

Joshua Aristides ate a solitary meal in his quarters, after his guests had gone to their beds. There would be no sleep for him that night. In any case, he slept very little, just a few fitful hours which were filled with half-completed dreams. His subconscious played tricks with him and there were times when he dreamed that he was whole again and running through the rows of the vineyards which had once ranged like soldiers around the flanks of the hill upon which his house was built. He would run in pursuit of something - or someone, which was elusive. He could never quite capture whatever it was that he pursued. In the end, the dream always culminated in one result. He was unable to succeed because he was unable to run and the ugly reality of his lost limb forced itself through into the dream world and he would feel the dull ache - the phantom pain of the limb which was no longer there.

Joshua munched through his food without tasting it. He did so out of a stubborn discipline, for he knew that starving himself would only create weakness and he could not afford to be weak. He wished the visitors had not come - he contradicted himself - he was happy that they had come, because it meant a contact with a world he hardly dared to remember - an elegant world which had existed only a few short years earlier, and of which he had been a part. It was a world which now only existed in his memory and one which would never again become a reality.

Saul and Eli Benjamin were a sudden reminder of those whom he had loved. Of Leah, of Michael, of Marcus, Joel and even his old protagonist, Asher. They had been wondrous days. Each one, like a rare and precious jewel which had been shown in all its wonder and then had been taken away to be secured in some safe place. The coming of the visitors from Jerusalem had disturbed him in many ways, firstly, their coming had resurrected all the memories he had tried to bury. Memories of those things which once had been, or what might have been. Not for the first time, he wondered how different things would have been if he had summoned up his courage and had taken Leah to be his wife. He grimaced into the darkness, if he had done so, she would now be married to a cripple, a man maimed, so that he had to hop around on one leg. He stared down at the stump of his limb in disgust and distaste.

They had told him that she had given Michael a son. He had never had a son. He was the last of his line - not that it mattered a great deal, for the end of all things was upon them and thoughts of descendants were inappropriate - for all that, it would have been wonderful to have had a wife and a child and not to be sulking alone with only his memories for company.

Eli had told him in great detail about the battle of Armageddon. He had extracted the smallest detail of the sequence of events, of what the young captain had seen of Gog and the manner of his death and that of his Horde, in the hail of fire which had swept across the Plain of Esdraelon. Something similar had happened to the north, over the alien mobs who had swept down through the richest lands of his northern provinces. They were lost to him

now, he had neither the resources, nor the will to recover them. His captains told him that the enemy was cowed. All fight had gone out of them - and Eli had confirmed that it was much the same amongst those who remained of the mighty army which Gog had led into Israel.

Eli had been reticent about Michael's reaction to the battle and the aftermath, but Joshua had persisted with his questions. In the end, he knew that Michael was far from well. Joshua leaned back from his meal and stared into the darkened room. Was it really so very different to himself? A little honest introspection told him that he was a very different man to the one who had left Michael and Leah soon after their wedding to hurry home. Maman had been dead when he had arrived. Perhaps that had been the start of the change in him.

The storm broke over the villa. It was ferocious, Joshua listened to it, and then rose to peer out of the window. He stood supported by the table, the simple act of walking to the window was now one of complexity. If he made the effort, there would not be much to see. He projected his thoughts to the camps which had been built on the Iberian and Africa sides of the breach. They would be getting the full force of storm, it would lash in from the Atlantic. The Wall would be straining and shuddering under the onslaught. If it was not this storm, it would be another, which would finally shatter that which Spiros, his father had engineered, and which had been a lasting monument to his ingenuity and tenacity.

He sat down again without moving from the table. Of what use were monuments? Of what use was it to pour cupfuls of sand into the great gap which had been torn in the structure. He could see the question in the eyes of Saul Benjamin. The man was a scientist of sorts, he knew the futility of what was being done. Joshua had persisted with it, despite the futility. It was the only thing left for him to do - a perverse kind of respect for the efforts of his father and the army of men who had brought about the miracle of the Gibraltar Dam.

The storm increased in intensity. Joshua sat and listened to it lashing the building. It seemed to him, that it shuddered under the impact. It was quite possible that it did so, the earth tremor had been severe and the whole structure had been rocked. He was glad that he had ordered the evacuation of the reclaimed sea bed through the ancient straits and the lowland polders close to the coasts of Iberia and Africa. If the dam was to suddenly collapse, those areas would meet the first savagery of the colossal tidal surge which would pour through. There would be no time to evacuate and no one would survive in its path.

The Mediterranean would not fill immediately, of course. There would be nothing so dramatic. The effect of the collapse of the dam would be similar to the filling of a bottle laying on its side in a pool. There would be a violent surge through the narrow neck - which could be compared to the ancient straits, but then, the inflow would ease because it would spread out on the ancient sea floor. The currents would still be quite ferocious, but it would take time for the waters to slowly fill the reclaimed lands closer to the continental coastlines and then, to extend over into the Adriatic polders and those around the coasts of Greece and Anatolia. The isolated mountains would once more become islands, and the inland sea would be restored to how it had looked

before the establishment of the Kingdom.

Joshua took his crutch and swung over to the trestle bed against the inner wall. He lay on it fully clothed and closed his eyes in weariness. He didn't want to sleep, for the dreams would return and when the outcome was repeated, the harsh and ugly reality would return.

On the following day, he bade his visitors farewell. There was no point in them remaining and he knew they wanted to return to Jerusalem. The dam had held during the ferocity of the storm, it yet remained to be seen if the gap had become larger and if the work of weeks had been washed away. The sky was still heavy with rain, but the wind had died down, although it was still driving in from the west.

Before they left, Eli had asked politely, if they might visit the grave of Maman. Joshua had looked at him in surprise. Eli had flushed a little.

"Leah would like to know that we had paid our respects to your mother, in her name as well as ours."

Joshua nodded. So, that was how it was with the young man - surely too young a man for Leah! But then, he had been too old a man for her - and so had been Marcus. He smiled a little, as he swung along the path to the grave site on his crutches. Leah had the unconscious ability to make men love her. If she had been conscious of it, she would have been a coquette, but she wasn't, she would remain loyal and true to Michael, especially now that he needed her.

They came to the grave of Miriam Aristides. The three men stood bowed before it. Saul broke the silence with a rather unnecessary statement.

"She was a great woman."

Joshua looked at him.

"You never knew her?"

"I saw her once, on the arm of Marcus Steinbecker at the last meeting of the Administrators, a few days before the end of the thousand years."

Joshua nodded.

"I remember she said something to the effect that it was Gotterdammerung - the Twilight of the Gods. How correct she was - our heaven has crumbled."

Eli interjected softly.

"Our heaven, yes - but we wait for a new heaven and a new earth and the former things shall not be remembered."

Joshua smiled.

"If you could stay longer, we could have many hours of discussion, I think - but I respect your urgency to return. I won't have you say to me: 'Hinder me not, for God has prospered my way, I must return to my master.'"

Eli looked at him sharply, but could read nothing into the diplomatic smile.

Joshua escorted them to their shuttle and waited whilst they lifted skyward. He dwindled away into a tiny figure as they gained height. Saul cleared his throat.

"A great man - the last we shall see of him, I think."

"Yes - he still is a great man, although he doesn't think he is."

"Perhaps that is what makes him great, Eli!"

Eli turned the shuttle to the east, they would not revisit the site of the

crumbling dam. Already, they had left the Iberian coast behind them. He said suddenly.

"I don't know how you feel about it, but I have the urge to go home as fast as possible. What more is there to see? A few pock marked fields, I suppose, where the meteorites are imbedded in the ground. Some corpses which haven't been buried. Would it add to what we have to tell Leah - or Michael?"

Saul remained silent.

"Well - say something!"

"Always impetuous, young Eli - I am considering your suggestion. It has merit. I think the important thing to tell Leah - or Michael - is the condition of the Gibraltar Dam and the fact that the former enemy seems totally cowed - if you discount the odd arrow or two which they shot at us in Egypt and the state of readiness at Joshua's headquarters."

"So, we go home?"

"Yes, I agree, we go home - on the way, we must decide what we will tell Leah about Joshua."

Eli set the automatic pilot and turned in his seat.

"Explain - we tell her the truth, of course!"

"What is the truth? Do we tell her that he is alive and in command of the situation and is valiantly trying to plug the hole in the dam, for the benefit of all those who live on the sea bed of the Mediterranean - or do we tell her that he is a tired, old man, who has lost part of one of his limbs and who is lonely and devastated without the support of the one person he loved and relied upon through the centuries?"

"Somewhere in between, I would think."

Saul stared out into the eastern sky.

"You must remember that there is a history between Joshua and Leah - and Michael too, is involved. I'm sure you wouldn't want to add to the stresses Leah is experiencing now, especially with Michael so unwell. To tell her that Joshua is a poor, old cripple, might prove to be counter productive for her peace of mind."

"She must be told that Joshua is - injured."

"I agree, but she must be told in such a way that we hide his despair from her."

"I don't like to deceive her."

"That is because you love her in a different way to that of myself."

"Love her! Who said anything about loving her?"

"Surely, we both love her, Eli? Not romantically, of course, she is totally committed to Michael - but we both love her, nevertheless. You love her so much that you don't want to deceive her - and I love her so much that I am quite prepared to deceive her to preserve her peace of mind. It's a question of degree."

"I wish more and more with every day that dawns, that we had been taken in the Second Resurrection on the Day of Armageddon! What is the point of this - existence - this waiting. It's as if we're in Limbo, between two worlds and committed to neither."

"We are waiting to ensure that we are perfect in patience. We have proved our faith and our love towards Our Father, now we must show Him

that we know His ways are far different to ours and that His thoughts are so far above ours. We are being perfected in patience, long-suffering and trust - that is the reason we are still here."

They had reached the site of the shallows between the Eastern and the Western Basins. Saul turned his attention to the water flow. He murmured.

"Never again can we talk about a land bridge, it is completely gone. The water levels must have risen considerably, perhaps the gap in the dam is greater. Let's inspect the pressure on the polders along the Sicilian and Italian coasts and the mouth of the Adriatic Trough - that might be a misnomer, it might once again be the Adriatic Sea by this time - we can continue home through the Corinth Trough and over the Greek polders."

"Just so long as you don't expect me to land - those areas were the marshalling points for the invasion of North Africa."

"And therefore, should provide us with ample evidence that fire was rained upon Magog as well as upon Gog!"

Their inspection proved their worst fears. Many of the dikes protecting the polders along the coastline, had already been breached, or had the sea water lapping over the crests. Vast areas were already under water and almost perceptibly, the saline flood was poisoning the rich agricultural land. It was much the same story when they came to the great line of dikes along the mouth of the Adriatic Trough. They had not yet been breached, but the on shore wind was driving the waves to wash over the road which linked the Italian shore to that of Greece.

Eli turned the shuttle to enter the Corinth Trough. Once again, the dikes were on the point of being breached. His face was grim when he turned to his brother.

"We're facing a disaster."

Saul shrugged.

"When the Gibraltar Dam finally gives way, the sea will reclaim what we have won from it, it's inevitable. The same thing will happen all along the Mediterranean basin. Eventually, the coastline will be restored to where it was a thousand years ago - and we will have to learn to feed our population from what remains. Another test for our patience and fortitude in the face of adversity. The human spirit being what it is, will ensure that we triumph!"

They cleared the Greek mainland and adjusted course for Jerusalem. Below them, the Eastern Basin glistened in deceptive tranquillity, but they knew that the level of the water was already rising and spreading and eating away at the achievements of centuries.

Eli landed the shuttle close to Leah's house. He hustled Saul out of the door. His brother was inclined to take his time when it came to journey's end.

"What IS your hurry, Eli? Can't a man assemble his thoughts - and his belongings?"

"You've had time enough to do both!"

"You're acting like a lovesick swain, eager to be united with his lady love!"

"And - what is that remark supposed to mean?"

"Whatever you choose to allow it to mean!"

Eli stalked across the open ground to the house. Saul smiled a little,

his brother really was a young cockerel. Eli vanished from sight, but he was back quickly, just as Saul stepped on to the ground.

"They're not here!"

Saul eyed the house, it certainly had the air of being deserted.

"Get back in the shuttle."

"I've only just got out!"

"Either get back in, or I'll leave you here!"

"Make up your mind, Eli."

Saul re-entered the shuttle. Eli took off in a hurry and flew over the rooftops to the Secretariat. He landed. Saul stayed in his seat.

"I have no intention of getting out until you are quite sure that we have arrived and intend to stay for more than two minutes!"

"Please yourself, I'm making enquiries."

This time, he was back in five minutes. Saul eyed him placidly, as he stormed into the shuttle.

"They're at the villa!"

The shuttle was airborne before Saul had the chance to comment. They passed over the great gash opened up by the earthquake and then gained altitude to cross over the nearer hilltops. It wasn't long before the villa came into sight.

"What will you do if they're not here?"

"They ARE here - Luke is still in Jerusalem - apparently Michael is much better and decided that they should go home."

"I'm very glad to hear it on both accounts - Leah's house was much too small - and Michael needs the peace and quiet of the countryside for his full recovery."

Eli landed the shuttle for the third time. On this occasion, he took his time to disembark. Saul was already on the landing pad before he did so. They walked towards the house. There was the sound of children's voices, of laughter and a deeper voice. Eli checked his stride momentarily, as Feodor emerged from the main entrance with three children swinging on his limbs. He glanced at Saul and found his brother smiling in amusement.

"Now, that was something we didn't anticipate, little brother. I think we can cool our guilty consciences. Feodor would have told them all there is to know about Magog."

They made their report to Michael and Leah. Saul did the talking and Eli was content to let him do so. Michael looked well, it was hard to believe that this was the same man who had withdrawn into himself only a few days earlier. Eli hardly dared to look at Leah. When he did, he found her intent upon what Saul was saying about Joshua.

"Joshua told us how it happened - losing his leg, I mean. It was purely and simply the lack of our medical knowledge. He wasn't wounded in the course of battle, but he was sleeping in the fields with his men and the conditions in the camp was far from clean, as you might imagine. He injured himself in some way, he couldn't even remember - a few days later and the wound became infected. They were engaged in stiff fighting with the Scandians and he paid no attention to his leg. Others were far more critically wounded. Then, he developed a fever and the leg became severely infected and eventually, due to neglect, there was no other option but to remove it

before the poison spread to the other parts of his body and killed him!"

Leah shuddered.

"I suppose - he was conscious - when they did it."

Saul shifted uneasily and glanced at Eli.

"I've seen something similar, Leah. They have grown used to dealing with terrible wounds. Joshua told us that they made a concoction of alcohol and herbs which had the effect of making him unconscious. He made a joke about it, he said the potion was more dangerous than his poisoned leg. He was spared a lot of pain."

Leah murmured.

"Joshua would joke about it - that is his way."

Michael interjected.

"We must take precautions - for when the dam fails."

"You speak as if it's inevitable."

"It is, Leah. Joshua knows it and Saul and Eli confirm it. I believe we should evacuate the polders and concentrate our resources on the higher ground."

Leah turned to Saul.

"Surely, Joshua will repair it - he won't allow it to happen."

Saul shook his head.

"He knows it is only a matter of time, Leah. It is now so unsound that eventually a storm, or another earth tremor, will finish it. Joshua has already evacuated his reclaimed areas."

Michael recited softly:

*'Mountains shall be torn up, the terraced hills collapse, and every wall crash to the ground'*

"Walls come in many sizes - even great walls, like the Gibraltar Dam."

"I suppose, much the same sort of thing is happening at the mouth of the Baltic - "

Michael nodded.

"Ironic isn't it. If the Baltic Dam collapses, the first areas to be flooded will be the heartland of the Scandian provinces. They were formed in the beds of the Baltic and the gulfs of Bothnia and Finland. The Scandians were always an implanted people, they didn't belong in that area originally. After the Great Destruction, they formed part of the huge refugee population, whose homes and lands had been destroyed by the nuclear attacks. One of the reasons for damming the Baltic, was to provide them with a home. The irony is, that eventually, they formed the hard core of the scourge Gog visited upon the rest of us!"