

The haunting melody ebbed away into silence. Leah sighed, Marcus was very conscious of her standing close to him.

"Marcus, that reminds me of the night when we listened to the community singing in the valley below Asher's house."

"If my memory is correct, it was the night when you marched me to the library and nearly curdled my brain with a litany of ancient names and places!"

"It was the night we discussed Profiles."

"Ah! Profiles."

"I see that you haven't altered your opinion of them."

"I still consider them obtrusive."

"Why worry, especially if you have nothing to hide."

"We all have something to hide - our secret thoughts."

"Tell me your secret thoughts, Marcus."

"Then, they would no longer be secret."

"You try to give the impression that you're sitting on the fence - but you're not, Marcus! Not after listening to you this evening."

"I believe the singers have another item."

They listened to the voices in silence. This time, Marcus sighed.

"I wonder if they are specially trained."

He was a little startled when Joshua interjected from close by.

"The Andalusians have a natural aptitude for harmony, Marcus. It has something to do with their ancient, Moorish bloodlines. The singers come from the nearby communes, it's quite a tradition amongst us."

Marcus eased apart from Leah. It was an invitation for Joshua to take his place, instead he moved on amongst his guests. Marcus looked after him and then at Leah. She was staring resolutely at the singers. They gave a few more items and then, the entertainment was at an end and the guests began to wander the grounds. Marcus and Leah found themselves standing awkwardly, a few paces apart. She said softly.

"This visit is a disaster, Marcus."

"He's busy with his guests, Leah."

"It isn't the reason, and you know it!"

"Let's walk this way."

Marcus led the way down a path which no one else seemed to have taken. They walked for a while and then stopped in a small arbour. She blurted out.

"Perhaps, I read too much into what happened between us - especially in Jerusalem six months ago. He was so attentive. It's my stupidity, I came to conclusions and obviously, I was wrong. I feel as if I'm being seen as trying to snare him!"

"I hope you're wrong, Leah."

"But you can't deny that I might be right, can you?"

"On the contrary, I think he cares for you very much."

"Forgive me if I find that hard to swallow!"

"He's said as much - it's just - "

"Just what?"

"I think it's a matter of politics."

"Politics! There aren't supposed to be any politics in the Kingdom."

"When I say politics, I mean that he's trying to find the right place and time to break the news to his mother - and to his associates. Perhaps, he feels that he ought to talk to Asher - or even to Joel, before he goes public."

"Are you trying to tell me that he wants to ask for my hand in marriage? That wouldn't be old fashioned courtesy - it would be nothing short of being - quaint!"

"Just my thoughts, Leah."

They sat on a stone bench and looked up into the clear sky.

"How long do you think this visit will last, Marcus?"

"A time frame has never been discussed. On the surface, it is supposed to be a short break for me to get to know Joshua and to see some of the sights. Under the surface, as we well know, it is a further attempt for me to make some impression on Joshua's way of thinking and to try to find the basis for a consensus. I suspect we will soon be on our way if we arrive at an impasse."

"I'll stay for another two or three days, if my own personal impasse isn't resolved in that time, I will find an excuse to go back to Jerusalem."

"And leave me as a lamb amongst the wolves - Father Joel will have a fit!"

"It you are a lamb, Marcus Steinbecker, you have wolf's teeth!"

"Now, I'm a wolf in sheep's clothing! What have I done to deserve that?"

She giggled, it was the first sign of relaxation he had seen all evening.

"I'm sure you'll survive! I'm going back to the house."

She was away before he could answer. He contemplated the stars. It was a wonderful night, it had been better when Leah had been with him. For the first time since Judith, he felt comfortable with a woman. He reminded himself that Leah was out of bounds and his feeling of contentment diminished. Out of bounds or not, a man could still dream.

He thought over his outburst at the dinner table. The reaction of the guests had puzzled him a little. There had been no attempt to repudiate what he had said - apart from the contributions of Joshua. It was almost as if they had never before heard the side of the argument he had presented. He was quite certain that they would have been taught by the Lord and the Firstlings and they would certainly be aware of the impending changes. The only resolution to the lack of response would have to be that Joshua had propounded his point of view and that contrary arguments had never been encouraged. Perhaps, they had been hearing the contra arguments for the first time.

He walked back towards the lights of the house and caught up with some of those who had been at the dinner table. There was a careful avoidance of the subject he was sure was on everyone's mind. They exchanged a few pleasantries and then the party began to disperse. Marcus had the feeling that the objective of the visit had been gained. It was very

likely that they had been summoned to look him over and hear him out, but were under strict instructions not to venture onto contentious ground.

There was no sign of Leah, or for that matter, Joshua. It could have been taken as being a hopeful sign, but then, it depended on the viewpoint. Marcus couldn't deny the faint hope that Leah and Joshua might find their differences insoluble. He decided to call it a night and crossed the reception foyer, heading in the direction of his quarters.

"Not looking for your bed so early, Marcus Steinbecker?"

He turned and confronted the tiny figure of Miriam. She went on.

"The night is young and we rarely have visitors from my old homeland."

He smiled into her serene eyes. It was the only description he could give her. She had the aspect of serenity. She looked as if nothing could ever ruffle her. It made Joshua's wariness of her reactions, all the more puzzling.

"It must be many years since you last visited Bethany, Miriam?"

"I've never been back, Marcus. When I allowed my swashbuckling pirate to carry me off, that was the last time I saw my early home.

"Swashbuckling pirate!"

"Spiros Aristides was a wild young man - totally unlike his son, I might add. Joshua errs on the side of caution to the point of being downright boring! Spiros was different, Spiros was an adventurer - an man of visions. Look at this place! It was the result of his dream. He saw it in his mind's eye and wouldn't stop until he had it as he had seen it in his imagination."

"He earned the reputation of being a resourceful and determined man."

"Tactful, Marcus - tactful! You sound like a Profile! Spiros WAS a determined man and usually had his way. I think he reminded me of my father. Sam Taggert was much the same sort of man. June, my mother, was also a very determined woman. She had quite a story to tell. They were both Survivors. The story goes, that during the turbulent time of the destruction, my father nearly killed my mother by blowing her aircraft out of the sky. Fortunately for me, he didn't quite succeed!"

"Carl Steinbecker knew her, even before the Destruction."

She eyed him sharply.

"I didn't know that! Do you mean to say that he knew her during the time of the Apostles?"

Marcus nodded.

"I understand that he was once her priest!"

"Ah!"

Marcus waited.

"Well, tell me more! Don't leave me hanging!"

Marcus felt his way and wished he hadn't broached the subject.

"June stopped coming to the services - I believe, because of an antagonistic husband."

"Robert Meredith, Darren's father?"

"I believe so, I would have to consult Grandfather Carl's chronicles."

"He recorded it!"

"I makes fascinating viewing."

"Darren was my half brother. He came a few times to Bethany when I

was a child. I liked Darren, he was a great big man, with a brood of children. I always enjoyed it when he came, but I thought my father was always a little reserved during the visits. I think he liked Darren, but he was a part of my mother's life which Sam Taggart hadn't shared."

"Bethany has become a small city."

"Bethany was a sweet, little place when I was a child. So, now it is a city - in a way, that's a pity. I know we have to allow progress, but we have too many cities and not enough sweet, little places - don't you think?"

"Bethany still has a certain charm - not like Salem, that's a great sprawling place, with those towering glass monstrosities lining the seashore. I always think of it as the tail wagging the dog. What was once the old capital - the place where the three bombs were dropped - has now become a suburb. What was once a run down suburb, has become the new city centre. Dar - er - Darren's old estate, is like an island in the middle of an urban sprawl - it's a tidy sprawl, but nevertheless, a sprawl for all that. The site of the old lighthouse on the headland, is also preserved. Mind you, after Joel is gone, I doubt if it will stay unchanged. Both he and Father Carl insisted on keeping it as a kind of reminder of what things were once like."

Miriam nodded.

"It is important to keep the reminders of how things once were. If we don't, I think we run into the danger of allowing the facts of history to become myths. That's half the problem we are facing today. The factual history of the Destruction and the time of the Apostles - and even the First Resurrection itself, are in danger of becoming myths. When that happens, we will be in danger of allowing a kind of complacency to develop and out of that complacency will grow the attitude that nothing will ever be allowed to change. Nothing will be allowed to happen which will rock our comfortable boat. Hence, we have the arguments about the impending release of the Evil One and what must follow.

Marcus murmured.

"In the Book of Revelation, there is a passage which applied in the time before the Destruction. If I remember it correctly, it goes something like this: 'You say, you are increased with goods and have need of nothing, but you don't know that you are poor and blind and naked.' They too were complacent, quite certain that nothing could or would be allowed to happen to change the situation - look at the outcome!"

"Perhaps, history repeats itself, Marcus Steinbecker! The same passage applies now! Stick to your guns, try to wake up this generation whose ears are deafened by the clamour of their own self congratulations. May the blessings of our Father go with you!"

She was gone, walking swiftly out of the room. Marcus stared after her. She and her generation were the bridge between those distant days at the beginning of the Kingdom and the present. She and people like her, had much to teach them - but who in the past, had ever listened to the ramblings of the older generation? He went to his quarters, but his day wasn't yet over, he had barely entered and closed the sliding door, before the chime announced a visitor. He activated the control and confronted Joshua in the entrance. He stepped aside to let him enter.

"I realise that it is late, but I hardly had the opportunity to talk with you

this evening - I'm afraid our other guests claimed my attention."

"It was a most enjoyable evening, and I thank you."

"Tomorrow, I promise you my undivided attention. I have a grand tour planned and I think I can promise you some spectacular sights!"

"I look forward to it - but I hope you will not allow me to monopolise you. I'm quite sure that you haven't forgotten Leah."

Joshua smiled and nodded in approval.

"You are fiercely protective of her, aren't you, Marcus?"

"She is my cousin - you would expect me to take an interest in her. I simply wanted to make the point that I wouldn't like her to feel neglected."

"And she won't be, Marcus. I'm quite sure that Maman has her plans also, and they will include Leah! You and I must be allowed time to get to know each other - on a one to one basis - after all, that was the whole objective of this visit!"

"Perhaps it was unwise to have invited Leah to come."

"Nonsense! I'm delighted that she's here! You couldn't have pleased me more! I promise you, she will not feel neglected!"

Marcus stared at the closed door after he had gone. He shook his head, the man either had the hide of a rhinoceros, or he was totally insensitive to the feelings of anyone other than himself. One thing was very clear, Joshua Aristides expected to get and usually did get, his own way.

They made an early start on the following day. Marcus had hardly finished his ablutions before Joshua presented himself at the door. It was barely light, with the sun just emerging from behind the Sierra peaks. Shafts of light were piercing into the valleys, like the powerful searchlight beams of an earlier era. Marcus was reminded of a passage in Carl's chronicles where he had said: "The dawn comes now like an explosion. Once it had been a gentle thing, all soft hues which touched the hills and the valleys and brought them into gentle wakefulness. Now the dawn comes like the trumpet blast which rouses the warriors to battle and we are once again rewarded with another day of the Kingdom of Peace."

Which rouses the warriors to battle! Was that the augury for the day he was to spend in the company of Joshua Aristides? There was no question of waiting for breakfast. Joshua seemed almost pathetically eager to show off his wonders to his guest. Marcus was glad to see that he did make a concession towards easing the hunger pangs, he placed a large basket between them on the dual seat of the Pod.

"We will have to be content with the left over scraps from last night's feast! But! Don't tell Maman! She would skin me alive if she knew!"

"Miriam is a serene and wonderful lady. You make her sound like a dragon!"

His host grinned.

"You don't say no to Miriam Aristides! Sweet she certainly is, but don't cross swords with her! If you do, you might find that what is sweet to the mouth, is sour to the stomach!"

They were alone in the Pod. Joshua acted as pilot, disdainingly plotting a course through the computer. He lifted the ship above the estate and then circled to give a general overview of the valley. It became clear that the home of Joshua Aristides was indeed, a miniature town, with blocks of buildings

radiating out from the main Administration Centre. To one side, his private domain was surrounded by the extensive parklands which had provided the setting for the entertainment of the previous evening.

Surrounding the cluster of buildings and stretching along the valley bottom, were extensive, cultivated fields. The Pod was too high for Marcus to identify the crop - in any case, the green of the fields varied, a sure indication that it was a mixed cultivation.

"Very impressive, Joshua."

"I'm sure it's no different to what you would find around any community in your part of the world."

"True, but Salem has overrun what was once the original cultivated fields around it. Now, we are forced to go further afield to plant and harvest - we rely a great deal on the reclaimed lands - desert and salt flats which were once completely unproductive."

"I suppose you had an overview of the Saharan wheat belt on the way here?"

"Not on this occasion, I pointed them out to Father Joel when we last visited Jerusalem - on that trip, we came in too far south to see the Dam."

"That would be when we were altogether in Jerusalem for the last meeting."

"When you invited me."

"An invitation, which I'm very happy to say, you accepted!"

"In the teeth of a great deal of opposition, it should be pointed out."

Joshua was silent for a long moment, apparently concentrating on setting his course.

"Tell me. Marcus - am I considered to be such an ogre?"

Marcus stared resolutely ahead.

"I think 'ogre' is too strong a word."

"I can assure you, I haven't eaten any little children for ages! That is what ogres are supposed to do, isn't it?"

Marcus's laugh was a little humourless.

"Amongst other things! As I said, 'ogre' is too strong a word."

"What then? Perhaps, a divisive influence, because I don't happen to agree with the camp which asserts that our God is incapable of showing mercy and adjusting his plans in the face of altering circumstances? I am merely pointing out that our Heavenly Father has a history of authorising change. I am trying to emphasise that we can't tie our God down to a course of action, if He so chooses to alter his mind."

"Our Father has also a history of fulfilling His word. We have only to look at the sequence of events which preceded the establishment of the Kingdom. He allowed His Son to promise that He would return and take to Himself the Chosen. He promised that this event would be the prelude to a great Destruction, which in turn, would be the precursor to the setting up of the Kingdom of Peace. He further promised that the Kingdom would, at the end of a thousand years, come to an end with the release of Satan.

In turn, this would be followed by the emergence of Gog and his Horde. Eventually, the End would come and then the Judgement. I find no reason to expect this sequence to be interrupted. The great master plan has reached the point of the fulfilment of the Kingdom, we stand on the brink of

the release of Satan. The rest will follow!"

They had been nosing through the peaks of the Sierras, very high, in a cloudless sky. The ranges were dwarfed below them and the deep clefts of the valleys between, featureless ripples in the landscape. Joshua was silent for a while.

"If I am not described as an 'ogre' - am I perhaps described as - Gog?"

Marcus looked at him sharply, Joshua's face was expressionless.

"I hope that nobody has ever suggested that, Joshua! I would be grossly improper."

"Why improper?"

"Not even Gog knows that he is Gog!"

Joshua weighed the answer.

"An interesting proposition. You are trying to say that Gog is unaware of his destiny?"

"In the time of Jesus, was Judas Iscariot aware of his destiny? For that matter, did Peter know that he would deny Christ three times before the cock crowed on a certain morning? Did Thomas know that he would become a doubter? Did John the Baptist know that he would lose his head to satisfy the blood lust of an outraged queen? Gog does not know that he is Gog! To answer your question, I do not know if you are Gog, just as you do not know if I am Gog!"

There was another contemplative pause.

"So, we must wait for the emergence of the villain."

"We must await the release of Satan and when he has done his work, Gog will become visible - and obvious."

The Sierra peaks were left behind them. They headed due west, with the rising sun behind them. The whole earth was bathed in radiance, as the sevenfold light increased in strength. Joshua breathed contentedly.

"It is so beautiful, Marcus - this earth upon which our God has established a Kingdom of Peace. We talk of dark events - below us, the shadows are shrinking before the light. May the shadows in our thoughts also shrink!"

Marcus grappled for an answer.

"I can only remind you of the time when Peter took Jesus' arm and rebuked him, saying: 'Heaven forbid! No, Lord, this shall never happen to you.' Then Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Away with you, Satan; you are a stumbling block to me. You think as men think, not as God thinks.'"