

The agreement was prepared and silently signed by the four men in another meeting on the following day. It was formally entered into the data records of the Council of Administrators. In former times, when the Kingdom had flourished, it would have been as solemn and as binding as an oath, but they all knew this was not the former times and their agreement was no more than a hollow gesture. Like so many other agreements and decisions, it would do no more than delay the inevitable.

Micah Perga could barely manage to contain his rage. As soon as the formalities were at an end, he stalked out of the room with his advisors. Michael stared after him and wondered who it was that returned home with a long baggage-train and anger in his heart. Micah most certainly returned with less than what he had started - but the anger in his heart was of monumental proportions.

Georgi Malenski had retreated behind a stiff guard of formality. It was as if the conversation he had shared with Michael on the previous evening, had never taken place. He had signified his agreement and as on the previous occasion, he attended alone. If he had brought any aides with him, they did not put in an appearance. Michael couldn't help admiring the courage of the man. When both Micah and Georgi had gone, he said as much to Joshua. His fellow Administrator shook his head.

"You misunderstand him, Michael. That isn't an expression of courage, nor is it bravado or recklessness - I recognise something similar in you at times. It is an expression of inevitability. You both have a destiny and you both know that your time is not now!"

Michael murmured.

"I tend to agree with you. It is uncanny how alike we are, Joshua. We are like spiritual twins."

"You ARE spiritual twins - your destinies are intertwined. You cannot extricate one from the other."

Michael stared at him.

"That only applies if he is Gog!"

Joshua nodded.

"I do not have the slightest doubt that he is!"

"What about his general, Pik Sedova?"

"We can't deny that Pik Sedova has military skills, but there is a great deal more to Gog than being a military genius. Gog is a thinker! Gog is a soul in torment! Gog has hooks in his jaws and he knows it! Gog is a man driven by his destiny!"

"You sound almost sorry for him."

Joshua stared at him.

"I am sorry for us all. I am sorry that we have to come to Armageddon. I am sorry that you must stand up for our people - and yes, I am sorry for the man who slowly and inexorably is being transformed into Gog!"

The silence was long and heavy. Michael asked eventually.

"Why do you think he is returning north with anger in his heart against

the Covenant? He's got what he wants - the supplies his general has looted from the Adriatic. Why is he angry?"

Joshua shrugged.

"Georgi is very protective of his people. His army has suffered many losses because of Micah Perga. Pik Sedova isn't happy with those losses, he will work upon Georgi and try to inflame him into revenge. He will have nothing but contempt for the agreement we have just countersigned. I wonder sometimes, if Georgi ever consults scriptures as we do."

Michael crossed to the computer controls and entered a co-ordinate.

"Let us remind ourselves of what we can expect next."

The required text started to scroll on the projected screen.

*'Then one will return home with a long baggage-train, and with anger in his heart against the Holy Covenant; he will work his will and return to his own land.'*

Michael move his hand over the controls.

"I think we can take that as read - Georgi returns to his base more than compensated for his trouble. The next verses relate to what we can anticipate."

*'At the appointed time he will once more overrun the south, but he will not succeed as he did before. Ships from the west will sail against him, and he will receive a rebuff. He will turn and vent his fury against the Holy Covenant; on his way back he will take due note of those who have forsaken it.'*

Michael faced Joshua squarely.

"The appointed time might come sooner rather than later, Joshua. Like it or not, it would seem that you must become the ally of Micah Perga."

Joshua wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"That is not a prospect which enthralls me, Michael. Micah and I will form a very uneasy alliance, I think."

"Possibly - it is the second portion of the text which concerns me. It seems to point to some desertions from amongst our allies."

They took their leave of each other. The question of Joshua's projected visit to Alexei wasn't mentioned. Weighing the alternatives, it was perhaps a better decision for Joshua to remain at his base in Iberia. Georgi Malenski, with his general, Pik Sedova would not retreat from their alpine stronghold. They stood poised, building up their strength and consuming their food supplies and soon they would become hungry and cast envious eyes upon the rich granaries of the Saharan wheatlands - and then, once more, at the appointed time, they would renew their conflict with Micah Perga - and with Joshua Aristides.

Pik Sedova had watched the diplomatic manoeuvres of his exalted leader with barely concealed amusement. Let Georgi Malenski play politics, he knew full well that in so doing, he was using the advantage provided by the successful campaign his general had waged for him. Sedova made a thorough job of rubbing home his victory. Normally, he wouldn't have burned

the fields of standing crops, he would have contented himself with the destruction of the storage facilities after they had been stripped of their contents.

He burned the crops because he wanted Micah Perga to know that his defeat was complete. He wanted Perga's army to know that their leader had not only failed to protect the storage facilities, but that he was incapable of protecting the croplands. The burning performed another service too - that of disposing of the corpses the 'King of the South' had left on the polders of the Adriatic.

Sedova didn't like the Adriatic trough. On average, it was between one hundred and fifty and two hundred kilometres from the old shore of Dalmatia to the ancient coast of Italy. He thought of it as a trough and he had to confess to a feeling of uneasiness. It was, after all, an old sea bed and all that prevented it from becoming one again, was the man made wall of the Gibraltar Dam, which held back the Atlantic Ocean. It was for this reason that he was in some haste to turn his men around and start the long march back to the higher ground of the alpine territory he had so recently conquered.

It was a slow march, they were richly loaded with the supplies they had appropriated. Away from the scene of their battle with Perga and the prying eyes of his fleet, he ordered his men to stop putting the torch to the crops. It was in their interest to let them come to maturity, for he was quite sure he would return to their rich pickings in the near future - he wasn't yet finished with Micah Perga and the opulence he enjoyed on the other side of the Great Sea.

By the time he reached his alpine encampment, Georgi Malenski had been and gone. The great leader had stayed only one night, he had left no message for his general and no one knew where he was to be found. Sedova shrugged casually, it was of little consequence. His men were in need of a rest and after that, he would scour the countryside for fresh recruits, drill them and hone their skills for the battle to come - it would all be in the name of their great leader - the name they hardly dared to whisper - Gog, the Invincible. Pik Sedova grinned through his yellow teeth and spat eloquently into the soft ground.

Micah Perga did not return with his fleet. The remaining two thousand men of his army journeyed no more than the length of the north-western coastline of the Eastern Basin. They disembarked on the African Shore, weary, defeated and demoralised. If the opportunity had been provided, they would have deserted en masse, but they were over two thousand kilometres from Nile City and there was nowhere to run, except into the endless plains of the Saharan Wheatlands on the other side of the Atlas Ranges.

The Shuttle carrying Micah Perga and his advisers touched down in Nile City in the early hours of the morning. He had timed it to be that way. Immediately, he retreated to his secluded estate to the south of the city and knew that he faced a greater battle than the one he had just lost in the trough of the Adriatic. He was not a popular Administrator. He was determined and inflexible, even more so, now that times had changed. In the three years since the end of the thousand years, there had developed an undercurrent of unrest. Perhaps it had always been there but submerged under the benign influence of the Time of Peace. Micah Perga knew full well, that when it

became generally known that he had led twenty thousand young men into an unequal battle with a better trained army and that he had left eighteen thousand on a distant battlefield, he would be hard pressed to control any unrest which might arise.

He eyed his silent ring of advisors suspiciously. He wondered how many of them he could really trust. The events in the Far East Administration resulting in the death of Marcus Steinbecker and the abduction of his wife, quite apart from the unsettling silence of Alexei Kharkov in the Asia Heartland and the rise of Gog and his general, showed him that Administrators could consider themselves fair game for anyone who might choose to try to alter the status quo.

They all looked exhausted and it was tempting to sleep first and tackle the problems in a new day - but not all could be relied upon to sleep. The hours of the night were a time for plotters. He glanced at the chronometer, there wasn't much of the night left. He slumped down in his chair and eyed them one after the other. Some held his gaze, others shifted their eyes. He said at last.

"Well! - What is to be done?"

Praedo Stern answered rather too quickly. Micah's eyes narrowed to slits.

"In the short term, we must contain the unrest our reversal of fortunes might provoke. In the long term, we must find a way of defending the land bridge from Europe to Africa. Gog will come again!"

Micah nodded slowly.

"Go on! Tell me first, how to you propose to convince the families of eighteen thousand young men that we have merely suffered a minor reversal which unfortunately resulted in the premature death of their sons, lovers, husbands and fathers?"

Praedo ran his tongue over dry lips and looked at his silent comrades. No sign of help was visible, on the contrary, they looked as if they were waiting for his self execution. He looked again at Micah.

"I suggest that we call a spade a spade. We have lost our men because we were fighting devilish forces led by Satan's general, Gog. Against such odds, some were lucky to escape with their lives - unfortunately, we were the minority. Perhaps we could hint at unspecified and horrific powers which could not be resisted!"

Micah Perga stared at his lieutenant for a long time.

"Tell me, how do you propose to control the panic which will sweep through the general population when they learn that we are faced with horrific powers which leave ninety percent of those who oppose them, dead on the spot?"

Praedo Stern shrugged helplessly.

"It was only a suggestion."

Micah nodded.

"Some of what you say has merit - but let us forget the horror stories - rumour will circulate soon enough without us making it official! We will emphasise that this was the work of the devil - and we will be telling no lies! We will speak of the relentless nature of the forces controlled by Gog - and yes, brothers, I do agree that we shall call a spade a spade and give the devil his real name! We will prepare a communiqué in those terms and publish it

before we take to our beds - and tomorrow, we will look at the long term defence of the land bridge!"

Joshua Aristides spent a few hours with his steward of the Italian province and the reclaimed lands stretching out in a tenuous link to the ancient islands of Corsica and Sardinia. It was to the southern extremity of Sardinia that his Shuttle diverted. Gela Licarte met him at the Cagliari Terminal. He was a sober faced man, well into his sixth century, typically Mediterranean in appearance, olive skinned, nearly black eyes, with straight black hair swept back severely from his high forehead. His mouth twisted into a rare smile as he greeted Joshua.

"For a man who has just met the fabled Gog, you look remarkably unscathed, Joshua!"

"Georgi Malenski is a rather likeable man, who is certainly very intense and passionate, but he doesn't breath fire, my friend."

Gela nodded and smiled again.

"So, what do I have to expect, Joshua? I kept a close eye on the progress of Gog's rabble through the Adriatic Polders - and of course, I saw what happened to Micah Perga and his army of innocents. I must tell you, I was expecting the redoubtable Georgi Malenski and his general, to turn and sweep on to the east coast of Italia, but it seemed they were satisfied with their pickings and decided to retreat to their alpine camp. They're much too close for comfort, Joshua. If they had decided to invade the valley of the Po instead of the Adriatic polders, I doubt whether I could have stopped them!"

Joshua nodded grimly.

"Rest assured, we will taste their steel before we're much older! It's one of the reasons why I'm here. We must prepare for the next onslaught - and I have every reason to believe it will be across the land bridge through Sicily to the African coast - "

"That will bring them into direct conflict with us! Sicily is in my stewardship!"

"Precisely, Gela. For this reason, I am going to send you ships - grain and cargo transporters mainly - anything I can lay my hands on at short notice. If Malenski and his general make a move against Africa, I want you to send as big a fleet as possible to the polders centred around Pantelleria, it will be the weak point in their supply lines. We can't form a fighting force in the time we have available, certainly not one which could take on Pik Sedova and his barbarians. It will be a massive bluff with empty ships, but I think we will cause our supposedly invincible friends to think again!"

"What about Sicily?"

"On no account are you to confront Pik Sedova face to face. I think he will have his eyes focused on the African shore and I doubt whether he will be tempted to push into the Sicilian interior. You might have trouble with small parties foraging for what they can find. By all means, let them feel we are ready to defend our storage facilities and our crops. Don't make the mistake our friend Micah made and wage a pitched battle. Gnaw at their flanks, sting them and run away. Hit them by night and be hidden by day!"

Gela eyed him thoughtfully.

"You sound as if you've decided to declare war, Joshua."

Joshua nodded grimly.

"They are the ones who first declared war on the peaceful communities they have swamped on their way from Siberia. They have called the shots and set the agenda ever since they started to move down from the Arctic. At first, they earned a little sympathy - they were hungry, and desperate. I believe the motive has changed - especially now that they are led by Pik Sedova. They are now engaged in out and out conquest and pillage. They are no longer hungry people with a moral demand to be fed by the rest of us, their motives have changed, they have become an invading army and must be resisted as such!"

"I'm not arguing with you, Joshua! You have my full agreement - and that of most of the population, I am prepared to say. It is so refreshing to hear someone make a declaration of defiance. In my opinion, we have been too inclined to bend over backwards to accommodate the demands of these people."

Joshua spent only a few hours at Cagliari, refining the plans to harry Gog and his Horde if they were to mount another challenge to the south. The shuttle continued on its way and Joshua was given time to reflect on the change in his own attitude. He was a little amazed with himself that he had taken such decisive action. He had no doubt it was the influence of the ancient text Michael had called up at Vesuvius. Each step was being laid out for them. From the west a fleet of ships would come to persuade Gog and his Horde to return from whence they had come. He felt a touch of uneasiness when he realised that there was no prediction about the flanks of Gog's army being harried by men from the same direction. His uneasiness grew to anxiety and before he had reached the Europa field in the shadow of the great dam, his new found bravery had evaporated.

Michael's homecoming was much more placid. During the flight along the length of the Eastern Basin, he had time to consider the implications of what had been decided. He had told Joshua that his concern was not so much with the second thrust Pik Sedova was sure to make to the south. His concern was with the reference to the loss of allies which Gog would note during his retreat from his battle with the forces of Micah Perga.

Events were accelerating. He doubted whether there would be much of a delay before this next phase was put into operation. It was over three years since the end of the Time of Peace. Gog had emerged, his Horde was being fashioned from the hungry throng which had been driven out of their northern homes. Georgi Malenski had led them, but that didn't automatically make him Gog. It was a thought which Michael desperately tried to retain. More and more it was beginning to sound hollow. Georgi was doing nothing to resist the transformation into Gog and the time would soon come when it would not be possible to deny the fact.

Some hours after he had returned, he received an urgent request for a holo-conference with Feodor Chernienko. Michael sighed and put aside the work he had been studying. Feodor was displaying customary impatience. No doubt, he wanted to know what had happened at the meeting with their enemy and wasn't prepared to wait to a more civilised hour. Michael glanced at the chronometer, it was three in the morning. He turned and nodded to Luke Belin.

"All right - arrange it, Luke. Sometimes I wonder if he has a spy

network in Jerusalem."

"I've no doubt he has! Every Administrator and every Steward has his spy network."

Michael looked up sharply.

"I haven't!"

"Then, it's time you had! It so happens that Asher ben Jacobi saw the value of one - and it still exists - even if you don't choose to use it!"

He went to arrange for the conference with Feodor. Michael stared at the closed door panel. It was incredible how little he really knew about Asher and his administration. His predecessor had kept many matters close to his heart, even if Michael was supposed to be his trusted assistant. One of those matters had been the so-called Jerusalem Defence Militia, which had been secretly drilled during the final years of the Kingdom of Peace and was reputed to be in a much better condition to resist a hostile force than the ineffectual efforts of Micah Perga. Now, Luke had casually added another factor to the equation - the existence of a spy net, which no doubt was feeding information back to the Secretariat on a daily basis and about which Michael had known nothing. He sighed in despair. What a hideous time they were moving into! Armies, war, death, spies, murder, abductions!

He made his way to the holo-pad and waited for Feodor to emerge from the mist of light. The young Cossack looked quite subdued and eyed his new Administrator glumly. Michael raised his eyebrows and felt a surge of apprehension. He hoped he wasn't about to receive a confession to the effect that Feodor had done something rash and was about to reap the rewards of impetuosity. He said as lightly as he could.

"Greetings, Feodor. Don't you have a bed to go to?"

"Greetings, Michael. I have a problem that can't wait."

"Since when has that been unusual!"

Feodor eyed him solemnly.

"At twenty-two hundred hours, a Pod landed at my private pad. It contained a crewman and two passengers - "

Michael waited, Feodor seemed bereft of speech.

"Go on - "

"The passengers were Elena Malenski and her son Piotr - she has asked for my protection!"