

Feodor cut his loses whilst there still remained a vestige of the diplomatic niceties. He bade his host a polite farewell and reboarded his single seater Pod. He entered co-ordinates for the return flight to the south-west, setting the speed as fast as his Shuttle would take him.

His decision to travel alone had been an impulse. He had hoped to be able to prevent his distant cousin from buckling under the pressure, but before he had started, he had admitted to himself that it was a forlorn hope. Grigor Suskov was not the sort of man from whom warriors were hewn.

There was no doubt, the situation was becoming more perilous by the hour. He had the pessimistic feeling that there was not a great deal anyone could do. If Scripture was taken on face value, these lands speeding by beneath him and those which he controlled further to the south, were destined to fall under the hand of Gog, for out of them - the land of Magog - would come the final, great onslaught against the spiritual and physical Jerusalem.

There was little time for something to be done and there was even less time to devote to conferences with his Barenkov cousins, his allies to the west. On the south, his stewardship bordered the Administration area of Michael ben Levi. In terms of distance, he was nearer to Jerusalem than to Alexei's headquarters on the Yenesei. To the west, his cousins shared a hazy demarcation with the West European Area controlled by his remote cousin Joshua Aristides. He had to make up his mind quickly. His choice of ally

would be one or the other, either Joshua or Michael. His decision was to turn to the south and head for Jerusalem.

Michael ben Levi was not in a good mood. His surprise visit to Salem had not produced the desired result. He was becoming more and more frustrated by the circumstances which forced him to be twenty thousand kilometres distant from the woman he loved. He was certain she felt the same way about him and shared his frustration. He was beginning to wonder if there was ever going to be a window in the constant pressure of circumstances, which would allow them to share some time together before it was too late.

It had taken him five days to return to Jerusalem from Salem, he had detoured to the troubled areas in China and India. Millions had been lost in the floods which had followed incessant rains in the headwaters of the major rivers. It was almost impossible to move supplies from one place to another. The ground was a yellow sea of mud, which bogged down land transport and even prevented the lift-off of airborne supplies. Soo Ching and Paul Vijay were making valiant efforts, but it was like trying to stem the tide of the raging torrents which had once been peaceful rivers flowing through luxuriant croplands.

He had arrived back in Jerusalem feeling depressed and deflated. The mechanisms which had kept the Kingdom functioning for a thousand years, were now faltering or grinding to a standstill. Power supplies were beginning to fail with an ever increasing frequency, as more and more of the global grid was damaged. He knew it was impossible, but it was almost as if Satan was gaining the ultimate victory. He pushed the thought from his mind, appalled that it had found expression - but it typified the increasing power of the Evil One.

Feodor Chernienko arrived in Jerusalem unannounced. He came in a single-seater Pod which bypassed the Salt Sea Terminal and landed at the house which had once belonged to Asher ben Jacobi. Michael was working at his desk when his secretary entered, behind him hovered an impatient young man, who brushed past his aide and advanced with outstretched hand.

"I am Feodor Chernienko - greetings of peace, Michael ben Levi."

Michael signalled to his indignant secretary with his eyes. The man took the hint, left and closed the door panel.

"I am always pleased to greet a close associate of a fellow Administrator. Greetings of peace, Feodor Chernienko."

He made a quick appraisal. Feodor was younger than himself, he looked what he was - a Cossack. Michael had a mental picture of him racing across an open plain on horseback, with a drawn sabre, screaming in bloodlust. The young man was fidgety with unreleased energy.

"What brings you to Jerusalem, brother Chernienko - and especially, what brings you to me?"

"Gog!"

Michael eyed him thoughtfully and gestured to a seat. Feodor looked as if he had never seen one before and sat down reluctantly.

"Gog brings you to Jerusalem - and to see me?"

"I have just come directly from Grigor Suskov's headquarters in the Urals. Gog is three days march from him and moving westward. Very soon, he will cross the mountains and we will face him in Europe!"

Michael teetered back in his chair and stared without blinking.

"Perhaps, you had better start at the beginning, brother Chernienko."

Michael listened to the story of Feodor's visit to Grigor Suskov and the assessment that he would provide no resistance to halt, or even slow down,

the advance of the flood of people coming down from the Arctic lands. Eventually, Feodor came to an end. There was a digestive silence.

"Grigor Suskov has told you that Georgi Malenski makes no claim to be Gog? What makes you so sure that he is Gog?"

Feodor snorted impatiently.

"How many other indications do you need? He leads millions of starving people. He confiscates what he chooses and destroys and pillages when there is any resistance. He has promised to overrun Europe and eliminate anyone unwise enough to stand up to him. He is the perfect candidate!"

Michael landed his chair delicately and leaned forward.

"It could be argued that all he is doing is fulfilling the directions given to him by Alexei Kharkov. I put it to you, that so far he hasn't ventured outside of Alexei's Administrative area. He was told to open the storehouses and to disperse the people into existing communities. That doesn't make him Gog - it makes him a loyal deputy carrying out the orders of his superior!"

Feodor stared back at him without smiling.

"I can assure you, Michael ben Levi, this was not the sort of answer I was expecting. I thought you would be the man to stand up against Gog. Now, you say this isn't Gog!"

"I didn't say he wasn't Gog, but I can tell you that there are at least four other possible Gogs controlling hungry people coming down from Scandia and northern Europe! One of them might be Gog - or none of them! What do you expect me to do? We had no armies in the Kingdom of Peace, other than purely ceremonial defence militias. I haven't a secret cache of weapons which I can hand out to untrained farmers to use against hungry men, women and children!"

Feodor stood and glared at him.

"So - you are going to be like Grigor Suskov. You will let Gog overrun your land and storehouses and let him come to the gates of your city - and then, I suppose, you will surrender!"

Michael rose slowly and put his face close to Feodor's across the table.

"I tell you what I will do. I will put my trust in Our Father. Gog will come to a land living in peace, with unwalled cities - because it is Our Father's will. Gog cannot be prevented from doing that, because he is destined to take his place at the End of Time and play his part in the final battle. I can't stop him and neither can you. It might well be that Georgi Malenski is Gog. You are convinced he is, I am not so sure. It doesn't matter what you think, or what I think. Gog will emerge and there is nothing to stop it. I will wait and I will watch and I will concentrate on feeding the starving millions from what has been stored."

Feodor sat down again, he was totally deflated.

"And what am I to do, Michael ben Levi? What am I to do when Gog moves westward and to the south and crosses the border of my responsibility and starts moving into the land of Magog?"

Michael resumed his seat.

"You will do what you are destined to do, Feodor Chernienko. We will all do what we are destined to do."

Feodor made one last try.

"Do you realise that I came here today to place myself under your command? I have lost contact with my Administrator and I can see no possibility of re-establishing that contact. In any case, Alexei Kharkov is old and impotent when it comes to reasserting his authority. Georgi Malenski is in

control in the Heartland. I have no wish to place myself under his authority, which I believe to be false. I would like to attach my area of responsibility to your Administration - I believe I can speak for my cousins, the Barenkovs, as well."

Michael stared at the desk top.

"Do you want to give me more mouths to feed?"

"We are not going hungry, our storehouses are full - but they won't remain so unless Gog - Georgi Malenski is stopped. You said that he hasn't strayed out of the area controlled by Father Alexei. If it is made clear to him that you control the lands to the north of the Black Sea, he may turn aside or be halted."

"For how long, do you think - a day, a week, a month - a year? If he is Gog, he considers himself to be the Prince of Rosh and of Magog. He will dispute your action in placing yourself under my authority."

"The control of my area and those of the Barenkovs, has always been hazy. Alexei always delegated much more authority to us than was usual - or perhaps wise. Joshua Aristides has joint venture interests to the west. Before your time, Asher's administration had similar joint ventures placed around the Caspian and the Black Sea polders. I am sure it could be argued that you have as much right to assert your authority over these projects in the present circumstances, as has Alexei. If Joshua Aristides could be persuaded to do the same thing, there could be no argument - and certainly, Georgi Malenski, who has never had any authority in this area, wouldn't have a leg to stand on!"

Michael rocked in his chair. He steepled his fingers.

"It's an interesting proposition."

Feodor went on eagerly.

"Don't you see, brother ben Levi, it will force Gog out into the open. If Georgi Malenski is Prince of Rosh and Magog, he will try to assert his authority - then we will be sure!"

Michael nodded slowly.

"Let me think about it, brother Feodor. I want to talk to my senior people - and to Joshua Aristides. In the meantime, I would be pleased if you would accept my hospitality."

Feodor flushed with pleasure, it was clear he felt he had scored a victory. Michael watched him make his exit from the room, following the house servant who would take him to his quarters. When he was alone, Michael thought over the proposition. It was in circumstances like these, when he would have given anything to have Leah by his side. She had an incisive mind - like old Father Joel. Michael smiled a little at the memory of him. How valuable his presence and wisdom would have been in the developing circumstances - and Asher as well. Michael tried to put himself in Asher's mind. How would he have dealt with Feodor's proposition?

What had the Book of Daniel said: 'He will seize the kingdom by dissimulation and intrigue in time of peace'. Dissimulation: The concealing of one's true feelings, to pretend, to be hypocritical. All this, coupled with intrigue, would be Gog's methods to seize control of the kingdom. Whose kingdom? That was easy! Alexei's Administrative authority!

If he was dealing with such a man, would he be right to use similar methods? Didn't that bring him down to the same level as Gog? On the other hand, he had the commission to 'stand up for his people'. Didn't he have the right to use whatever means at his command to flush out the hypocritical pretender - the 'contemptible creature', and expose him for what he was?

He made up his mind on a course of action: First of all, he would

examine the agreements with Alexei's Administration to see if they contained a clause dealing with the inability of one of the Administrators to exercise control. Secondly, he would sound out Joshua Aristides, taking the risk of using the holo-conference method, which was supposed to be secure, but which leaked confidential information like a sieve. Thirdly, he would attempt to contact Alexei Kharkov and obtain his permission for the take-over. Fourthly, he would arrange a holo-conference of all interested parties and include Micah Perga and ensure that his suspicious southern administrative neighbour didn't arrive at the wrong conclusions about any territorial moves.

Michael moved quickly. Feodor had mentioned a time limit of three days before Georgi Malenski would cross the Urals and enter Europe. If he was Gog, he would be coming into the area designated as being his own. How that could be justified, was a mute point. Feodor had been correct when he had said that Georgi Malenski had never had any authority other than over the Arctic Provinces of Alexei's Administration. The phrase in Daniel came back to his mind: 'He will seize the kingdom'. It was the next logical move. If Georgi was Gog, he would declare Alexei incapable of exercising his stewardship due to age or infirmity and he might even declare that Alexei had nominated him to take control. He would seize control by 'dissimulation' - by pretence and hypocrisy.

It was already late in the afternoon, but Michael worked his staff to produce the agreements concerning the joint ventures with the Asia Heartland. There was a standard clause: 'Whereas, if circumstances should arise to prevent the joint exercise of administrative control, one of the parties to the agreement will exercise unilateral control'. There was no ambiguity. Michael leaned back with a grin of satisfaction. He was willing to wager that no one could have imagined the current circumstances when it had been

framed. It gave him legality!

He had already ordered a repetitive attempt to contact Alexei Kharkov. There had been no response, it was as if the communication link had been shut down. It could mean a number of things, some of which were not pleasant to contemplate. He was in no position to investigate, but it was a matter of genuine concern. He ordered the attempts to contact the headquarters on the Yenesei to continue - it was the least he could do.

It was time to contact Joshua Aristides. If the holo-link was being monitored, it would be the first indication that he intended to take decisive action against the inroads of the refugees. He refused to allow himself to be stampeded into nominating Georgi Malenski as Gog. He had been quite correct when he had suggested that there were at least four other contenders for the dubious honour.

He waited patiently in the holo-room until Joshua completed the link. His fellow Administrator showed every sign of exhaustion. Michael was fully aware that the last thing Joshua would have in mind was an unscheduled holo-conference. Joshua eyed him speculatively.

"Greetings, my dear Michael. This is an unexpected pleasure."

"Greeting, Joshua - probably hardly a pleasure - but certainly, a surprise."

He was rewarded with the flicker of a smile.

"You read me like a book, Michael - So - what is the reason for this - surprise?"

Michael explained his purpose succinctly. Joshua leaned forward in concentration when the situation with Alexei was explained and the part Georgi Malenski was playing in the movement into Europe. When Michael had finished, Joshua nodded.

"You are quite right, Michael. I have a few Gogs of my own. Only time will tell. Feodor has introduced a novel idea. You say that you've looked into your agreements? I shall do the same - but I have no doubt that they are worded in a similar way. Our bureaucrats tend to follow set rules when they draw up such documents. Provisionally, I agree with your acceptance. Subject to my satisfaction over legalities, I will act with you!"

After a few more pleasantries, they broke the link. Michael remained in his chair. He eyed the empty space which the image of Joshua had occupied and steeled himself for the next discussion. This would be more difficult. During the last years of the Kingdom of Peace, there had been a certain cooling in the relationship between the Administration of the Central Area based on Jerusalem, and that of the North African, based on Nile City. Some minor difference of opinion had occurred between Asher ben Jacobi and Micah Perga. Since the release of Satan, as might have been expected, relationship had deteriorated.

Michael had already placed the request for a holo-conference with the North African Secretariat. The request had caused a certain flurry of surprise. Enough, he was sure, to stir the interest of Micah Perga. Promptly at the appointed time, the connection was established and Michael found himself staring into the level gaze of the large man occupying the other position. There was something in the gaze that told him that his reason for requesting the holo-link was already known.

"Greetings of peace, Michael ben Levi. This is an unexpected surprise - we seem to have so little to say to each other these days."

"Greetings of Peace, Micah Perga. I am also pleased to be able to talk with you. I'm certain the infrequency of our contact can be put down to one reason - our extremely busy schedule."

"Yes - you have vast responsibilities since the death of Marcus Steinbecker - a sad, sad loss to the Covenant."

Michael eyed him steadily.

"That is an interesting way of describing us, brother Micah - the Covenant."

Micah Perga leaned back. He was a fleshy man, overweight, florid. His hair was already steely-grey. He looked older than his five hundred odd years. He smiled slightly.

"I would say that it is an accurate description of the Administrators. The Covenant shrinks, with the death of Marcus, we are now eleven. I understand that Alexei Kharkov is in poor health also?"

Michael knew he was being baited and began to question the wisdom of having established the link in the first place. He reminded himself, it had been an act of simple courtesy, he had no reason to seek the permission of Micah Perga for what he might do - on the other hand, there was a political motivation as well. He decided to attack.

"Brother Micah, I have called you for a particular purpose. Your use of the term 'Covenant' reminds me that we have moved into the era described in Book of Daniel. You have suggested that the Administrators are the 'Covenant' mentioned there. This leads us to the definition of other terms. I am sure that you are well aware of the suggestion that Gog will come from out of the far north and will be called the Prince of Magog and of Rosh.

It has been suggested that someone will soon emerge who will become Gog - there are a number of candidates. I propose to take certain action to protect my Administration in the short term. In the absence of indications from Alexei Kharkov that I should do otherwise, I intend to exercise certain clauses in our joint venture agreements and assume control

over some areas currently under the control of the Asia Heartland. I have consulted with Joshua Aristides and he is considering similar action."

Michael had delivered his speech without flourish. It had been a recitation of his intentions. He waited for Micah to respond. The big man's smile increased slightly. He eyed Michael steadily. His tone was honey-sweet when he finally answered.

"I thank you for your courtesy in informing me of your intentions. Clearly, it is not a matter of seeking my advice, you have already decided what you wish to do. I am rather surprised that you found it necessary to bring these matters to my attention. The last thing I would suspect would be your motives in adding vast areas of the Asia Heartland to your already enormous responsibility.

If I may make one point, my dear brother Michael. If, as you suggest, Gog is about to take his place to menace your Central Administration, there is little you will be in a position to do to prevent him. Acquiring new areas to control will do nothing to affect the ultimate battle. I am sure you have considered this."

Michael forced a smile.

"I agree, brother Micah. This - acquisition - I think you called it - is simply a tactic. I have received a formal request to assume control from one of the Alexei's stewards. In appraising you of my intentions, I was trying to ensure that you did not misunderstand my subsequent actions. After all, when Gog is revealed, your 'southern kingdom' will be one of his first targets!"

Micah leaned forward abruptly.

"I do not understand you, brother Michael!"

"I would advise you to reread the Book of Daniel, brother Micah. You will find that the 'southern kingdom' will be attacked on three occasions - the

last of which, will produce unfortunate results!"

He had the satisfaction of knowing, that when the holo-link was broken, he parted company with a man, whose complacency had been severely shaken.