

Michael broke the link on one of the most extensive holo-conferences he had attended since the end of the Kingdom. It was time for a moment of quiet reflection.

He was well satisfied with what he had been able to achieve in the three days which had elapsed since the visit of Feodor Chernienko. On the surface, the holo-conference had been nothing more than a face to face meeting of all the parties concerned. It went much deeper than that, it had been the first meeting of the uneasy alliance which would greet the coming of Gog from out of Asia, on to the soil of Europe. He guessed that by this time, the Urals would have been crossed - at least, by the forerunners of the huge group of people Georgi Malenski led. They would now be camped on the doorstep of Grigor Suskov.

He thought back to the participants of the holo-conference. They were the main players in what was to happen during the next phase of Gog's activity. Joshua Aristides had lived up to his promise to act with him. His areas of joint venture with Alexei Kharkov, embraced the Italian Peninsula and the Adriatic polders to the east. It had always been a hazy area of demarcation.

The Balkan Peninsula formed yet another segment of loose control. One of the Barenkov brothers, Alexander, held an uneasy stewardship over what had become one of the most turbulent areas of the Post-kingdom era. It was a fact of history that it had always been an area of unrest. It had become a prime target for the re-emerged Satan. It proved that the ancient historical differences between the ethnic divisions, had hardly been submerged under the influence of the Time of Peace.

To Alexander's north, beyond the Carpathians, the other brother, Anatole, kept an anxious and watchful eye on the flood of refugees coming down from the Scandia ice deserts. As yet, forays into his territory had only been of a minor nature. There appeared to be no cohesion between the scattered, hungry bands. They followed in the tradition of their ancient ancestors who had roved the seas in their long boats, from which they had ravaged the coastal settlements.

Both the Barenkov brothers bordered the stewardship of their cousin, Feodor. His area of responsibility described a great curve through southern Russia to the borders of the drained Caspian Sea and then south into the Anatolian Plateau. His, was the land of Magog!

Michael turned his mind to the other players. Micah Perga had attended, but he had been little more than an observer, as had been Leah. Michael had almost felt the eyebrows being raised when she emerged from the mist of light at the beginning of the conference. He had been at pains to sweetly explain her presence - she was his deputy and as such, needed to be fully informed of events which drastically altered the balance of his combined stewardship. She would, after all, be the one to act on his behalf on certain occasions. He didn't spell out what they might be and nobody seemed inclined to press the point.

He considered his next move. Clearly, there was no point of establishing his alliance unless the fact was generally known. The conference had agreed that each area would ensure that its population was informed of the change of responsibilities. Special steps would be required to inform those who were outside of the areas of their control - and that included Gog. Above all, it was essential that he knew that a line had been drawn and that he understood the warning, 'Thus far - and no farther!'.

Michael was under no delusions, what had been done was no more than a stopgap measure. The time would come soon when Gog would feel confident enough to step over the line and test the resolution of those standing in his way. He fought down a surge of pessimism. The thought wouldn't go away that all he was doing was futile. Gog would come down from the far recesses of the north. He would invade the land of a people who lived in peace in unwalled cities. There would be one last, terrible conflict, when God would take a hand and send fire down from heaven to consume the invader. There was nothing that Michael or his allies could do to prevent the inevitable. He wondered why he was putting so much effort into his resistance and the thought came to him like a voice whispering in his mind: 'It is because Michael shall stand up for his people.'

One thing troubled him. During all his planning and negotiating, there had not been one hint of the thoughts of the Kingly-Priests. Perhaps, it didn't matter what he planned or did anymore. The outcome was certain, the most his little efforts could achieve would be to buy time. Once again, he wondered why it was so essential to buy time. To what purpose? Once again, there was a whisper: 'To complete the final test'.

He came to a decision. It would have been easy to ask Feodor Chernienko to carry the news to Gog - he corrected himself - to Georgi Malenski. They knew where he was to be found, Grigor Suskov would be his uneasy host. Michael's curiosity was aroused, he wanted to meet him, to see for himself what sort of person this 'contemptible creature' was. In ancient times, it used to be said that it was good tactics to evaluate your enemy. He would himself spell out the terms of peaceful coexistence, to the man he was destined to one day confront on the Plain of Megiddo!

Having made the decision, he was galvanised into action. He glanced at the chronometer. He grinned, he had sat brooding in the darkened, bare room for nearly a half hour. He was almost tempted to re-establish the link to Leah. He longed to talk to her, but he knew the holo-link was no longer secure. Micah Perga had proved it so and Michael had no desire for his endearments to his deputy in Salem to become the tittle tattle of modern day voyeurs. He resisted the urge, returned to his office and started to make things hum to prepare for his forthcoming journey.

Grigor Suskov was not given the opportunity to express surprise over the return visit of Feodor Chernienko, nor did he have much option other than to accept the additional guest who accompanied Feodor. The two men arrived at the door of his headquarters on the day after he had seen the first stream of refugees set up camp in front of his door.

It hadn't taken long for Georgi Malenski to appear. Immediately, the arrangements for the distribution of precious reserves of foodstuffs were concluded. There was no question of negotiation. Georgi's requirements

brooked no argument. He had hungry people to feed; the storehouses had been filled during the time of plenty, and the reason for filling them had been so that hungry people could be fed. To him, it was a simple equation. It was now time to open the treasure houses.

Now, Grigor was confronted by the persistent Feodor and even more unsettling, by no less than the Administrator of an adjoining stewardship. He had invited them into his private office and there had listened to the reason for their visitation. When he heard that Chernienko and the Barenkovs had transferred their allegiance from Alexei Kharkov to Michael ben Levi, on some trumped up, legalistic excuse concerning joint venture responsibility, he was appalled. The consequences couldn't help but affect him and his responsibilities. Effectively, the boundary he shared with Feodor had now become the potential front-line of the battles which were to come.

Michael had watched the expressions come and go. He had decided to leave explanations to the effervescent Feodor. In spite of himself, he was beginning to find his new ally attractive. The man seemed totally fearless, almost reckless. At another time, Michael would have avoided such impetuosity, but now, he was beginning to realise that such men might make the best allies, especially when it came to dealing with Gog. - and he was becoming more and more certain that he was dealing with him.

He was disappointed to find that Georgi had refused the offer to lodge with Grigor. This potential Gog had returned to the encampment which was mushrooming up from the ground for kilometres in every direction in the fields around Grigor's headquarters. Michael acknowledged that he had arrived too late to salvage anything from the relationship Grigor had made with their potential enemy. He had viewed the huge camp as Feodor had piloted the Pod to the landing pad and had realised that this was only a fragment of what was to come. The chill of that knowledge had sent a tingle down his spine.

Feodor had momentarily run out of something enthusiastic to say, Michael interjected whilst he had the chance.

"I had hoped to have the opportunity to speak to our brother Malenski personally."

Grigor eyed him frostily. Increasingly, he was beginning to feel as if he was the meat in the sandwich.

"He has returned to his encampment."

Michael nodded encouragingly. Grigor went on grudgingly.

"I have no doubt that he will return in the morning."

Michael nodded and waited for more, which was not forthcoming. He forced an answer.

"I have no doubt that he will want to have further discussions with you before he leaves."

Grigor looked startled.

"Before he leaves?"

"Of course! He will strip your land bare of whatever you have, empty your storehouses - and perhaps, leave you a little if you are lucky - then, he will go on his way."

"He plans to leave a garrison to protect us."

"From whom, brother Grigor? - Of course, you will be required to feed and house his men and their families. I would expect that he will find it

necessary to leave many garrisons throughout your territory - his excuse being to keep the peace and protect you! Effectively, he will have populated your area with his followers - and at the same time, he will ensure that you don't have any second thoughts about your co-operation."

Feodor interjected.

"I think, perhaps you were a little too quick to cave in to our friend Georgi, my dear Grigor. I told you - the man has to be stopped - you were not prepared to make a stand. It was for this reason that I asked join the Central Administration. He will not cross into my lands and do with us what he intends to do with you!"

Michael raised his eyebrows slightly. Feodor was revealing the diplomatic skills of an elephant! Grigor stared at his distant cousin.

"You may think that you have found some legalistic loophole, Feodor - which gives you the right to switch allegiance. I have no joint ventures with the Central Administration. Alexei Kharkov is my Administrator and Georgi Malenski is acting under instructions from him."

Feodor leaned forward.

"So he tells you, Grigor - have you seen written authority? Has Alexei opened the communication lines to tell you to cooperate? I think not! If I am acting without authority, then so are you. You have decided to accept Georgi's unsubstantiated word! I think you will learn to regret it - if you haven't done so already!"

Michael decided that it was high time to pour oil on troubled waters.

"Brothers! Brothers! Recriminations and accusations are not going to change the situation. We came in peace to contact a man with a problem. Georgi Malenski faces a nightmare of logistics. The least we can do is offer our advice - for this reason we wish to speak to him. At the same time, we will explain our changes in organisation."

Grigor relaxed slightly.

"I think you will understand, brother Michael, I had no choice - "

"But of course, brother Grigor! It was your decision to take. Feodor has taken another - and I have taken another to safeguard the joint ventures and so has Joshua Aristides. We have attempted to inform Alexei Kharkov, but like yourselves, we have not been able to establish the links - Tell me, does Georgi Malenski have any news of him?"

"Perhaps, it would be best for you to ask him yourself, brother Michael ben Levi."

The voice was unexpected, it came from the entrance to the room. Michael turned and stood facing the mudstained man who stood just inside the door. There was a moment of silent appraisal and then Michael moved forward with extended hand.

"I greet you, Georgi Malenski - I greet you in peace."

Georgi nodded slightly and his face twitched into a brief, responsive smile.

"May we always meet in peace, Michael ben Levi."

They clasped each other's hands for far longer than was usually considered correct. Feodor watched them, conscious of an almost explosive force of cohesion. He questioned the thought - cohesion, not repulsion. They dropped their hands and turned back to Grigor. He hastily babbled.

"Perhaps, you would all accept my hospitality. Use my house for your discussions?"

Michael shook his head.

"Thank you, Grigor - but I would like to see for myself, the conditions under which Georgi labours - if he is agreeable?"

Georgi nodded without smiling.

"Perhaps, it would be a good thing for you both to see my dreaded horde at first hand - that is, if you are not frightened of getting dirty!"

Elena Malenski met them at the entrance to their tent. If she was surprised to see unexpected guests, she didn't show it. Michael took her hand in greeting and realised how desperately cold she was. The hand was almost lifeless, a blue, grey extremity protruding from a thin and tattered tunic sleeve.

The walk from Grigor's house to Georgi's tent had been a little less than two kilometres. Their host had offered no commentary as they made their way through the scraps of cloth which housed his nearest neighbours. There had been many gestures of greeting when he had been recognised, but his guests received blank stares. There was no hostility, only an indifference born out of a greater priority. It was more essential to keep alive and prepare to face another cold night, than to conjecture who the well dressed strangers might be.

They were shepherded within the tent and young Piotr ran to his father. Michael took in the sudden relaxation of Georgi's expression, before the boy remembered his manners and stepped away again. He was introduced. Michael knelt on the frozen earth.

"I am pleased to meet you, Piotr. You remind me of a little boy in Salem - he's a few years younger."

"That would be Marcus Steinbecker's boy."

Michael glanced up at the father, who added.

"We met once - about seven years ago at a conference on the Yenesei. I told him about Piotr and he told me of his plans to marry. I liked him, he was a good man."

It was almost a speech. Michael got to his feet, but he still held the boy's hand. He nodded.

"John is Marcus's son."

"And Leah is his mother - when will you marry?"

Feodor's eyebrows arched abruptly. Michael laughed.

"You're very well informed, Georgi."

"You can thank Ambrose for that."

"Ah! I had forgotten that you know Ambrose."

"We have worked together. As you could see around us when we walked here, we share the same problems."

"The Arctic lands are lost to all of us. There are some who say that we're experiencing a mini ice age."

Georgi grunted.

"Then, the Lord preserve us from a big one!"

"The Lord will preserve us from many things."

"But not from the ultimate test - we must all endure what He has in store for us. You, me and the ones who follow us because they think we have

answers for their problems."

"How many do you have following you, brother Georgi?"

Malenski eyed him steadily for a moment.

"If you are asking how big the horde is which threatens Europe - I can't tell you. I have never counted it - perhaps it is a numberless throng. There is much coming and going. Some stay, others join us."

Michael trod carefully.

"You described them as a horde threatening Europe. Is that your estimation of what they are?"

There was another pause.

"Hungry men and women soon become impatient. The mob knows no law. History is waiting for a horde, perhaps we are what is expected."

"Much depends on how you see yourselves."

Georgi shrugged.

"Does it matter how we see ourselves? It will be for others to decide whether we are the countless number who come from out of the north. Someone else will decide if their leader is the dreaded Gog!"

Wooden bowls had been half filled with a thin vegetable soup. It was little more than water.

"As you can see, brother Michael. If an army marches on its stomach, we will not make a very great journey. Tonight, we have bread as well - that is a luxury."

Elena had produced a small piece of flat bread which had been baked directly on the wooden embers of the fire. It was doled out to each one. Michael paused.

"I feel guilty to take your rations."

"Why so? You repay as in the way that we treat others. We take from them what isn't ours - we forage and open the storehouses meant for their future. How quickly the teaching and the habits of the Kingdom have been forgotten. Three short years ago, we all shared equally in that which the Lord provided in his bounty. Now, we are accused of stealing from each other!"

The man's eyes had taken on a fierce glaze. Michael stared into them and the intensity faded away. Georgi continued in a different tone.

"Eat! - you are welcome to share what we have. You honour us with your presence. First let us thank our God and Father."

The old, well used formula of hospitality sounded incongruous in the surroundings. The prayer of supplication which followed was even more so. It was the petition of a man driven to the edge of despair by the circumstances he was trying to control. It acknowledged his vulnerability and showed his implicit trust. It left Michael ben Levi shaken and with the question: How could this man be the monster they were expecting to sweep into the lands of a people living in peace in unfenced cities?

They ate their meal in silence. Piotr had eased himself between his Georgi and Michael. Once or twice, he looked shyly up at the stranger, but for the most part, he leaned against his father. The silence was broken.

"I once asked Marcus Steinbecker what future there could be for our children, when all we expect for ourselves is a grim tomorrow which must end with the Final Day. He was full of confidence. He told me of his plans to marry. Now, he is dead and he has left two children to face whatever is to

come. I wonder, was he as confident in these past years and did he look at his son and daughter and perhaps think it would have been better to have abandoned his optimistic plans of love and marriage?"

Michael glanced across the table at Elena. She waited for his answer without apparent emotion.

"Marcus loved his children - and he loved his wife. I will never believe that he regretted his decision to marry and start a family. During the history of man, life has always been uncertain - there have never been guarantees. We cannot live our lives by the spoiling of today with the fear that we might meet disaster tomorrow. We must take each day as it comes - remember the Lord's words: 'So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself. Each day has troubles enough for its own'."

Georgi nodded slowly.

"If I had given no thought to tomorrow, we would all lie dead in the ice desert of the Arctic coast! In some matters, we must help ourselves, brother Michael."

"I agree! But let us be very careful that we do not help ourselves when we ought to be allowing God to help us."

"Perhaps it is a matter of God helping those who help themselves, brother Michael."

"Man has always been expected to do his part, brother Georgi - but it is essential that we leave room for God to fulfil his intentions."

Their voices were very soft and Feodor found himself suppressing his breath so that it didn't intrude on the conversation. He looked at the silent Elena, she was gazing down at the floor. He wondered what she really thought. She had the look of someone who had abdicated the right to speak for herself. Georgi Malenski was her spokesman, whether she agreed with his views or not. Feodor had the impression that it was not always the case that she agreed.

"God has already declared his intentions through the prophets, brother Michael. Hasn't he declared that he will put 'hooks in the jaw' of Gog and turn him about and lead him from out of the north with his great Horde? I make the suggestion that there are few hooks so sharp as those of hunger pangs, or the numbing cold which overwhelms all reason. In both cases, the overriding emotion is to escape, to find nourishment and warmth. It is the most primitive of all requirements. Even a newly born child instinctively seeks food and warmth. Can we be blamed for following the basic instinct to survive?"