

He grinned at her.

"Can I take encouragement from that warm welcome?"

She didn't answer, instead she led the way into the small reception room which overlooked the garden.

"I'm glad you came."

"I'm doubly encouraged - you said that before!"

A small smile flickered across her face. He went on:

"How are the children?"

"They're both well - and sleeping."

"Yes, I suppose they are - I am rather late."

"You're a busy man."

"I deserve the veiled reproach. I shouldn't be too busy to spend more time with you."

"It was a statement of fact - not a reproach."

He stared at her for a moment.

"Why are we fencing with small talk, Leah?"

She didn't answer immediately, then:

"I have been doing a lot of thinking, Michael - and I've come to a decision."

"About what?"

"The future - "

He stared at her and then found his voice.

"I hope it includes me!"

She stared at him.

"It will always include you, Michael - one way or the other."

"I don't like the sound of that!"

"An optimist would find it encouraging!"

"Do I have the right to feel optimistic? I've lost count of the number of times I've asked you to be my wife!"

She shook her head slowly.

"I haven't been very fair to you, have I?"

"Someone - and I can't remember if he was a wise man or an idiot - once said: 'All's fair in love and war'."

"You've been very patient with me, Michael."

"Now, I can't be patient any longer, Leah! Will you give me a straight answer? Will you be my wife?"

"A wife might be a hindrance to you, Michael. I could foresee the time when she might beg you to stay with her and not to go into battle against Gog and his Horde. She might plead with you to think of her first and not put yourself into danger. She might say that it isn't fair that you should stand up for your people and defend the Camp of the Saints. Think about it - It might be better if you went on alone and didn't allow yourself to be restricted by a wife who hangs around your neck!"

He stared at her relentlessly.

"Have you finished? Give me a straight answer! Will you be my wife?"

She hesitated. He jumped to his feet and held her by the shoulders.

"Do I have to shake the answer out of you?"

"I believe I'll have to think about it some more - I didn't realise you had a bullying nature!"

He shook her gently and she started to laugh.

"All right - all right - yes! Yes, Michael ben Levi, I will be your wife!"

She put her hand over his mouth before he could shout.

"We don't want to wake the children!"

He kissed her instead, long, passionately, so that she was breathless before he let her go. She managed to ask:

"What would you have done if I had said no?"

"More of the same until you had changed your mind!"

She looked disappointed.

"I knew I should have hesitated a bit longer!"

He kissed her again. She rested against his chest and said nothing for a while. They looked out into the darkness. The moon was rising, a pale shadow of its sevenfold glory in the time of Peace, but it was enough to light the garden. She whispered:

"I'm frightened for the future, Michael. There is so little light to show us the way."

"There will always be enough for those who hold to what we were taught during the Time of Peace. Nothing can defeat us. Never fear, even if Gog was to assemble an uncountable multitude and surround us with a ring of steel, he still will not be able to overthrow the Camp of the Saints. Jerusalem is only a symbol of that holy condition - a physical expression of the deepest of spiritual truths. The Camp of the Saints comprises all those who will hold to the teachings of our God and who refuse to surrender to Satan and his general. Gog will be destroyed, but it will not be at the hand of Michael - it will be by fire from heaven! Hold fast to that truth, my darling - it IS our security!"

They sat far into the night and whispered their plans to one another. They would seek the earliest opportunity to formalise their union. It would be announced for all to know and they would wait eagerly for its sanctification at the hand of a Kingly-Priest. He returned late to his quarters, there was no suggestion that he should remain with Leah. Both were of the same mind - first the union would be sanctified and only then would they truly become husband and wife. It was the Godly way.

By the time he managed to get to sleep, it was almost dawn. For this reason, he was unusually late in rising. When he presented himself at his Administration Office, there was already a request for a holo-conference with Joshua Aristides. It was the first priority. Joshua eyed him quizzically when he emerged from the haze of the initiated link.

"Greeting, Joshua, my friend! A thousand apologies for the delay."

Joshua continued to eye him critically.

"What a difference a day makes!"

Michael managed to look puzzled.

"You'll have to explain that."

"Yesterday, you were doom and gloom - today you are - shall we say - disgustingly smug about something!"

"Yesterday, I had just had the dubious pleasure of talking to Micah Perga - today, my breakfast was more agreeable."

"I'm glad to hear it! You look as if you have just pulled off the diplomatic coup of the millennium."

"Almost, Joshua - almost, but not quite!"

"Then it must be that Leah has finally relented and you are to be congratulated!"

Michael stared at him. Joshua threw back his head and laughed. He wiped his eyes.

"So! I am right! Congratulations to you and to Leah. I am very happy for you!"

Michael nodded.

"Thank you, Joshua - It will mean a great deal to Leah that we have your approval."

Joshua became serious.

"It could never be in any doubt, Michael! You must get it into your head that the episode between myself and Leah is ancient history - and I firmly believe it was never destined to come to anything - regardless of what my little tyrant has to say."

Michael's smile returned.

"How is your mother, Joshua?"

"Maman still sparkles with her usual determination and forthrightness, but she is so terribly weak these days. She rarely gets out of bed, but she holds court and has a steady stream of regular visitors - as many as her strength allows. She will be especially delighted when she gets to hear the news - please tell Leah that Maman and I are both very happy for you."

"I will be sure to do that."

"I think we must get down to business, my friend - hard though that must be for you in the circumstances!"

"I'll force myself, Joshua!"

"Your emissary arrived with your interesting suggestion. Luke was able to enlarge on the details in a very competent way. You are to be congratulated in finding such an able replacement for Simon. I like your idea and I have already issued instructions for it to be put into action. I think we can promise a rude surprise."

"I'm pleased, Joshua. I think it will force the issue."

"Good-bye, my friend - and once again, congratulations to Leah and yourself."

The link evaporated and Michael eased back in the chair. Everything now depended on Georgi Malenski - or upon his general Pik Sedova. He would have given much to know the true status between the two. It was a puzzling relationship, for without a doubt, Sedova had the power of his army behind him and Georgi had nothing but his earlier reputation of leading his people away from the disastrous Arctic settlements. He was the one who had some sort of mystical hold on his people, but it was Sedova who had the actual political power. Michael wondered how long it would be before Sedova decided that he had no further need for Georgi Malenski and when he had come to that decision, what the outcome would be.

It was a number of weeks before Sedova made his move. He moved

out of his alpine encampment, with forty thousand men behind him and started his relentless march down the length of the Adriatic trough. There was no resistance. Those who farmed the polders retreated into the mountain vastness of the Balkans on the one hand, or into the corresponding heights of the Apennines, on the other. The polders had yielded their harvest. Sedova had timed his move to coincide with its end. He travelled light, confident that there was no one to stand in his way when he came to the makeshift storage facilities. It was then that he had his first rude shock.

The storage facilities were empty - at least, those closest to his alpine stronghold. In the encampment on that first night, he called his captains together. He questioned them with the ferocity he usually reserved for his victims.

"You are trying to tell me that all the facilities are empty - every one of them? There isn't one which has at least some food in it? What about the settlements? What are they doing for food?"

One responded, someone had to.

"The settlements are empty, the people saw us coming and retreated - they must have taken the supplies with them."

Sedova snarled at him.

"The harvest was good - they couldn't have carried it all away. We've moved too fast. I want some answers - a hungry army loses its edge - and Sedova's army never goes hungry! Understood?"

They understood but it was no different on the next and subsequent days. By this time, Sedova and his forward troops was already half way down the trough of the Adriatic. Strung out behind him at daily intervals, were his main force. The rearguard hadn't even started from the base camp. The fact soon came home, not one storage silo had produced enough to keep one man in rations, they had been stripped bare, swept clean. The food they had brought with them from the alpine camp was gone. For the first time that night, there were murmurings from hungry men.

In the morning light, they began their march with empty bellies. Sedova glared with disfavour at the looming heights to each side of their line of march. They were nearly at the place where they had met the forces of Micah Perga on their previous excursion. He knew it was a focal point for storage and he pinned his hopes on finding sufficient to feed his men at the end of the day. Once again, he was faced with empty silos, this time he exploded with a rage which could be heard for hundreds of meters around his tent. His captains waited for the force to expend itself - gradually Sedova's fury subsided to be replaced by a tense silence which no one dared to break. He glowered at them one after the other, as if they were personally responsible for the empty bellies.

"It will get no better tomorrow or the next day or the next. The harvest has been shifted as soon as it was brought in, probably during the nights. That calls for a plan and I doubt whether your local, average farmer would have been that clever. The question is, which way - either Alexander Barenkov has been too clever for his own comfort, or - or Joshua Aristides and his steward have stepped into the picture."

He walked to the entrance to the tent and glowered out into the setting sun, the Apennines were a black silhouette in the gathering darkness. There

were no lights - there ought to have been lights from the settlements he knew were strung out along the old Italian shore and on the mountain sides beyond. He turned the other way. The Balkan mountains were still visible in the last setting rays. On that side, there were lights of settlements. He looked again at the western side of the trough before returning to his table.

"We will raid the settlements we can see to the east and strip their storehouses. It will give our fighting men something to do other than growl about the emptiness of their guts! Do it now!"

His captains melted away and Sedova was left to contemplate what the expansion of his activities would do to the delicate balance of power Georgi Malenski was trying to maintain. He heard the movement of men leaving the camp, hunger was a good spur and he knew they wouldn't return empty handed. They would bring back enough supplies to keep them going for a few days. He thought of men like Michael ben Levi and Joshua Aristides, machinating their designs in their far off citadels. He had no doubt that they were behind the stripping of the storehouses. He couldn't work out the purpose of their strategy. He wondered if they really thought that he would get discouraged enough to turn his men around and retreat back into the Alps. They must have calculated that he would retaliate and strike out to right and left to keep his army supplied.

It was nearly light when the first of his foragers returned. He had snatched a few hours sleep but their sound aroused him. It wasn't a jubilant

homecoming, not like it had been after the tough battles they had fought on other occasions. He stepped out into the cold air of the dawn and watched them, they avoided his eyes, slouching in and dispersing quickly. Two or three of his captains made their way slowly towards him. He watched them for a moment and then retreated into the tent and waited for them to join him. They stood awkwardly and said nothing.

"Well?"

One was forced to make a report.

"They were waiting for us - "

"Of course they were waiting for you! They have eyes! They saw us camp! They knew the storehouses were empty! Did you expect them to be sleeping sweetly with their wives?"

"They attacked us as we climbed the slopes from the polders. They cut us to pieces!"

Sedova stared at them one after the other.

"I repeat! What did you expect, no resistance? So - we took some casualties, but you soon cut them down?"

The captain shook his head slowly.

"They melted away in the darkness. We moved forward into one of their towns and made for the storehouses. They were empty! We broke into the houses - the people were gone. They saw us coming and retreated into the darkness, taking everything with them and when we went after them, they attacked in small groups and then turned and ran before we could cut them down."

Sedova looked deceptively casual.

"So - you took a lot of casualties and got nothing to show for it?"

His captains nodded reluctantly.

"You are captains each of a thousand men. As from now, you will be responsible to feed your own men on a daily basis. Each captain will send a hundred men each day - and night, if necessary, to find enough supplies to feed his thousand. If you find nothing, your men will starve! If they starve, they are free to call you to account! Do I make myself understood? I think you will soon learn how to deal with these new tricks - if you don't, your men will deal with you!"

He knew the word would soon get around the camp. Of one thing he was determined, he would not be delayed in pressing forward to his objective. Hundreds of kilometres had to be covered before he reached the African shore and within reach of the rich coastal settlements under the stewardship of Micah Perga. The winter would soon return and by that time, it was essential that adequate supplies were under his control.

There was a steady flow of communiqués to Jerusalem, Nile City and Joshua's Iberian base. Each step of Sedova's march south was plotted. Joshua was well satisfied with the evacuation of supplies carried out by the competent Gela Licarte. He had only just been in time, but the rich harvest of the polders had been transported to the western side of the Apennines. If Pik Sedova wanted to get his hands on it, he would have to divert men across the mountains and fight the stinging counter-attacks of the small groups Michael had suggested.

Much had depended on the co-operation of Alexander Barenkov, but for the time being, he had agreed with Michael to withdraw his coastal settlements along the old Adriatic coast and to remove their provisions out of harms way. It was a matter of conjecture how long the co-operation would last - especially with Georgi Malenski working upon his brother, Anatole. Several things were still in Michael's favour. First of all, Alexander had more steel in his make-up than his brother. Secondly, his stewardship had hardly been penetrated by the flow of refugees which had almost swamped that of Anatole. Thirdly, he had never had first hand dealings with Pik Sedova, who had been scrupulous in his avoidance of incidents across the northern demarcation line of his stewardship. If he had any concerns at all, it was the knowledge that what he was doing was, without any doubt, provocative and that Pik Sedova would eventually call him to account. Another factor was that he liked Michael ben Levi as a man and admired the panache with which he faced the common enemy.

Micah Perga watched events and moved his men into the forward areas along the coast of ancient Tunisia. It wasn't lost on him that this was close to the site of the ancient city of Carthage and that an Italian invasion had eventually destroyed that great empire. The eighteen thousand men he had lost in the Adriatic polders still weighed on him. He was unpopular at home and he was well aware that another military reversal would provoke an unrest he would not be able to contain. If he was grateful for the harassment of the Sedova army by the small forces flanking the Adriatic, he didn't express it. He saw himself as standing alone and was frankly contemptuous of the minuscule efforts they were contributing on his behalf.

Georgi Malenski knew that Sedova's army was on the march. His so-called general was becoming more and more independent of his direction. The army looked to Sedova, he was the one who trained them and led them

into battle. Georgi was the unknown quantity, there was a mystique about him. The rank and file knew that he wasn't like other men and around him was growing a cultus. The name of Georgi Malenski created awe - the whispers were becoming louder - this man was Gog. He was the great mystical leader who had led them out of the certain death of the Arctic winter into the lands which they now occupied. The murmur was, that he was indestructible. No man could kill him, he was controlled by forces which kept him inviolate. Lately, there had been another contribution to the cultus. He had repudiated the ties which held him to a woman. He no longer consorted with his wife, she had been sent away, together with his son. He was a man who stood alone.

Feodor watched his northern border. The ancient line of demarcation had become nothing more than a joke. It had been crossed by a steady stream of displaced farmers from Grigor Suskov's stewardship. For the moment, the newcomers were being assimilated. They had certain things in their favour. They respected the lands into which they moved. Many of them had family ties with those who farmed the border area. There was a reluctant absorption and little open discontent, but it wasn't a situation which could continue long before there were problems.

When he wasn't watching his northern border, or monitoring the movement of Sedova's army, he was keeping an eye on Elena and her son. It was a much more pleasant occupation. The early stiff formality had evaporated. The ice had thawed out of Georgi's wife, as if the legacy of the Siberian trek had been eradicated. Only at times would she become pensive and sad. It was almost impossible to do so in the house of Feodor Chernienko. He was young, wild and totally unlike the serious man Georgi had always been - even in the days of Peace. Feodor and Piotr had become bosom friends. The boy would accompany their host for his morning ride and soon showed that he had almost the reckless skills of a Cossack. Feodor had declared:

"What more do you expect, Elena - it's in the blood. We are cousins, after all - your ancestors came from this area. Piotr can ride because it's in his genes. I predict that he'll be the best of us all when he grows up!"

Then he saw the sadness in her face and the humour evaporated. The End of Time would come before Piotr could expect to have reached manhood. Elena saw something else in Feodor's face. It was something she knew she had to avoid, for only disaster would come from it. Feodor Chernienko was finding it very hard to disguise the fact that he was falling in love with her.