with fear, Joshua."

"Don't be fearful, Marcus - we need you to be watchful."

"We?"

"Who knows where the danger will emerge? Not all of our brother Administrators are as clear minded about the dangers we face."

"Why particularly must I be watchful?"

"You might be able to look into corners denied to others."

Marcus felt his way carefully.

"Surely, there are no hidden corners in the Kingdom."

Joshua smiled a little.

"If you believe that, you were not listening to some of the worthy participants at the conference trying to wriggle their way out of explaining why they hadn't followed the instruction of a Firstling. Let's say, there are a few soft spots in our administration, which bear a little investigation."

Marcus looked at him squarely.

"I think you're hinting something to do with my visit to Alexei Kharkov."

Joshua didn't answer, instead, he sipped his drink.

"I thought he was your kinsman, Joshua - I would have thought you to be the most logical man to - look into corners!"

Joshua laughed softly.

"I like you, Marcus. You come straight to the point. Very well! I'll give you an answer. Alexei is a dear, old man, who is better suited to retire into the realms of his books and studies - incidentally, you will find that he has a fascinating library - he is a recluse, he leaves the administration of his stewardship to others and exercises minimal supervision. Without being judgmental, he has many - soft spots - unfortunately, they are also - blind spots."

Marcus continued his careful footwork.

"He mentioned joint ventures - like those he has with your administration on the Russian plain."

Joshua's laugh was a little brittle.

"Alexei loves joint ventures - they are a trap, Marcus, be careful.

Unless there are clearly stated spheres of responsibility, no one accepts control - therefore, no one has control!"

They moved on to other subjects. Just as Marcus was about to leave, Joshua moved on to the one topic both had avoided until then.

"I notice you have a new assistant."

"Leah had little to occupy her in Jerusalem."

"Yes - I noticed that Michael ben Levi had assumed her duties."

"I'm sure you know the reason why."

Joshua walked to the window.

"Tell me frankly, Marcus. Do you believe I was using her to obtain information from Asher?"

"What I believe isn't important, Joshua. You are the only one who can give that answer. Unfortunately, Asher felt he could no longer place his trust in her. He is the one who has to justify that decision. I had need of an assistant, she seemed exceptionally well qualified. I offered her the position and she accepted."

There was a slight pause.

"Is your relationship only one of employer and employee, Marcus?"

"That's strange, you're the second one to ask me that in the last few hours. Leah is my cousin - many times removed, I might add."

"You know what I mean, Marcus."

"Do you ask because you have a prior interest, Joshua?"

He shook his head.

"I've forfeited any priority, Marcus."

"Very well, I'll answer you as I answered someone else. I do have an interest, which I haven't yet declared - but I fully intend to do so."

Marcus walked back to his own quarters and debated the last part of the conversation. It was the second time that he had asserted his intention of taking a certain course of action. He wondered what had happened to his

notorious prudence and concluded that it had become submerged in a sudden rush of blood to the head.

A message was waiting for him when he re-entered his suite. It was in the form of a hand written note, which was a perfect example of classical cryptography. Each letter had been lovingly formed and delicately inscribed on to a thick sheet of excellent quality, hand crafted paper. Marcus examined it critically, even before he read the message. There was little use for paper in the Kingdom, the making of it was almost a forgotten art and penmanship was almost a dead skill.

He read the message. It was a simple confirmation of the invitation given by Alexei Kharkov and provided details of departure times and an itinerary for the journey. It had been crafted by Alexei himself and signed personally. Marcus placed it carefully amongst his papers, it was a document to be preserved, there would be very few in existence like it.

He considered the detailed itinerary. Alexei was making a slow progress homeward through this domain. It was an intriguing prospect and Marcus knew why he had had the urge to accept the invitation. Alexei intended to tour through the steppe lands to the west of the Ural divide, describing a broad sweep into western Siberia before arriving at his base near the great river Yenesei.

Joshua's final injunction surfaced in his mind.

"Keep your eyes open, Marcus - a great deal might depend on what you see - and always remember that you have a friend in me."